Academic Reading and Writing Challenges Among International EFL Master's Students in a Malaysian University: The Voice of Lecturers

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the perspective of lecturers, this qualitative research investigated the academic reading and writing challenges faced by international English-as-a-foreign-language master's students at a Malaysian university. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews with 16 lecturers who taught international students from various graduate programs. The findings from the lecturers' perspectives indicate that the students faced acute challenges in their academic reading and writing practices such as adhering to academic writing conventions and interpreting text in an English language instructional setting. This study suggests policies and programs to overcome the challenges of the international EFL students' academic writing and reading practices to ensure their academic success in as they learn in graduate programs.

Keywords: academic reading, academic writing, challenges, international graduate students, lecturers

As a global lingua franca, the English language is the medium of instruction (MoI) for international English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) master's students in Malaysian higher education institutions. The use of English as the MoI in Malaysian higher education is one of the criterion that has made Malaysia a popular hub for further study among international EFL students. However, the use of English language as the MoI also has its disadvantages, especially for EFL students. These students, mainly from Arab countries, China, and Thailand, were previously exposed to academic discourse primarily in their native language. This setback contributes to international EFL master's students facing hardship with the English language, especially with

academic writing and reading practices in Malaysia at the master's level (Manjet, 2015, 2017). Academic writing and reading practices, along with academic listening and speaking practices, are important for academic success (Braine, 2002). Existing research (Abdulkareem, 2013; Saazai, Melor, & Embi, 2014; Yuen & Mussa, 2015) has concentrated on academic challenges facing international students from the students' perspective. Extremely limited studies have focused on these challenges from the perspective of other stakeholders such as the lecturers who teach international EFL master's students.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate a significant issue affecting international EFL master's students' academic performance. In line with the aim, the investigation involved analysis of lecturers' views on the challenges faced by international EFL master's students in their academic writing and reading practices at a Malaysian university. On a macro level, the findings of this study also contribute to global higher education as international EFL students' mobility is not only restricted to the Association of South Eastern Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries such as Malaysia or Singapore but also expands to other countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In addition, at the micro level, the findings provide significant insight for lecturers in terms of reducing the impact of the challenges international EFL students face, along with strategies to overcome those issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia is one of the most successful countries that draws many international graduate students into its higher education system (Knight & Sirat, 2011; Wan & Sirat, 2017, 2018). Luo (2017) highlighted that the Malaysian government's national education blueprint released in 2015 targeted the future intake of 250,000 international students by 2025. By December 2016, 132,710 international students were enrolled in Malaysian higher education. Most international students in Malaysian higher education institutions from Middle Eastern and Arab countries such as Yemen, Iraq, and Libya (Kassim, 2013; Pandian, Baboo, & Mahfoodh, 2014; Yusoff, 2012) must use English in their academic activities. Thus, English is their medium of international academic communication. International master's students in Malaysian universities experience difficulties and challenges in their academic writing and reading practices because English is not their primary language (L1; Manjet, 2015, 2017), and during their undergraduate study in their native country, exposure to English is extremely minimal or non-existent. Specifically, international EFL students struggle with issues of plagiarism and understanding the nature of academic writing conventions such as synthesizing ideas from various sources for writing, using their own voice in writing, writing coherently, and linking theory to practice. As for academic reading, the common challenges are extracting and synthesizing information from various sources and recognizing and acquiring academic vocabulary for academic purpose (Manjet, 2013, 2017).

Spack (1997) reported that writing practices provide avenues for writers to showcase their reading comprehension and practices, by assisting readers with obtaining information and generating output through writing. Spack (1997) and

Hudson (2007) indicated these two cognitive literacy and learning practices have a reciprocal relationship and are crucial for academic performance and achievement via understanding and accumulating knowledge (Paltridge et al., 2009). To support Spack's notion of reciprocity between reading and writing, Phakiti and Li (2011) argued that reading and writing are key interrelated areas of academic challenge among international EFL students.

Likewise, Scarcella's (2003) argument focused on academic literacy as not only the ability to read and write, but also to acquire higher order communication and research skills. Tas (2010) emphasized that academic discourse is a unique kind of written world, with a set of conventions, or code. As such, competency in academic writing requires students to be attentive and be aware of their lecturers' expectations, leading to the required standard of written output. However, for EFL students, there is a perception that they cannot write in this specialized code due to lack of knowledge and understanding of the code. Irvin (2010, p. 8) concurred and indicated that academic writing involves "evaluation that requires them to demonstrate knowledge and proficiency with certain degree of disciplinary skills of thinking, interpreting and presenting." Other scholars, such as Turner (2011) and Yingli (2012), in consensus with earlier researchers, indicated that the ability to integrate skills such as information gathering, paraphrasing and summarizing resources, organizing ideas in a logical order, editing, and proofreading are very crucial for the success of academic writing.

