

International Graduate Students' Academic Writing Practices in Malaysia: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

This article focuses on the challenges faced by non-native English speaking international graduate students in their academic writing practices while they studied at a university in Malaysia as well as the solutions they employed when faced with the challenges. Academic Literacies Questionnaire was used to collect data. Based on 131 participants, the findings indicate that non-native English speaking international graduate students faced challenges in their academic writing practices in the instructional settings where English was used as a medium. In addition, the results revealed that some challenges those students face were mainly attributable to the fact that English in Malaysia is not the native or first language. This study suggests policies and programmes to meet the unique academic writing background needs of these students and ensure their academic success.

Keywords: international graduate students, academic writing practices, challenges, solutions

South East Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore where English is the second language, are increasingly attracting foreign students (Crewe, 2004; Reinties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Kommers, 2012). There is a wide gap in research pertaining to the academic literacy practices in South East Asian countries including Malaysia (Crewe, 2004; Reinties, et al, 2012).

In Malaysia, international graduate students, especially from the Middle East countries, contribute as one of the largest blocks of students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). The increasing number of international students studying in Malaysia has brought linguistic, educational and cultural diversity (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Kaur (2000) discovered that stakes are high in the taught Master programmes that international graduate students are enrolled in. These Master programmes comprise coursework or mixed mode programmes that require students to attend lectures, participate in tutorials and fulfill various academic literacies demands. The learning in these Master programmes in the university is facilitated through classroom lectures, tutorials, seminars, individual project work, industrial or business placement, problem-solving classes, group projects, research dissertation or discussion groups.

Majority of the non-native English speaking international graduate students enrolled in the Master programmes at the higher education institutions in Malaysia have exposure to academic literacies from their previously gained formal education in their native countries. This attribute crucially impacts the challenges related to the academic literacies when they come to Malaysia to further their study. Furthermore, the use of English as the medium of instruction for majority of the Master programmes caused more academic adjustment problems for the students (Kaur, 2000).

In Malaysia, these students qualify to further their study at graduate level based on their English language qualifications such as the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) results and academic qualifications such as their cumulative grade point average of their previous degree. However, they are still unable to grasp the new and different academic expectations in their academic writing practices as well as adapt to appropriate academic demands of their academic writing as mentioned in academic studies (Kaur & Shakila, 2007; Sidhu & Kaur, 2009).

However, much of the research on academic writing practices of non-native English speaking international graduate students is confined on students studying in the English as first language environment, such as in the Anglo Saxon countries. Therefore, the underlying motivation of this research study was to explore the academic writing practices of the non-native English speaking international graduate students in Malaysia, where English is the second language.

Review of Related Literature

Academic Writing Practices

Writing in a discipline requires a complete, active, struggling engagement with the facts and principles of a discipline (Rose, 1985). According to Arkoudis and Tran (2007), academic writing as a form of thinking is fundamental for academic success of the international students. Hyland (2007) also highlighted 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.

Hence, writing in the tertiary level disciplines often poses challenges for international students. For example, students who are non-native speakers of English are often reported to have difficulties with grammar, lexis and syntax (Rose, 1985). These difficulties are worsened when faced with the challenges of the rhetoric of academic English, way of organizing ideas, defending claims, and addressing readers (Belcher, 1994).

In addition, Paltridge (2002) asserted that thesis writing is a difficult process especially for English as a Second Language students because they possess limited language proficiency for critical thinking, genre knowledge and social knowledge. Consequently, the greatest challenge with producing written text is language errors which create negative impressions (Loewy & Vogt, 2000).

Academic Writing Practices among International Graduate Students

Studying in an English instructional environment exposes the 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). Leki's (2007) suggested that all the lecturers she interviewed reported that learning to write well was a burden because of its extensive writing requirement. As Brown (2008) discusses, the international graduate students' difficulties in adjusting to academic writing were not only due to language barriers in terms of vocabulary and grammar, but also due to the inadequate understanding of academic writing standards and expectations from the lectures and institution.

Two studies (Casanave, 1995; Angelova & 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 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. The results highlight the ways ESL students learn to write in their home cultures and that the writing expectations of English-speaking discourse communities were different.

