It's A Jungle Out There: Challenges In Postgraduate Research Writing

Joanna Joseph Jeyaraj
joannajj@tarc.edu.my
Tunku Abdul Rahman University College, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Literature in English for academic purposes and postgraduate education suggests that research writing is challenging for students and acts as a barrier to timely completion. In Malaysia, postgraduate numbers are steadily increasing, yet high attrition rates remain a significant problem. Research into thesis writing appears to be an area that is slowly beginning to grow among Malaysian scholars, however most studies focus on public higher education institutions in the country. This study seeks to provide a voice for students from an off-campus university in Malaysia by investigating their writing experiences. The aim was to explore research writing challenges because there seemed to be a lack of any formalised structure which supported the writing process in this institution. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six full-time postgraduate research students from non-native English-speaking backgrounds and data were analysed using a general inductive approach. It was found that academic language demands were challenging, and this affected writing and disciplinary socialisation. Additionally, some students felt there was an absence of clear direction in writing. Finally, isolation was experienced and resulted in a need to reach out to other communities. These findings reveal the diverse needs of students; if addressed, more timely completion rates and greater student learning experiences may be achieved.

Keywords: postgraduate research writing; writing challenges; academic writing; thesis writing; EAP writing

INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate research involves the production of a thesis and there is a rather substantial body of literature that indicates students experience difficulties writing in this genre. Although many find academic writing a challenge, it is a crucial skill for academic success and thesis completion. Consequently, students are expected to gain mastery in the conventions of academic writing in English so that they can meet the demands of their postgraduate studies. Hyland (2013) notes that academic writing has become an area of interest due to increased participation in higher education, quality teaching audits, and finally because of the emergence of English as an international language of research and scholarship. For the purpose of this paper, 'academic writing' or 'research writing' shall be examined in the context of thesis and journal article writing; which are two important preoccupations for postgraduate students. Postgraduate research writing has received considerable attention in countries such as the UK, Australia, and New Zealand and in many studies, the experiences of students from non-native English speaking backgrounds have been problematised (Jeong-Bae Son & Sang-Soon Park, 2014; Phakiti, Hirsh, & Woodrow, 2013; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Strauss, 2012; Woodward-Kron, 2007). In Malaysia, which is the context of this study, postgraduate research writing is also beginning to gain increased attention among scholars. Some recent examples of studies in postgraduate research writing in Malaysia are by Sidhu et al. (2016) and Lim et al. (2016) who explore the reading and writing skills of postgraduate students based on the perceptions of supervisors and students.

eISSN: 2550-2131
ISSN: 1675-8021

Studies involving the experiences of academic reading and writing among international postgraduate students have also been carried out. For instance, Abdulkareen (2013) and Kaur (2016) explore the academic writing practices and difficulties of international postgraduate students in Malaysian universities. Another academic writing related study was by Rubdy et al. (2012) who surveyed doctoral theses on English language education from three Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia. While the study involved an exploration of writing, it did not explicitly address the experiences of students, but instead focused on textual analysis of the theses. It was found that socio-cultural factors influence knowledge production and English language education in these postcolonial contexts. While there have been numerous studies conducted in Malaysia, the tradition of theorising and researching postgraduate research writing is rather 'young' compared to scholarship from the West.

One aspect appears to be strikingly clear from the considerably limited pool of studies on postgraduate research writing in Malaysia. Most involve the experiences of postgraduate students in public higher education institutions, and studies on students from private higher education institutions, specifically overseas universities which have international campuses in Malaysia have received little to no attention. In Malaysia, clear distinction exists between private and public universities because they are governed by different legislation, with the former being only established and recognised after the enactment of the Private Higher Education Institutions Act 1996. Therefore, private institutions operate under different realities, and are considerably younger in terms of tradition and history compared to public universities in the country. This may cause students in private institutions to experience different levels of support and research training compared to those in public universities. Hence, in this study, the perspectives and 'voices' of students from an overseas university which has an international branch campus in Malaysia shall be explored. The main aim is to identify the challenges faced by Malaysian and international students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) when it comes to research writing.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Malaysian higher education system comprises both public and private institutions. In 2015, there were 20 public universities, 33 polytechnics, 91 community colleges and 514 private higher learning institutions (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). These private higher learning institutions include foreign universities from countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and China which have set up international branch campuses in Malaysia. Public institutions are seen to function for nation building, teaching, research and service, and are also charged with the responsibility of competing in the global rankings of universities (Chang, Morshidi & Abdul Razak, 2015). In contrast, private institutions remain profitable and sustainable through student fees, and tend to be more oriented towards teaching (Knight & Morshidi, 2011). Consequently, the importance of research engagement, rankings and league tables appear to be a relatively new endeavour for most of these institutions.

In terms of language, English has in one way or another been recognised as important and it is currently used as the medium of instruction in most public and private higher education institutions. However, Malaysia has for decades used Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) as the sole medium of instruction in primary and secondary education. As a result of recent English language policies in higher education, students from predominantly non-English speaking backgrounds and who have undergone primary and secondary education in Bahasa Malaysia are now expected to gain the needed English language competencies to meet the demands of tertiary level education (Michael, 2016).

Additionally, the internationalisation of higher education in Malaysia has also contributed to wider use of the English language. This phenomenon has encouraged

Malaysian higher education institutions to have an international faculty and student body, which in turn has necessitated the English language to be the medium of instruction at these institutions. Over the last decade student mobility in Malaysian education has shifted from a sending country to a receiving country (Tham, 2013). The majority of international students in Malaysia are from non- English speaking backgrounds (Hashim & Leitner, 2014), and to bridge this growing diversity there is an increased need for English language use in higher education (Michael, 2016).