International students may particularly struggle with achieving expectations for academic writing because rhetorical styles of writing differ from one language to another due to cultural differences (Grabe and Kaplan, 2014). Malaysian researchers Stapa and Irtaimeh (2012) cited that if texts are written in a rhetorical style different from the style of their own language, readers become confused and their language can be unusual even if the grammar and vocabulary are correct.

Earlier research such as that by Andrade (2006) and Wang and Shan (2007) expressed that language skills are one of the key issues that affect the academic adjustment of international students in an English-speaking environment. Phakiti and Li (2011) asserted that academic language competence is related to students' ability to use English to acquire specific knowledge. Their findings also mentioned that academic reading and writing challenges are related to the international students' abilities to orient themselves to academic expectations and tasks, cope with assignment loads, learn subject knowledge, and manage their study and assignment completion time.

Previous research by Zhang and Brunton (2007) and Campbell and Li (2008) also demonstrated that one of the setbacks of low English language proficiency is the negative impact on Asian international students' academic reading and writing practices. Manjet (2013, 2015, 2016) also cited that such setbacks have a negative impact on the international students' academic success. Manjet's (2015) study identified difficulties experienced by international graduate students from the Middle Eastern, African, East Asian, and Southeast Asian countries in dissertation writing. The academic writing practices that students brought from their prior undergraduate education differs from the expectations in a graduate community of practice.

Socialization into academic discourses requires international students to be "… positioned between different cultures and languages" (Turner, 2011, p. 12).

My previous qualitative study of challenges faced by international graduate students in their academic writing practices, indicated difficulty in adhering to proper academic writing techniques (Manjet, 2016). At the same time, due to communication hurdles, the students also faced difficulty in obtaining corrective feedback on their academic work from their lectures. In the current study, international EFL master's students are required to understand lectures, participate in the classroom tasks, and write assignments. However, many of these students experienced limited opportunities to speak, read, write, or listen to English in their home countries.

Existing research by Goodfellow (2004) and Lalasz, Doane, Springer, and Dahir (2014) stressed that the lack of proficiency in English language in a similar setting to Malaysia, affects international students' academic satisfaction, as their academic impairment is attributed to low English language proficiency. Students' communication with lecturers is hampered as they cannot fully engage and interact with their lecturers in question-and-answer sessions. A study by Ankawi (2015), which discussed Saudi international students' experience in New Zealand's higher education institutions, indicated students experienced difficulties with understanding the academic writing conventions because they lacked paraphrasing and summarizing skills, sufficient academic writing vocabulary, and critical thinking in their English communication. The students also faced challenges in locating and identifying appropriate articles for research. In agreement with these researchers, Manjet, Pandian, and Kaur (2015), Talebloo and Bak (2013), and Xu (1991) also highlighted that lack of English language skills contributed to academic problems faced by international students in English-speaking programs. Furthermore, more support from Adas and Bakir (2013) indicated that international students lack understanding of English vocabulary and struggle to express their ideas clearly in the language.

This review of academic reading and writing offers only the perspective of international graduate students. However, a gap that exists in the current literature is the perception and perspective of lecturers, university administrators, and other relevant stakeholders.

Lecturers' Perspectives

In considering lecturers' perceptions of challenges faced by international graduate students, Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas (2010) indicated that lecturers attributed international students' reluctance to participate in discussions to a lack of understanding lecture content and terminology, a lack of critical thinking, a lack of independent learning skills, and lastly, dependency on lecture notes. Trice's (2003, 2005) qualitative studies listed the challenges such as inadequate vocabulary, the struggles to meet the requirements for academic, and achieving unique academic goals. Basically, these two studies emphasized that English language competency plays a crucial role in academic success among international students. Later, Arkoudis and Tran (2012) captured lecturers' position as individuals being aware of the needs of their international students, yet struggling with the best avenue to assist their students' academic work.