Studies showed that international graduate students in Malaysian universities struggled in reading and writing practices which are the thrust of academic literacies (Kaur & Shakila, 2007; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009). Ibrahim and Nambiar (2011) identified that the students' experiences at 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 respondents in their study claimed that there were differences in teaching and learning styles between the higher education institution in Malaysia and their home countries and they were not prepared for the autonomy presented in the process of writing up their academic papers. In addition, the respondents cited that cross-cultural limitations stemming from differences in teaching and learning styles within Malaysian postsecondary institutions and their home countries inhibits academic writing (Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011).

Research Method

This paper draws on material from a completed PhD 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.

This quantitative study utilized purposive sampling with the aim of selecting all eligible respondents who could provide accurate and reliable information regarding the research problem (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The criteria for inclusion of international graduate students in the study are as follow: (a) respondents have to be full-time international master students in the coursework or mixed mode Master programmes; (b) they have to be in their second semester or later; and (c) they have to be a student of the Arts, Hybrid or Science schools at the research site university.

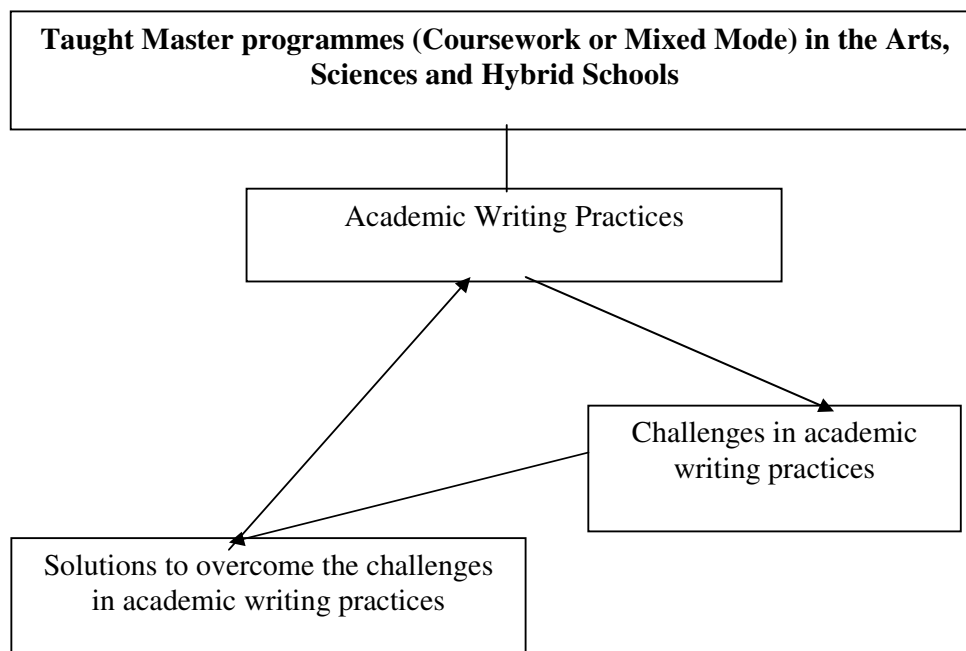


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework of the Study*

Selected items from the Academic Literacies Questionnaire were used to collect data for this study (Chang, 2006; Evans & Green, 2007). The two sections of the questionnaire that were utilized for this research were "Challenges Faced in Academic Writing Practices" (20 items) and "Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices" (6 items). The respondents were asked to assess the difficulty level of the challenges in academic writing practices on a scale from 1 (*very difficult*) to 4 (*very easy*).

Data was obtained from the university's Institute of Postgraduate Study. There were 203 international graduate students registered in the 13 coursework and 11 mixed mode Master programmes offered in the 10 schools comprising three Arts (Social Sciences, Humanities and Communication), two Hybrid (Education and Housing, Building and Planning) and five Sciences (Chemical Sciences, Physics, Pharmacy, Computer Sciences, Mathematics) for the Semester Two (Academic Session 2011/2012). Only 131 respondents in the age range of 20 to 47 years voluntarily participated in the study and completed the questionnaire.