Furthermore, when discussing postgraduate education, it has been noted that policy focus is very much on student numbers (Dash, 2015) and efforts are becoming increasingly intensified in both public and private institutions of higher learning primarily because of Malaysia's aspiration to increase the number of PhD holders to 60,000 by 2023. This aim has been articulated through the second thrust of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHEP). To support PhD completion targets, the government put in place the *MyBrain15* scholarship scheme as incentive. Consequently, there has been tremendous expansion of the number of PhD students enrolled in both public and private universities and between 2007 to 2014 alone, the percentage of PhD students increased by 236% (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015).

While postgraduate numbers in Malaysian higher education have dramatically increased, the number of PhD graduates have not been substantial due to high attrition rates (Sidhu et al., 2014). Although there is limited research investigating the problem of untimely completion and attrition rates in Malaysia, Dash (2015) reflects on his personal experience with research education in a private higher education institution in Malaysia, and describes the situation as: "underprepared students, entering into undermanaged institutional settings, receiving little encouragement and support and eventually failing to develop as researchers" (p. 146). Dash goes on to argue that while there may be policies in place to increase either the quality or quantity of PhD holders, policy discourses notably fail to address the process of developing researchers.

RESEARCH WRITING PROBLEMS AND RESPONSES

Literature on research writing experiences of postgraduate students from non-native English-speaking contexts is a developing area. There is considerably more research and scholarship on the experiences of non-native English speakers in Western, English speaking contexts compared to those in Asian contexts. The emergence of this research area in the West, could possibly be attributed to the internationalisation of higher education that has led to increased enrolment of international postgraduate research students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This growth has resulted in more scholarship in the area of academic experiences, especially among NESB postgraduate students. Research on NESB students has covered a variety of experiences and interactions such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support programmes (Jeong-Bae Son & Sang-Soon Park, 2014; Larcombe, McCosker, & O'Loughlin, 2007; Storch & Tapper, 2009) researcher development workshops (Franken, 2012) academic presentation skills seminars (Ohnishi & Ford, 2015), peer writing groups (Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011), supervision experiences (East, Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2012) and individual writing consultations with learning advisors (Woodward-Kron, 2007).

Although students often need to demonstrate a certain level of English language competency and proficiency prior to commencing their academic study, many still struggle with a wide array of aspects related to academic life. These include possessing sufficient oral communication (Kim, 2011) and critical thinking skills (Cadman, 2000; Ravichandran, Kretovics, Kirby, & Ghosh, 2017), understanding academic culture (Cadman, 2000; Jeong-

Bae Son & Sang-Soon Park, 2014; Jones, Farrell, & Goldsmith, 2009; Zhou & Todman, 2008), managing relationships with supervisors (Walsh, 2010; Wang & Li, 2008; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014), and mastering disciplinary-specific writing conventions (Evans & Green, 2007; Phakiti & Li, 2011).

Understanding plagiarism has also been noted as a significant problem among some students (Ravichandran et al., 2017). Lan (2015) sheds light on the differing conceptions of plagiarism in Western and Asian contexts, by drawing specifically on the situation in China. Lan (2015) contends that in the Chinese education system, drawing on the work of others is valued and seen as a collective achievement. Furthermore, Chinese students have been schooled in a tradition where there is great respect for authoritative sources of knowledge and there is a high degree of shared knowledge. Hence under these circumstances, it is expected that the reader would know who these sources are and what they say. Finally, Lan (2015) notes that Chinese students are often reluctant to offer personal views and criticism, which leads them to prefer to incorporate other people's perspectives and words in their writing. These differing conceptions add to the challenges that students from non-native English-speaking backgrounds face when entering institutions which have a 'Western' influence and legacy.

Research writing is a common problem for NESB students (Cheng, Myles & Curtis, 2004; Li & Vandermensbrugghe, 2011) and English language proficiency contributes to academic success (Phakiti et al., 2013; Vinke & Jochems, 1993). Hence, writing a thesis in English places tremendous academic and linguistic demands on international NESB postgraduate students (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Odena & Burgess, 2015; Wang & Li, 2008). It can be inferred that a similar challenge could be faced by postgraduate students in the Malaysian context. A study of postgraduate Arab students in Malaysia found that poor writing skills and unfamiliarity with grammar affected students' ability to present ideas and concepts in a lucid and coherent manner; these obstacles eventually affected their research progress (Khozaei et al. 2015). Li and Vandermensbrugghe (2011) highlight that some of difficulties that NESB students face are the capacity to write with clarity and confidence in English, develop an understanding of the conventions of academic writing practices in their disciplines, and recognise the institutional expectations and standards of thesis writing at their degree level.

In many ways, research writing is treated as a 'problem' that universities need to 'fix' (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Lea & Street, 1998); and the solution is oftentimes skills based, in the form of add on writing skills courses, one off thesis writing workshops and 'how-to' programmes (Badenhorst, Moloney & Rosales, 2015). Carter (2011) adds that this form of generic (doctoral) support is widespread and sustained by learning advisors rather than departmentally based academics. Hence, research writing is often separated from pedagogies of supervision and research learning (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). This managerialist, centralised approach to writing support has given rise to much debate, and it has been noted that a sustained academic literacies approach, where academic and writing skills development are integrated into the formal curriculum, may be more helpful compared with skills-based research support (Lea & Street, 1998; McGrath & Kaufhold, 2016).