Tran (2013) pinpointed the eminent role of lecturers in the academic learning process of international students. Lecturers need to assist their international students in a way that their expectations are better understood by the students. As strategic personnel in the academic advancement of their students, lecturers need to find more avenues to assist the students' academic literacy challenges, transcending the cultural boundary between them and their students. Such insights, according to Tran, will lead to reciprocal relationships between students and their teachers and enhance the inclusive practices of the institution. Unruh (2015) and Cheng (2016) reiterated that lecturers view international students as assets who bring different perspectives and diversity to their classrooms. However, obstacles to international EFL students offering those diverse perspectives include lack of English language proficiency, cultural differences, issues with learning and study strategies, and lack of student participation in class activities.

METHOD

Research Design

The current study was conducted to find out if there is a discrepancy between international EFL master's students' lived experiences of academic reading and writing practices and the lecturers who teach them. A basic interpretive qualitative study focusing on *insiders' perspectives* (Burke & Wyatt-Smith, 1996) was carried out. Purposive sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Collins 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Teddlie & Yu, 2007) was utilized to select lecturers for the one-to-one interview. This sampling selected participants who have experienced the phenomenon being explored and yields the most comprehensive understanding of rich information on the topic. According to Creswell (1998) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2007), purposive sampling ensures that only those participants who can make a meaningful contribution to the research are included in the study.

Participants

Forty nonnative English speaking lecturers who taught international EFL master's students in a higher education institution in Malaysia were invited to participate in this study. This study draws on the analysis of in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted with 16 volunteer lecturers who agreed to recorded interviews. These lecturers are from the 10 faculties categorized as Arts (three), hybrid (two), and Sciences (five). The participants were provided the Research Statement Sheet and a short briefing took place. Participants were also provided a consent form to sign and return to the researcher to acknowledge their participation in the research. Participants were reminded that it is a voluntary basis commitment and they are able to withdraw if they wish to do so.

One-on-one Interviews with Lecturers

The purpose of the one-on-one interviews with 16 lecturers was to gain a better understanding of the international EFL master's students' academic writing and

reading practices experiences as they negotiate academic literacy contexts and the lecturers "are likely to be more knowledgeable and informative about the subject under investigation" (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, p. 378) compared with other stakeholders.

The interviews that took place in the lecturers' rooms lasted between 30–60 min for each session. In each session, the lecturer was introduced to the study and purpose of the interview. An interview guide (interview questions) created by the researcher facilitated the interviews, and the lecturers were given the opportunity to discuss issues and concerns pertaining to the academic writing and reading practices of their students. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher at the end of each interview. The transcriptions were analyzed using qualitative data analysis software, NVivo version 10, to organize complex data and emerging patterns. The core feature of the qualitative data analysis was coding. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006), NVivo 10 is helpful for researchers in moving data easily from one code to another and to annotate the data as it is analyzed.

This study used pseudonyms to ensure lecturers' anonymity and confidentiality. The 16 lecturers who took part in the one-on-one interviews were coded according to a number provided to each lecturer and a letter used to identify their school/faculty. For example, a lecturer interviewed in School A is coded as L1A. L refers to the lecturer, 1 represents the lecturer's unique code, and A represents the school's code.

Data Analysis

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. Data analysis involved five phases of familiarization with the data, i.e., generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Evidence from the various databases was grouped into codes and codes were grouped into broader themes. The captured themes of the relevant data from the interview transcripts answered the research questions and represented the patterned responses within the created data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

The findings, categorized into themes, provided the 16 lecturers' perspectives on the challenges faced by the international EFL master's students in their academic writing and reading practices.

Table 1: Themes of Challenges in Academic Writing and Reading Practices

Challenges in Academic Writing Practices
Lack of English language proficiency
Challenges in expressing ideas
Unorganized academic writing structure
Intentional plagiarism

Proofreading and editing
Translation
Mismatch in academic writing culture
Cheating in their academic writing

Challenges in Academic Reading Practices

Interpretation of reading material
Intensity of reading
Dependency on lecturers' notes
Lack of English language proficiency
Short duration to prepare the dissertation
Lack of resources
Content and English language integrated learning

Challenges in Academic Writing Practices

Lack of English Language Proficiency

An English language barrier in students' academic writing practices was cited by more than half (62.5%) of the lecturers interviewed. Two lecturers expressed that English language is the main barrier for academic success among the students, especially Middle Eastern students. Furthermore, the lecturer stated that the Middle Eastern students who graduated from their undergraduate study in their countries' private universities experienced more academic literacy challenges in their studies compared with those from public universities.