Reliability Test

A pilot study was administered to a small sample ($n = 21$). The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient values indicate relatively high internal consistency with higher values than the minimum accepted value of 0.70 (Pallant, 2010). The result of the pilot study indicated high internal consistency reliability with the alpha coefficient of .822. The Cronbach's Alpha value of the 20 items of challenges in academic writing practices in the actual questionnaire administered was .903. The study has set a mean of 2.5 or above to indicate some degree of ease in the academic writing practices challenge in the ALQ based on the items selected from the previous research study by Evans and Green (2007).

Figure 1 provides the conceptual framework of the study. The dependent variable is academic writing practices that are influenced by the challenges faced by international graduate students and solutions employed to overcome the challenges in their academic writing practices in the coursework or mixed mode Master programmes in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences schools at the research site university.

Results

The majority of the students were from the Middle East countries (64.4%). Iran has the highest number of respondents (26.5%), followed by Iraq (14.4%), Palestine (6.8%), Libya (6.1%), Yemen (3.8%), Jordan (3.0%), Saudi Arabia (2.3%) and Egypt (0.8%). The respondents from other Asian and African countries account for 35.6%. Slightly less than half of the respondents (49.6%) were from the five schools in the Sciences. This was followed by 29.0% of the respondents from two Hybrid schools and 21.4% of the respondents from three Arts schools. The mean age of the respondents was 28.1 years.

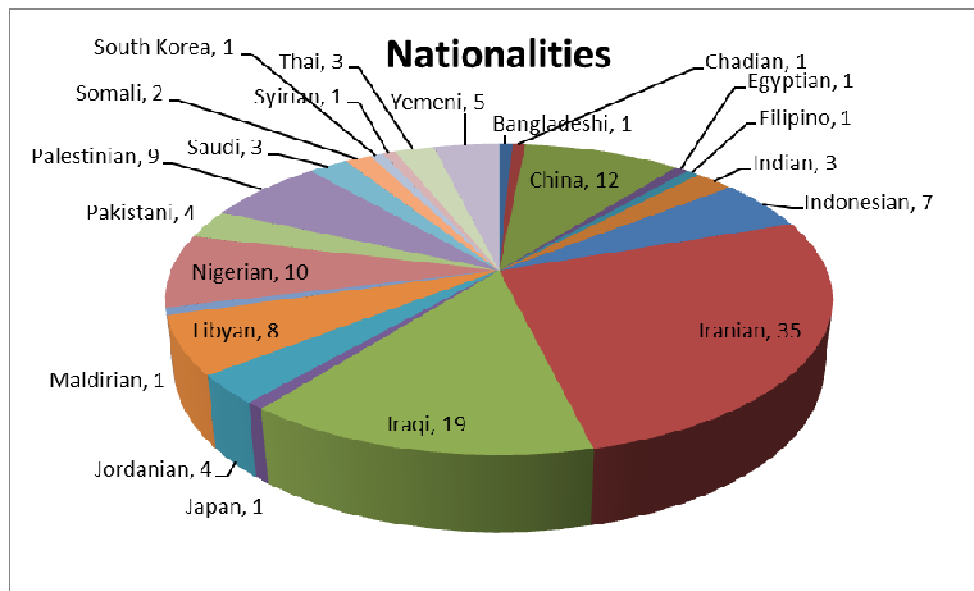


Figure 2. Nationality of the Respondents

The primary language used for lecture purposes during the first-degree was English language (39.4%). Persian language was used by 21.2% respondents from the Middle East countries. 12.9% of the respondents used Arabic language. The language that was most frequently used for discussion with lecturers was English language (34.8%). The respondents from the Middle East countries also preferred to use Arabic (18.2%) and Persian (21.2%) for discussions. On the other hand, the respondents from China used a combination of English and Chinese or only Chinese language (6.1%).

Likewise, English language (46.2%) was the most frequently used for reading material purposes. A little over nineteen percent of the respondents from the Middle East countries used Persian language. About 10% of the respondents used Arabic and only 7.6% of the respondents from China read in English. English language was the main language used for writing task by majority of the respondents (43.2%), secondly, Persian (19.7%), Arabic (10.6%) and Chinese language (6.8%).