In contrast to a skills-based approach, which situates literacy as a set of atomised skills separate from course content, an academic literacies approach regards literacies as cultural, contextual and a social practice, which enable students to understand, organise and interpret knowledge (Lea & Street, 1998). This anthropologically-driven approach goes beyond developing 'proficient' or 'expert' language users; it leads students to question a range of issues such as how academic writing conventions impact meaning making, and what are alternative ways of creating meaning (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Similarly, Badenhorst et al. (2015) propose a postgraduate writing pedagogy that is strongly influenced by critical

pedagogy through its emphasis on a critical engagement with self and other social processes. This pedagogy moves away from notions of 'deficit' and 'problems' and instead seeks to empower students to become discourse analysts, develop an authorial voice and finally to acquire critical competence. Additionally, Aitchison and Lee (2006) offer a research writing group pedagogy which addresses questions of knowledge, textual practice and identity in a socially driven learning context. Therefore, other possibilities to support research writing exist, and they do not necessarily have to be focussed on finding quick fixes for students' writing problems.

METHOD

The present research project was conducted in an international branch campus of an overseas university in Malaysia. Before students can enrol in the research degree programmes, certain language requirements need to be met. For instance, they either must obtain an overall IELTS band of 6.5 and above, or have successfully completed at least 24 months of full-time formal study in the English language at Bachelor degree level. At the time of the study, approximately 100 research Masters and PhD students were enrolled on the campus, and in 2016 there was a total of 40 new students. Postgraduate research writing received little attention at the time the project was being developed, and no long-term formalized approach was in place to support the research writing process.

Students were recruited through an e-mail call for participation and through student referrals. Potential participants had to have complete at least six months of full-time study to have sufficient research writing experiences to draw on. Eight students initially expressed interest in the project, however only six confirmed participation. All were from non-English speaking backgrounds and were pursuing postgraduate research degrees full-time in the Sciences. Four participants were Masters students, and the remaining two were Doctoral students. Two were international students, while the rest were local Malaysian students.

In this institution, Masters students are required to produce a written thesis of between 50, 000 – 60,000 words, while the requirement for Doctoral students is a thesis of between 70,000 – 100,000 words. Both the Masters and PhD programmes are fully research-based without any coursework components.

Semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45-90 minutes were conducted with five full-time postgraduates, while one other student requested an e-mail interview. Those who were interested in participating were sent an information sheet and consent form, which was later signed and returned. A copy of the interview protocol was also sent through e-mail a few days before the interview, so that students could have sufficient time to reflect on their experiences. To get a sense of students' writing challenges, interview questions spanned three broad areas:

a) Academic writing perceptions
b) Academic writing challenges
c) Support sought for academic writing

Under each of these areas were open-ended questions that probed further into their experiences of research writing. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The completed transcripts were sent to participants to be checked for accuracy and they were asked to make changes to the information where necessary.

Analysis of the transcripts followed a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The process started with the preparation of raw data files that were formatted, page numbered and printed to ease with referencing. Next, frequent, dominant, or significant themes were identified in the raw data (Thomas, 2006). This inductive analysis involved reading and re-

reading the transcripts, examining commonalities, differences and distinctive features across the data set, and identifying relationships between the various elements in the analysis. At times, certain segments of texts were assigned into more than one sub-theme. At other times, there was considerable amount of text that was not coded into any category because it did not relate to the research objectives. This is because there were instances when students shared experiences that did not explicitly address their research writing experiences.

Table 1 lists information about the participants' programme along with their stage of candidacy. Because this university has a relatively small postgraduate student population, their specific areas of study will not be disclosed to protect their anonymity.

TABLE 1. Participants' degree level and stage of candidacy

Name (Pseudonyms)	Degree level	Stage of candidacy
Malissa	PhD	1st year
Thevi	Masters	1 ½ years
Carrie	PhD	2nd year
Kei	Masters	2nd year
Wan	Masters	Thesis submitted and under examination
Patton	Masters	Thesis submitted and under examination

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the three dominant themes that emerged from the analysis shall be discussed. These themes were:

a) Understanding the 'laws' of the jungle
b) Navigating darkness in the jungle
c) Experiencing isolation in the jungle

I use the metaphor of 'the jungle' to conceptualise and further illustrate students' challenges in research writing. The metaphor of a 'jungle' conjures images of unfamiliar and unfriendly terrain. Survival in a vast, dense jungle is not easy, and its harsh conditions may very easily test human limits. Because of the unknown and unexplored nature of the 'jungle', I have chosen this metaphor to exemplify students' research writing challenges.

UNDERSTANDING THE 'LAWS' OF THE JUNGLE

This theme refers to the basic 'rules', 'conventions' or 'behaviours' that students felt were important for success in academic work. The three 'laws of the jungle' that they found to be significantly challenging were related to getting acquainted with the conventions of academic writing and skills, disciplinary socialisation and finally, gaining linguistic competence. As new researchers in the field, they recognised that these were competencies they needed to master so that they could continue to survive this metaphorical jungle experience.

Two students expressed their frustration with familiarising themselves with academic forms of writing:

> *It is not easy to express myself clearly, especially on the description of experiment details.* (Carrie)
> *I noticed that in my draft papers, he (my supervisor) would say 'don't write like you are speaking.* (Patton)

For Carrie, clarity in writing appeared to be a problem while Patton struggled with achieving an academic tone and style in his writing. According to Li and

Vandermensbrugghe (2011), the capacity to write with clarity and confidence in English and develop an understanding of the conventions of academic writing practices in their disciplines is a common problem that students from non-native English speaking backgrounds experience when writing for academic purposes. The struggles Carrie and Patton faced are common to other participants in this study, and it can directly affect academic success and progress.

Learning the conventions of academic writing also includes the need to master a set of academic skills and in this case the issue of plagiarism emerged.