In addition, the lecturer stated that the students faced challenges in answering final examination questions as they were unable to elaborate and explain their arguments. Another lecturer also asserted that the lack of enforcement of the English language requirements by the university, is one of the reasons the students were not able to meet the expectations of the academic language skills' demands in content based programs at graduate level.

> Most Middle East students, what they face, the problem is obviously it's the English. Like when we had a huge group of students from Libya, they told us that most of them didn't even speak English prior to coming to Malaysia. —L3E

Lecturers also faced difficulties supervising the students with their term papers. One lecturer explained that she rigorously guided the students who faced severe challenges in their academic writing from the proposal stage until the final draft stage. Her colleague further reiterated that supervising the students during their dissertation writing was challenging because the feedback provided to the students was often misinterpreted. This led to a written discourse that did not fulfill the lecturers' expectations.

> So, it was really very difficult situation I even had a situation whereby I don't understand what the student submitted and to give an F is just very harsh. So what I did was, I asked the student to come to the front, ask a

Malaysian who understands Mandarin and had the assessment done by interview. So that shows how difficult it was with student from China because of their English proficiency. —L1C

Five lecturers from the Arts and hybrid faculties stated that language barrier hindered the students' positive development as good writers, in terms of dissertation writing and academic paper publication in reputable journals, especially refereed journals. Communication of research findings in written form is a linguistic challenge for the students although they display good content knowledge capability.

According to one lecturer, the fundamental grasp of the English language is crucial for the students in Malaysia, as master's programs for international students are English Medium Instruction (EMI) based. Unfortunately, low proficiency in English language limited the reporting and dissemination of their high-quality research findings. Consequently, the students failed to report the results of their research accurately and precisely.

Furthermore, according to another lecturer, the fundamental grasp of English language literacy by his international students from China, Iraq, Thailand, and Palestine was also weak. Supporting the views of other lecturers from the Arts, hybrid, and Sciences, the lecturer was very concerned with the students' academic English language skills in expressing ideas, writing the narration of their script, and developing the story for film production. Although these students are considered experts in terms of their technical and content knowledge, their participation in coursework activities, class interaction, and enthusiasm was lacking due to low English language proficiency that is crucial in media production industry.

Intentional Plagiarism

Lecturers commented that enforcement against plagiarism in their faculties is not strict, although plagiarism is treated as an academic offence. According to three lecturers, the lack of English language proficiency and poor paraphrasing skills are two main reasons that lead the students to plagiarize. A lecturer further asserted that students who plagiarize could be categorized into two groups, the expert and the amateur. Expert students skillfully copy and paste by linking words, sentences, and paragraphs. However, amateur students haphazardly organize plagiarized information. One lecturer explained,

[We tell the students] "Please do not just copy and paste, you can refer to whatever website but rearrange and rephrase all the sentences, use your own sentences." But we still not go that far yet to check with our software, Turnitin not yet for the program. But we do discuss this and might be, we have to go in future. —L1E

According to another lecturer, the students generally have the tendency to use information verbatim from the original text. However, detection is easy as there is commonly a mismatch between the actual language proficiency of the students compared with the proficiently written submission. The lecturer further explained that certain sections of the students' writing was error free when it was copied from other

sources without acknowledgement, compared with some sections that contained language errors. Students often copy and paste in the literature review section. However, writing the discussion section, which requires critical thought, is also a major hurdle due to lack of English language proficiency. As such, the students also found it challenging to copy and paste information in this section, because the analysis section requires the student to deliberate their findings in detail. A lecturer acknowledged,

> During the section meeting, about the problem with the English. … Ok we just, what you call it, we just accept it; we cannot be too detailed on the grammar, the language. We see on the content, on the analysis so we can't just … the students because of their English, so we try to be fair with the student who are having problems with that. —L1D

Furthermore, one of the lecturers pinpointed that students lacked awareness of plagiarism. The students tend to take an easy route in terms of writing their research or project reports. Once a student has access to a thesis to replicate, often the student will not be interested in exploring or researching further for alternative dissertation topics. Avoiding plagiarism is a difficult task for them. The lecturer added that students plagiarize because they face difficulties in writing academically, based on their lack of English language proficiency and research skills. This eventually impacts their research project or dissertation and delays the completion of their degree, because they actually expect to complete their graduate study quickly via shortcuts.