Challenges in Academic Writing Practices

Sixty-seven respondents from the coursework and 64 respondents from the mixed mode Master programs used a Likert scale ranging from one ('very difficult') to four ('very easy') to assess the degree of difficulty they experienced in the 20 items on academic writing practices in the questionnaire. Scale one (very difficult) and scale two (difficult) were combined, while scale three (easy) and scale four (very easy) are also combined for reporting purposes. Table 3 summarizes the respondents' evaluation on the difficulty level of the academic writing practices.

Table 1
Challenges in Academic Writing Practices

Challenges in Academic Writing Practices	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	Mean
Using appropriate academic style	6.1	66.7	24.2	1.5	2.22
Writing methodology section	15.2	52.3	28.0	2.3	2.18
Writing findings/analysis section	15.2	52.3	28.0	2.3	2.18
Writing coherent paragraphs	9.1	57.6	28.8	1.5	2.23
Expressing ideas clearly/logically	6.8	57.6	31.1	3.0	2.31
Expressing ideas in correct English	13.6	50.0	31.8	3.0	2.25
Synthesizing information/ideas	9.8	51.5	31.1	3.8	2.30
Writing literature review	19.7	40.2	37.1	2.3	2.22
Writing discussion section	5.3	52.3	35.6	4.5	2.40
Summarizing/paraphrasing	6.8	47.7	39.4	3.0	2.40
Proof-reading written assignments	6.8	47.7	37.1	4.5	2.41
Planning writing assignments	6.8	45.5	42.4	6.8	2.41
Linking sentences smoothly	9.1	42.4	41.7	3.8	2.41
Writing abstracts	6.1	44.7	42.4	4.5	2.47
Revising written work	4.5	46.2	44.7	4.5	2.46
Writing introductions	3.0	44.7	47.0	3.8	2.52
Referring to sources	3.0	39.4	53.8	3.0	2.57
Writing conclusion	2.3	36.4	51.5	7.6	2.66
Writing recommendation section	1.5	36.4	54.5	5.3	2.65
Writing references/bibliography	6.1	28.8	56.8	6.8	2.65

Scale: 1 = Very Difficult, 2 = Difficult, 3 = Easy, 4 = Very Easy

Writing methodology section, writing findings/analysis section, using appropriate academic style, writing literature review, writing coherent paragraphs and expressing ideas in correct English are ranked as the six top challenges in academic writing practices (mean range from 2.18 to 2.25). The respondents

rated writing introductions, referring to sources, writing conclusion, writing recommendation section and writing references/bibliography as easy and very easy.

The data in Table 1 indicates that writing using appropriate academic style is very difficult (6.1%) and difficult (66.7%) for the respondents. Sixty-seven percent of the respondents reported writing methodology section and writing findings/analysis section as having the same level of difficulty with very difficult and difficult. More than 50% of the respondents indicated each of the following academic writing practices as very difficult and difficult: writing coherent paragraphs, expressing ideas clearly/logically, expressing ideas in correct English, synthesizing information/ideas, writing literature review, writing discussion section, summarizing/paraphrasing, proof-reading written assignments, planning writing assignments, linking sentences smoothly, writing abstracts and revising written work.

More than 50% of the respondents indicated each of the following challenges in academic writing practices as easy and very easy: writing introductions, referring to sources, writing conclusion, writing recommendation section and writing references/bibliography. A little over sixty three percent of the respondents reported writing bibliography/references as easy and very easy. In addition, slightly more than half (59.8%) of the respondents reported writing recommendation section as easy and very easy.

Mann-Whitney U test, a non-parametric test for two independent samples carried out to compare the difficulty level of the academic writing practices between the coursework and mixed mode respondents revealed a significant difference in the difficulty level of writing abstracts, summarizing/paraphrasing, planning writing assignments and synthesizing information/ideas. The test revealed a significant difference in the difficulty of writing abstracts between the coursework and mixed mode respondents ($Z = 2.221$, $p = .026$) with writing abstracts being more difficult for the coursework respondents (mean = 70.99) compared to the mixed mode respondents (mean = 58.32).