> *Sometimes I don't get why we have to paraphrase. I know it is to avoid plagiarism… And then when you present it, they are going to say 'no, I did not say that'. It is because you changed his words. So I don't get it. I don't understand.* (Thevi)

Like many students writing for academic purposes, Thevi was unsure of the purpose of paraphrasing. Pecorari (2008) recognises that textual plagiarism is often unintentional and from her study among postgraduate students, she posits that students are unaware and lack information on exactly what plagiarism is. From Thevi's response, it is evident that textual plagiarism and source use is an area that needs explicit instruction in research writing, and if this is done certain ambiguities and misconceptions about these issues can be better understood.

> *Plagiarism was a problem for me because I was not really sure the proper way to interpret the information and make the content still have meaning. So, for me I thought OK if I just take this work, take this work and put it together then it is OK. But it ended being plagiarized.* (Patton)

Reflecting on his journey of research writing, Patton, who had already submitted his thesis highlighted his difficulties with plagiarism. His response closely resembles a strategy that is termed 'patchwriting' (Howard, 1995) and Pecorari (2008) explains that students who patchwrite lack the fluency in the skill of writing on academic topics and ways to draw on other texts in the writing process. Additionally, Patton appeared to reveal a lack of understanding on the underpinning issues surrounding plagiarism. Therefore, there seems to be a clear need to address plagiarism in a more focussed manner so that students can not only be equipped with the necessary academic skills, but with an understanding of issues related to plagiarism.

The second 'law of the jungle' was socialisation into the discipline. As students are exposed to various disciplinary practices, they slowly begin to think, talk and act in ways that are appropriate within their field (Charles & Pecorari, 2016). This eventually leads to a construction of a new identity, which can be observed over time through a student's writing and thinking as well as through the gradual adoption of ideas, values and practices specific to their disciplinary community (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).

Malissa who was in her first year of PhD study shared some of the challenges she faced when reading and writing:

> *At this stage, it would be scientific language and terms. And familiarising myself with names of equipment and massive number of technical terms. There are many new terms – not studied during undergraduate study. Also scientific writing and learning how to write for journals. Even though we have read a lot of journal articles, writing it by yourself is different.*

Through the process of disciplinary socialisation, she began to engage with the knowledge in her discipline and this influenced writing. Hence becoming inducted into a new

knowledge area was a challenge for Malissa who was in early stages of her candidacy. As she began to read around her research area and engage with people from her discipline, she was exposed to many unfamiliar, technical and scientific terms that she had never encountered before. In addition to learning how to write, she also had to know how to use these new terms appropriately.

Socialisation into the discipline was also evident through publication. Some of the students in this study published during their candidacy and engagement with the scholarly community helped shape their views on their discipline and research writing:

> *I sent my papers out for reviews and the feedback and comments I received from those reviewers really taught me how to present my thesis.* (Patton)

Here, students learnt how to write and learn both disciplinary and academic language conventions. Malissa's and Patton's experience reveal that, for them, disciplinary socialisation was an important step in becoming inducted into the field, and research writing facilitated this process.

The final 'law of the jungle' that students had to grasp was proficiency in the English language. As all students were from non-native English-speaking backgrounds, this proved to be a significant challenge, because all their research related work was in the English language. Wan, who had recently submitted his thesis reflected on his research writing journey and reported that he relied very much on translating information from one language to another:

> *My first language is not English. So when I read different things, it is hard to translate into what you want to say. I think that is most important – how you translate the reading into your own mind, and then translate it back out into English.* (Wan)

Another indication that language proficiency impeded research writing was the rather limited academic English vocabulary some students possessed. The challenge for Carrie was expressing the same idea in different ways, while for Thevi, it was finding the right words for what she wanted to say. In both instances, a larger and broader vocabulary may have helped them better articulate and communicate ideas through writing.

When considering standardised, academic English, Strauss (2012) raises the question whether Western universities should be imposing English language standards or be employing a more accommodating stance towards academic English use, especially at a time when English ownership is international and far-reaching. 'Protection of a standard variety of English or Western EAP practices not only demonstrates a failure to grasp the dynamic nature of language, but also sits uneasily in an environment suffused with the rhetoric of internationalization' (Liyanange & Walker, 2014, p. 7). Thus, with reference to EAP teaching and learning in the Asian context, Canagarajah (2014) proposes a pedagogy that enables students to address competing cultural, academic and linguistic traditions. He contends that this would lead to development in English language proficiency because it enables an appreciation of the differences that are present between local and Western academic literacies and an understanding of the rationale behind local conventions. Perhaps such a pedagogy deserves discussion and deliberation in the Malaysian context; and it might be worth exploring how this approach can be systematically developed in the future.

NAVIGATING DARKNESS IN THE JUNGLE

This theme refers to the sense of 'darkness' that three students experienced during their research writing journey. Amidst this 'darkness' students found themselves having to navigate their way, so that they could continue to survive this 'jungle' experience.

The notion of 'blindness' and 'darkness' seemed to clearly resonate with Thevi who shared that there was a stage where she experienced writing blindly without clear purpose or direction. However, after attending a workshop, she developed an extra sense of clarity of her writing journey.

> *During the workshop, Dr X shared some links about phrase bank and those kinds of sites. I thought that was helpful. Before that I was just writing blindly. … So basically for the whole candidature I am just blindly hitting walls.*

She described her writing experience as 'blindly hitting walls', which suggests a lack of advancement or clear direction; while the 'walls' were an obstacle which prevented her from progressing with her writing. In a study among doctoral students, Starke-Meyerring (2011) found that students experienced a sense of being left in the dark, and learning by trial and error. Thevi's supervisor did play a role in the writing process, and she acknowledged his contribution in the following ways:

> *In terms of more like structuring how I write. How do I get from one point to another – from one section to another so that the chapters flow and makes sense. Usually I start writing my own draft then he will look at it, and if he thinks the flow is not really good he will just adjust it.*

Despite the guidance received, Thevi required greater support to help her navigate through the writing process and one form of support that proved to be helpful was a skills-based intervention in the form of a one-off workshop. While Thevi was fortunate enough to have a supervisor, who was involved in the writing process, other students had supervisors who focused mainly on disciplinary knowledge and the overall structure of the research project. The lack of writing guidance gave way to a sense of uncertainty and confusion:

> *I don't know if my literature review is too broad, or too narrow so or what kind of sub-topics that I should include. Whether what I include is specific to this particular type of work or maybe I have put something that is not related.* (Kei)

Students can feel left in the dark when there is a lack of exchange and dialogue about writing because this results in writing being 'hidden from plain sight', and treated as normalised and 'common sense' (Starke-Meyerring, 2011).

Three students experienced 'darkness' and disorientation when their expectations of supervisors were not met. A sense of 'darkness' surfaced because there was a lack of clarity on what the roles of the supervisor were. Carrie and Kei felt that supervisors should be responsible for proofreading drafts and rewriting sentences. Malissa shared that her supervisor conducted discussions with her in another language, but she believed that only the English language should be used because that is the language the thesis will be written in. Finally, Thevi expected her supervisor to set clear writing deadlines. These unfulfilled expectations that students had of their supervisor were a problem encountered during the writing process. A study by Catterall et al. (2011) revealed a lack of consistency among supervisors' perceptions of their roles as well as the forms of support students sought from supervisors. Additionally, there was no clear instruction from the institution on what was required of the supervisor in relation to writing development and neither were students provided with guidelines on what to expect from supervisors. Although in the case of the present study supervisors' perceptions were not sought, it can be generalised that a somewhat similar situation seemed to be happening. Students had quite diverse expectations of their supervisors, and the institution had not clearly communicated what the role of the supervisor was.

eISSN: 2550-2131
ISSN: 1675-8021

One student provided a solution which she believed would help navigate the writing journey:

> *I think maybe it is a good idea for students to go through a briefing. What they need to do in the beginning, for example confirmation steps. A briefing on what the roles of the supervisor is and what can they do for us and who we can go to when we need help… Perhaps coming out with an agreement between supervisor and student to clarify expectations.* (Malissa)

The role of the supervisor in terms of writing development seems to be a contentious area, because some supervisors may feel that it is not their responsibility to teach writing (Starke-Meyerring, 2011). Apart from that, many supervisors may also not know how to teach writing or be familiar with writing pedagogy. Supervisors also often rely on their own experiences of being supervised as ideals to emulate, and this may not always prove to be helpful (Badenhorst et al., 2015). In the Malaysian context, some supervisors are also from non-English speaking backgrounds, and hence there is an added linguistic demand placed on them as English language writing teachers. Canagarajah (2014), from his knowledge and experience of the academic culture in Sri Lanka, observes that among other things, the local academic community is more of a reading community than a writing community in its literacy practices and it is also more a teaching community than a research community. Although Canagarajah (2014) provides a Sri Lankan perspective, his notions about local academic culture and community seem to resonate with the situation in Malaysia.

EXPERIENCING ISOLATION IN THE JUNGLE

The final theme that emerged relates to the isolation and disconnectedness students experienced. The writing journey was perceived as lonely and students sought sociality in writing. Aitchison and Lee (2006) explain that although there are notions of writing as a solitary pursuit, writing is in fact a process that involves a network of social, institutional and peer relations.

Firstly, students sought a sense of community with other peers. Thevi reported that she was in a faculty which did not have many postgraduate students enrolled and she mentioned that there was not much interaction among students. Although some may regard writing as a solitary endeavour, Thevi displayed a need to have greater sociality by connecting with others from outside the university:

> *I also heard from my colleague that they had a research group but with another university. So when I heard that I was like 'Oh… why don't we have this here'?*

Patton felt a sense of isolation from recent graduates in his field and members from other faculties:

> *I wished there were people who had finished before me, like seniors who could have really assisted me. And I always wished I could have had access to the faculty of English because I thought it is easier for them to support our mistakes.*

He continued to relate how there was a time during his candidature that he was unable to find assistance and support from other fellow postgraduates. He attributed this to the lack of interaction among students and recalled how the students he approached felt that it was 'weird' for him to seek their help.

Although students were unable to gain a sense of community with other postgraduates in their own university, they displayed agency and found ways to compensate. To overcome

this challenge, they sought to make connections with people from industry, other universities and friends from outside academia. Wan recounted how he would talk about his research project to his old high school mates, and friends of friends. He also relied on networking with people from industry, for instance through his supervisor's connections and people he met at conferences. He noted that these people could not explicitly help with the writing process, but they contributed to forming his ideas about disciplinary knowledge. Malissa also displayed a sense of agency despite being 'isolated' because she sought to make connections with others in her faculty who were researching similar projects. Like Wan, she talked to and networked with experts in the field and made links with people she met from outside the university.

One way in which this problem of isolation can be addressed is by forming peer writing groups among students. Li and Vandermensbrugghe (2011) found that NESB peer writing group participants benefited through sharing their writing in a supportive environment and appreciated the continual assistance given in the writing process. Additionally, participants acquired increased awareness of language use and developed reader awareness because they became readers for each other. In a peer writing group, learning is 'horizontal' because students learn with and from each other.