The Mann-Whitney U Test also revealed a significant difference in the difficulty of summarizing/paraphrasing between the coursework and mixed mode respondents ($Z = 2.175$, $p = .030$) with summarizing/paraphrasing being more difficult for the coursework respondents (mean = 70.44) compared to the mixed mode respondents (mean = 58.18). The test also revealed a significant difference in the difficulty of planning writing assignments between the coursework and mixed mode respondents ($Z = 2.487$, $p = .013$) with planning writing assignment being more difficult for the coursework respondents (mean = 71.43) compared to the mixed mode respondents (mean = 57.35). Lastly, the Mann-Whitney U Test revealed a significant difference in the difficulty of synthesizing information/ideas between the coursework and mixed mode respondents ($Z = 2.007$, $p = .045$) with synthesizing information/ideas being more difficult for the coursework respondents (mean = 69.33) compared to the mixed mode respondents (mean = 58.41).

Kruskal-Wallis Test, a non-parametric test of four scales carried out to compare the difficulty level of the academic writing practices among the respondents in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences schools revealed a significant difference in the difficulty level of writing abstracts and writing methodology section. The test revealed a significant difference in writing abstracts among the respondents in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences (Chi-Square (H) (2) = 11.619, $p = .003$) with writing abstracts being the most difficult academic writing practice for the respondents in the Arts (mean = 79.23) compared to those in the Hybrid (mean = 70.86). Writing abstract is the easiest academic writing practice for the respondents in the Sciences (mean = 54.89). The test also revealed a significant difference in writing the methodology section among the respondents in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences (Chi-Square (H) (2) = 6.164, $p = .046$) with writing the methodology section as the most difficult academic writing practice for the respondents in the Hybrid (mean = 72.93) compared to the respondents in the Sciences (mean = 65.92). Writing methodology section is the easiest academic writing practice for the respondents in the Arts (mean = 52.16).

Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices

Table 2 shows the frequency count of the six solutions employed by the respondents to overcome the challenges in their academic writing practices. Based on frequency count, the findings

indicate the most crucial solution employed by the respondents is “Be persistent and try to express yourself in different ways” (56.8%). This is followed by “Discuss with the lecturer to get information on how to approach assignments” (50.8%) and “Seek help from other classmates, for example checking the writing in English” (41.7%). The least popular solutions among the respondents are “Use editors to edit my work” (22.0%) and “Write in my first language and then translate it into English” (23.5%).

Table 2
Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices

Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices	YES (%)	NO (%)
Be persistent and try to express yourself in different ways	56.8	43.2
Take additional writing course	36.4	63.6
Write in my first language and then translate it into English	23.5	76.5
Discuss with the lecturer to get information on how to approach assignments	50.8	49.2
Use editors to edit my work	22.0	78.0
Seek help from other classmates, for example checking the writing in English	41.7	58.3

Mann-Whitney U test, a non-parametric test for two independent samples carried out to compare the solutions employed by the coursework and mixed mode respondents to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices revealed significant difference in two solutions employed to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices. The solutions are persistence and trying to express oneself in different ways and taking additional writing courses. It revealed a significant difference in being persistent and trying to express oneself in different ways ($Z= 1.974$, $p=.048$) as the more employed solution by the mixed mode respondents (mean = 72.31) compared to the coursework respondents (mean of 61.03). The test also revealed a significant difference in taking additional writing courses between the coursework and mixed mode respondents ($Z=2.066$, $p=0.039$) with taking additional writing courses as the more employed solution by the mixed mode respondents (mean = 72.41) compared to the coursework respondents (mean= 60.94).

Overcoming the Challenges in Academic Writing Practices (Open-ended Responses)

The data provided by the respondents in the open-ended response question section of the questionnaire, which describe the solutions employed to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices, indicates many ways were employed by the respondents to overcome the challenges in their academic writing practices. Responses given by the respondents ranged from seeking help from seniors about the conventions of academic writing, using the Google Translator to help in their writing process, and using an English language dictionary. The respondents also referred to the internet as a source for websites that provide information on the academic and dissertation writing techniques.

Most importantly, the respondents learned assignments, reports, essays and dissertation writing techniques. The most frequently employed solutions were preparing multiple drafts of assignments, revising the drafts, preparing a final draft, and, to a certain extent, integrating lecturers’ feedback if available. External assistance, such as access to internet to use the Google Translator to translate their written work from their first language into English, further reading on the subject, getting comments from the seniors on their work and improving their language skills, helped the respondents to overcome the challenges in their academic writing practices. The respondents also took the initiative to consult their lecturers on how to approach their assignments. Seeking advice and guidance from lecturers was identified as crucial in contemplating to write assignments.