Apart from this, peer writing groups also contribute to the formation of a community, as exemplified through the idea of 'communities of practice' (COP). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) define COPs as groups of individuals who share a concern for a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who develop their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. A COP is a social learning group that is developed with individuals participating in a common enterprise hence, postgraduate students who find the writing process lonely and isolating will be able to form COPs by forming peer writing groups. When students form such communities, they are able to learn 'the history of a practice in terms of that community's artifacts, actions and language' (Kim, 2011, p. 283). This addresses the epistemological, experiential and textual dimensions of writing (Aitchison & Lee, 2006). Hence, participants in this study may have felt less isolated if such communities were present in their institution.

It is uncertain whether informal peer writing groups exist among postgraduate students in Malaysia, however the lack of published work on this seems to suggest that peer writing groups may not be something that has gained much attention. Nevertheless, Stracke and Kumar (2014) reported a peer support group initiative in University Putra Malaysia from 2006 - 2011. This support group did not only focus on activities involving writing, but also included social and career development activities as well as practical day-to-day management of the research process. Fergie, Beeke, Mckenna, and Crème (2011) reveal that peer learning and peer feedback enable students to develop confidence as researchers and in writing, gain alternative insights on less considered issues, and familiarise themselves with the process of peer review which will be beneficial in their future academic careers. Another benefit that is gained when participants meet face-to-face is a sense of belonging and connection with others (Buissink-Smith, Hart, & van der Meer, 2013). As peer learning and peer writing groups have proven to be valuable in supporting the writing process; it may be worth adopting and appropriating something similar in the Malaysian context as well.

CONCLUSION

Three main themes emerged from this small-scale exploratory study: a) understanding the laws of the jungle, b) navigating darkness in the jungle and c) experiencing isolation in the jungle. The first challenge the students described was grasping certain skills, competencies and understandings that are often expected of students at postgraduate level. Students needed to know the conventions in academic writing, possess disciplinary knowledge and

comprehension of technical vocabulary as well as be proficient in the English language. The second challenge students experienced was confusion and lack of clear direction in the writing process. The final challenge was related to the social aspect of writing; which was the need to make connections with peers and others from outside the university. These findings suggest that the struggles of postgraduate students are diverse and writing in many ways was dependant on many other variables such as disciplinary and academic socialisation, supervisory approaches, and the institutional context.

Since research into postgraduate education in Malaysia is considerably 'young', valuable lessons can be learnt from other countries. For instance, the long-standing skills - based approach which focuses on the development of generic skills and side-lines discipline-specific contexts. has proven to be a rather unhelpful way of dealing with research writing. Therefore, instead of going down this route and adopting this approach, Malaysian academics can seek and appropriate other approaches that have been found to be more effective and would work in the Malaysian context. For this to happen, there first needs to be greater engagement and knowledge sharing between research communities across the globe.

The increasing pressure at national level to have more doctoral graduates has provided Malaysian academics with a new space for exploration and research. At present, postgraduate research education seems to be an under researched area, especially among private higher education institutions. Private higher education institutions in Malaysia work under different realities and constraints, so scholarship and research in this area could lead to new and fresh perspectives which can enhance and further knowledge. In addition to more studies involving student experiences, inquiry could include supervisory practices and perspectives; as well as institutional policies and support for research education in the private higher education setting. More research into postgraduate education is needed so greater understanding can be gained and the problem of high attrition rates can be addressed.

Malaysia's aspirations to increase the number of doctoral graduates and 'knowledge workers' in the country are ambitious, and if they are to be realised, a more systematic approach to supporting research writing and researcher development is needed. Through this, the challenges faced by students can be mitigated and more timely completion rates, greater student learning experiences and researcher development are likely to ensue.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr Lee Adam and Professor Malachi Edwin Vethamani for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.

REFERENCES

Abdulkareen, M. N. (2013). An Investigation Study of Academic Writing Problems Faced by Arab Postgraduate Students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). *Theory and Practice in Language Studies. Vol. 3*(9), 1552-1557. https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.3.9.1552-1557

Aitchison, C. & Lee, A. (2006). Research writing: problems and pedagogies. *Teaching in Higher Education*. *Vol. 11*(3), 265-278. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510600680574

Badenhorst, C., Moloney, C. & Rosales, J. (2015). Beyond Deficit: Graduate Student Research-writing Pedagogies. *Teaching in Higher Education. Vol. 20*(1), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2014.945160

Berkenkotter, C. & Huckin, T. (1995). *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/ Culture/ Power.* Hillsdale NJ: Erlbaum.

Bitchener, J. & Basturkmen, H. (2006). Perceptions of the Difficulties of Postgraduate L2

Thesis Students Writing the Discussion Section. *Journal of English for Academic Purpose. Vol. 5*(1), 4-18. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2005.10.002

Buissink-Smith, N., Hart, S. & van der Meer, J. (2013). ` There Are Other People Out There!' Successful Postgraduate Peer Groups and Research Communities at a New Zealand University. *Higher Education Research & Development. Vol. 32*(July), 695-705. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.777034

Cadman, K. (2000). "Voices in the Air": Evaluations of the Learning Experiences of International Postgraduates and Their Supervisors. *Teaching in Higher Education. Vol. 5*(4), 475-491. https://doi.org/10.1080/713699170

Canagarajah, S. (2014). Eap in Asia: Challenges and Possibilities. In I. Liyanange & T. Walker (Eds.), *English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Asia: Negotiating Appropriate Practices in a Global Context* (pp. 94-102). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. Retrieved from http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tarc-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3034982

Carter, S. (2011). Doctorate as Genre: Supporting Thesis Writing Across Campus. *Higher Education Research & Development. Vol. 30*(6), 725-736. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.554388

Catterall, J., Ross, P., Aitchison, C. & Bergin, S. (2011). Pedagogical Approaches That Facilitate Writing in Postgraduate Research Candidature in Science and Technology. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice. Vol. 8*(2), 1-10.

Chang, D. W., Morshidi, S. & Abdul Razak, D. (2015). The Idea of a University: Rethinking the Malaysian Context. *Humanities. Vol. 4*,266-282. https://doi.org/10.3390/h4030266

Charles, M. & Pecorari, D. (2016). *Introducing English for Academic Purposes*. New York: Routledge.

Cheng, L., Myles, J. & Curtis, A. (2004). Targeting Language Support for Non-native English-speaking Graduate Students at a Canadian University. *TESL Canada Journal. Vol. 21*(2), 50-71.

Dash, D. P. (2015). *Enacting a Developmental Niche for* Researchers : Lessons From Research Education Initiatives in India and Malaysia. *International Journal for Researcher Development*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRD-08-2014-0022

East, M., Bitchener, J. & Basturkmen, H. (2012). What Constitutes Effective Feedback to Postgraduate Research Students? The Students' Perspective. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*. *Vol. 9*(2), 1-16.

Evans, S. & Green, C. (2007). Why EAP Is Necessary: A Survey of Hong Kong Tertiary Students. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes. Vol. 6*(1), 3-17. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2006.11.005

Fergie, G., Beeke, S., Mckenna, C. & Creme, P. (2011). " It' S a Lonely Walk ": Supporting Postgraduate Researchers Through Writing. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Vol. 23*(2), 236-245.

Franken, M. (2012). Re-situation Challenges for International Students "Becoming" Researchers. *Higher Education. Vol. 64*(6), 845-859. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-012-9532-5

Hashim, A. & Leitner, G. (2014). English as a Lingua Franca in Higher Education in Malaysia. *The Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics. Vol. 1*(1), 16-27. Retrieved from http://ssrn.com/abstract=2418116%5Cnhttp://caes.hku.hk/ajal

Howard, R. M. (1995). Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty. *College English. Vol. 57*(7), 788–806. https://doi.org/10.2307/378403

Hyland, K. (2013). Writing in the University: Education, Knowledge and Reputation. *Language Teaching. Vol. 46*(1), 53-. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000036

Jeong-Bae Son & Sang-Soon Park. (2014). Academic Experiences of International PhD Students in Australian Higher Education: From an EAP Program to a PhD Program. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning. Vol. 9*(1), 26-37. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18334105.2014.11082017

Jones, G., Farrell, H. & Goldsmith, R. (2009). Paradigm Shift From Student to Researcher : An Academic Preparation Program for International Students. *Journal of Academic Language & Learning. Vol. 3*(2), 61-69.

Kaur, M. M. S. (2016). An emic perspective on academic writing difficulties among international graduate students in Malaysia. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies. Vol. 16*(3), 83-97.

Khozaei, F., Naidu, S., Khozaei, Z. & Salleh, N. A. (2015). An Exploratory Study of Factors That Affect the Research Progress of International PhD Students From the Middle East. *Education & Training. Vol. 57*(4), 448-460. https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-09-2013-0115

Kim, H. Y. (2011). International Graduate Students' Difficulties: Graduate Classes as a Community of Practices. *Teaching in Higher Education. Vol. 16*(3), 281-292. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.524922

Knight, J. & Morshidi, S. (2011). The Complexities and Challenges of Regional Education Hubs: Focus on Malaysia. *Higher Education. Vol. 62*(5), 593-606. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9467-2

Lan, F. (2015). A Case Study Into the Writing of Chinese Postgraduate Students in a Uk Academic Environment. *English Language Teaching. Vol. 8*(9), 86-95. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n9p86

Larcombe, W., McCosker, A. & O'Loughlin, K. (2007). Supporting Education PhD and Ded Students to Become Confident Academic Writers : An Evaluation of Thesis Writers ' Circles. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice. Vol. 4*(1), 54-63. Retrieved from http://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol4/iss1/6/

Lea, M. R. & Street, B. V. (1998). Student Writing in Higher Education: an Academic Literacies Approach. *Studies in Higher Education. Vol. 23*(2), 157-172. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079812331380364

Li, L. Y. & Vandermensbrugghe, J. (2011). Supporting the Thesis Writing Process of International Research Students Through an Ongoing Writing Group. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International. Vol. 48*(2), 195-205. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2011.564014

Lillis, T. & Scott, M. (2007). Defining Academic Literacies Research: Issues of Epistemology, Ideology and Strategy. *Journal of Applied Linguistics. Vol. 4*(1), 5-32. https://doi.org/10.1558/japl.v4i1.5

Lim, P. C., Sidhu, G. K., Fook, C. Y., Fong, L. L. & Jamian, L. S. (2016). Assessing Writing Skills of Postgraduate Students: Perspectives of Supervisors and Supervisees. In S. F. Tang & L. Logonnathan (Eds.), *Assessment for Learning Within and Beyond the Classroom : Taylor's 8th Teaching and Learning Conference 2015 Proceedings* (pp. 31-41). Singapore: Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0908-2

Liyanange, I. & Walker, T. (2014). Accommodating Asian EAP Practices Within Postgraduate Teacher Education: Perspectives From Australia. In I. Liyanage & T. Walker (Eds.), *English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Asia: Negotiating Appropriate Practices in a Global Context* (pp. 1-12). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. Retrieved from http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tarc-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3034982

McGrath, L. & Kaufhold, K. (2016). English for Specific Purposes and Academic Literacies: Eclecticism in Academic Writing Pedagogy. *Teaching in Higher Education. Vol.*

21(8), 933-947. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1198762

Michael, G. R. (2016). Self-efficacy and Self-regulation in Academic Writing at the Tertiary Level. In R. Tupas, S. Pillai, & R. Nair (Eds.), *English Language Education in Southeast Asia : Problems and Possibilities* (pp. 105-124). Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2015). *Malaysia education blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education)*. Putrajaya.