Discussion

The notion of academic writing practices the students bring from their prior academic learning background differs from the similar notion and socialization in the current Master's community of practice. Their writing, which is affected by previous learning patterns, does not help them to quickly grasp the new and different academic expectations in graduate programmes. 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 international graduate students 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. The results also indicate that writing abstracts, summarizing/paraphrasing, planning writing assignments and synthesizing information/ideas as more difficult for the coursework students compared to the mixed mode students. In addition, Arts' students found writing abstracts as the most difficult compared to Hybrid and Sciences students. Writing the methodology section was indicated as the most difficult by the students in Hybrid compared to students from other two categories of schools and it is the easiest academic writing practice for the students from the Arts.

Overall, this study found that it was more difficult for international graduate students, especially those from the Middle East, Africa, East Asia and South Asia countries to make the necessary adjustment to study for their Master programmes 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 and use in their academic writing.

The most crucial solution employed to overcome the challenges in academic writing practices is being persistent and trying to express oneself in different ways. The less popular solutions employed are using the editors to edit their work and writing in their first language and then translating into English. The result also indicated that being persistent and trying to express oneself in different ways and taking additional writing courses were the more employed solutions by mixed mode students compared to the coursework students. The students in this study also used their own practices and complemented with the practices they learned from the lecturers and seniors.

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). The lecturers often fail to recognize the complexity of language 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 faced academic literacy challenges in main areas such as academic writing. Therefore, their English language qualifications are not the true indicator of their English language proficiency.

Therefore, this study suggests three recommendations to help international graduate students face the challenges in their academic writing practices. First, is the formation of a Learning Support Centre

for the benefit of the students and the internationalization agenda of the research site university. The one-stop academic centre should support the university in the improvement of the students' academic writing experience as the academic fraternity at the research site university is the best academic discourse community to reinforce the important route of academic socialization to the inexperienced international graduate students in becoming legitimate members of the Master students' community.

Currently, there is lack of enforcement on the English language entry requirement by either the individual schools or the Institute of Postgraduate Studies at the research site university. Secondly, this study recommends that the university strictly adheres to the English language requirement policy. Subsequently, the university should not be dependent on the standardized English language requirement across the board for all taught Master programmes. A previous study such as Alco's (2008) has found IELTS and TOEFL not to be consistently reliable indicators of language ability in the academic setting. There should be future possibility of designing and implementing a more effective in-house standardized English language placement test to evaluate students' English language proficiency and determine their suitability for linguistically and non-linguistically demanding Master programmes that require different levels of English language proficiency.

Lastly, in order to facilitate the development of effective learning to enable the students to become skilled writers within the graduate education environment, the university should enhance teaching and learning through trans-disciplinary collaboration between content and language specialists' lecturers which is currently under-utilized in Malaysia. Lecturers from both areas should cross the boundaries of their discipline, collaborate and become familiar with a wide range of disciplines. The expertise integration of both area lecturers is viable to create integrative language and content instruction courses that focus on specific discourses within the discipline to bring about an optimum exposure of the academic writing expectations to students.

Conclusion

This study has revealed how international Master programmes graduate students who come from different academic literacy backgrounds and differ from the present institutionally accepted codes and conventions faced the challenges in their academic writing practices and empowered solutions to overcome the challenges. 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. Nevertheless, the findings have given us insights from their perspective on how they face the challenges in their academic writing practices and employ necessary steps in overcoming those challenges. 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 study also reaffirms the idea that "an understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings" (Street, 1993, p. 430) and the situatedness of academic literacies are multiple, changing and different from one academic context to another which reflects the Academic Literacies Model (Lea & Street, 2000). Moreover, the higher education industry of Malaysia, which is on a serious quest to upgrade its education system to international standards and join the global ranking as provider of tertiary education for the international society, should consider the recommendations provided in this study to ensure a positive learning experience for international students. Improvement in their educational experience has the potential to create a positive reputation for the higher education institutions in Malaysia especially the research site university. Therefore, implementing the recommendations will be a step towards advancing international higher education environment within the research site university and assisting in the attainment of one of the ultimate aims of the internationalization agenda that is to turn the country into a centre of excellence for higher education.

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