Odena, O. & Burgess, H. (2015). How Doctoral Students and Graduates Describe Facilitating Experiences and Strategies for Their Thesis Writing Learning Process: A Qualitative Approach. *Studies in Higher Education*. 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1063598

Ohnishi, S. & Ford, J. H. (2015). Student Seminar Program for Improving Academic Presentation Skills for Phd Students in Science: the Effect of Language Background on Outcome. *International Journal for Researcher Development. Vol. 6*(1), 57-76. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJRD-09-2014-0027

Pecorari, D. (2008). *Academic Writing and Plagiarism : A Linguistic Analysis.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Phakiti, A., Hirsh, D. & Woodrow, L. (2013). It's Not Only English: Effects of Other Individual Factors on English Language Learning and Academic Learning of ESL International Students in Australia. *Journal of Research in International Education. Vol. 12*(3), 239-258. https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240913513520

Phakiti, A. & Li, L. (2011). General Academic Difficulties and Reading and Writing Difficulties Among Asian Esl Postgraduate Students in Tesol at an Australian University. *RELC Journal. Vol. 42*(3), 227-264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688211421417

Ravichandran, S., Kretovics, M., Kirby, K. & Ghosh, A. (2017). Strategies to Address English Language Writing Challenges Faced by International Graduate Students in the Us. *Journal of International Students. Vol. 7*(3), 764-786. https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.570033

Rubdy, R., Tupas, T. R. F., Villareal, C. D., David, M. K. & Dumanig, F. P. (2012). Review of Doctoral Research in English Language Education in the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia (2007–2010). *Language Teaching. Vol. 45*(1), 64-88. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000383

Sidhu, G. K., Kaur, S., Fook, C. Y. & Yunus, F. W. (2014). Postgraduate Supervision: Comparing Student Perspectives from Malaysia and the United Kingdom. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences. Vol. 123*, 151-159. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.01.1409

Sidhu, G. K., Kaur, S., Lim, P. C. & Fook, C. Y. (2016). Assessing the Critical Reading Skills of Postgraduate Students: Perspectives of Supervisors and Supervisees. In S. F. Tang & L. Logonnathan (Eds.), *Assessment for Learning Within and Beyond the Classroom : Taylor's 8th Teaching and Learning Conference 2015 Proceedings* (pp. 43-52). Singapore: Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0908-2

Starke-Meyerring, D. (2011). The Paradox of Writing in Doctoral Education: Student Experiences. In L. McAlpine & C. Amundsen (Eds.), *Doctoral Education: Research-based Strategies for Doctoral Students, Supervisors and Administrators* (pp. 75-95). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0507-4

Storch, N. & Tapper, J. (2009). The Impact of an Eap Course on Postgraduate Writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes. Vol. 8*(3), 207-223. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2009.03.001

Stracke, E. & Kumar, V. (2014). Realising Graduate Attributes in the Research Degree: the

Role of Peer Support Groups. *Teaching in Higher Education. Vol. 19*(6), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2014.901955

Strauss, P. (2012). "The English Is Not the Same": Challenges in Thesis Writing for Second Language Speakers of English. *Teaching in Higher Education. Vol. 17*(3), 283-293. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.611871

Tham, S. Y. (2013). Internationalizing Higher Education in Malaysia: Government Policies and University's Response. *Journal of Studies in International Education. Vol. 17*(5), 648-662. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315313476954

Thomas, D. R. (2006). A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation. Vol. 27*(2), 237-246. doi: 10.1177/1098214005283748

Vinke, A. A. & Jochems, W. M. G. (1993). English Proficiency and Academic Success in International Postgraduate Education. *Higher Education. Vol. 26*(3), 275-285. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01383487

Walsh, E. (2010). A Model of Research Group Microclimate: Environmental and Cultural Factors Affecting the Experiences of Overseas Research Students in the UK. *Studies in Higher Education. Vol. 35*(5), 545-560. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903243092

Wang, T. & Li, L. Y. (2008). Understanding International Postgraduate Research Students' Challenges and Pedagogical Needs in Thesis Writing. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning. Vol. 4*(3), 88-96. https://doi.org/10.5172/ijpl.4.3.88

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice : A Guide to Managing Knowledge.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Winchester-Seeto, T., Homewood, J., Thogersen, J., Jacenyik-Trawoger, C., Manathunga, C., Reid, A. & Holbrook, A. (2014). Doctoral Supervision in a Cross-cultural Context: Issues Affecting Supervisors and Candidates. *Higher Education Research & Development. Vol. 33*(3), 610-626. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.841648

Woodward-Kron, R. (2007). Negotiating Meanings and Scaffolding Learning: Writing Support for Non-english Speaking Background Postgraduate Students. *Higher Education Research & Development. Vol. 26*(3), 253-268. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360701494286

Zhou, Y. & Todman, J. (2008). Patterns of Adaptation of Chinese Postgraduate Students in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Studies in International Education. Vol. 13*(4), 467-486. https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315308317937

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joanna Joseph Jeyaraj is currently a Senior Lecturer in Tunku Abdul Rahman University College. Her research interests include postgraduate research writing and critical pedagogy in English language teaching.