> They tend to hold on to that thesis, even they are not interested in them, even though they are ...they have not ... they don't have much knowledge on they want to do... but they still in a way, do their topic because they have a sample and... uhh... I guess the word "'plagiarism" is the right word. —L1D

Challenges in Expressing Ideas

A majority of the lecturers (75%) found it challenging to grade the assignments submitted by students. One lecturer explained that students lacked the ability to express written ideas fluently in English. This trend was noticeable in the assignments, tests, and examinations. He further commented that students' limited lexis range to express their views offsets fulfilling the requirements set by the lecturers. Secondly, the importance of sourcing substantive literature and the pivotal role of conducting a literature review are downplayed in the students' academic work as they are constrained by their lack of proficiency in English language and data search skills to conduct such reviews. According to another lecturer, the challenges also led students to limit the scope of literature sourced for their academic writing.

Unorganized Academic Writing Structure

Lecturers need to be aware that international students come from very different cultural, academic, and English language backgrounds. For example, students from non-EMI based undergraduate study programs, especially from the Middle Eastern

countries and China, face challenges in writing as they have limited lexis range and they lack proper techniques in structuring and organizing their writing.

In organizing their writing, some of the students occasionally diverted from the actual discussion in various sections of their assignments because they repeated their arguments, lacked clarity in their writing, and did not write concisely. This made it difficult for the lecturers to understand students' organization and structure of writing and the vague message presented in their writing. As noted by 10 lecturers, students could converse well orally but understanding their writing was a struggle.

From the perspective of another lecturer, the majority of students who faced English language challenges were from the Middle Eastern countries. The language-related weaknesses that disrupted the writing process of the students from the Middle Eastern countries were in understanding the demands of the examination questions. The students were unable to explain, argue, and write well. He further added that the students, primarily from Iran and Iraq's private universities, faced challenges with their writing. They also lacked knowledge of their fields' fundamental theories. On the other hand, this particular weakness in writing was not very obvious among Iran and Iraq's public university students because these students performed better academically. This lecturer elaborated that weaknesses in the academic and English language aggravated the challenges faced by the students. Subsequently, another lecturer stated that Iranian and African students also have difficulties performing well in written and spoken English academic activities.

> Some students they cannot even write in English, for example the students from Iran, he can write but a lot of mistakes, broken English ... he cannot deliver, he can transcribe data but he can't describe it and make it clear so that people can understand. —L4E

A lecturer argued that students in the TESOL master's program wrote "horrendously." She questioned the justification of accepting students with low levels of English language proficiency or limited English language skills into the TESOL program as it is a very linguistically demanding program. Another lecturer attested that although the students have strong content or technical knowledge in their field, their low level of English language proficiency impairs their academic writing practices.

In terms of the students' writing during examinations, there has always been an element of curiosity among the lecturers and other academicians when students who are extremely weak in English language eventually succeed in their examinations. A lecturer voiced her curiosity with the ability of the students to write their dissertation or pass the examination considering the restricted vocabulary in presenting their arguments in written form. Another lecturer reported that the students did face challenges in answering the examination questions. One of the characteristics of their answers was a limited vocabulary to explain their arguments. Furthermore, their short sentences written in the answer scripts were regurgitated from the lecture notes.

> So, whatever we teach them, that's only the answer that we will get back…
> We put point form, they come back with a point form. So, no elaboration, no nothing. —L1E

In fact, we even had students who know nothing... you know? That's why ...when we go for meeting, professor always ask how do these students... you know respond your class, I wonder how they pass the exam. —L1C

The students also faced challenges in managing and organizing their writing. L1B highlighted that the students' weaknesses were usually centered around the organization of their ideas when writing. Writing aided by computer-mediated tools allow for ideas to be organized smoothly. However, many of the students were found to also lack computer literacy, which caused them to struggle with their academic writing.

Proofreading and Editing

According to a lecturer, weaknesses in the students' dissertation or research projects' write-up could be rectified through editing or proofreading before submission and evaluation. This would be helpful for the examiners as the students' writing has been proofread by a language editor. Another lecturer further explained that as the coordinator of students' dissertation examination, he received complaints from examiners in terms of poor language proficiency or dissertation text not being "proofread." On the other hand, a lecturer, who faced the same problems, assisted the student by voluntarily editing the work of her students.

…Like in the literature, definitely they can cut-and-paste, but when they're doing the analysis part, so they having problems. So that one we having problem because sometimes we also discuss these problems during the section meeting, about the problem with the English. Some of them said that *Ok we just what you call it we just accept it, we cannot be too detailed on the grammar, the language.'* We see on the content, on the analysis so we can't just fail the students because of their English, so we try to be fair with the student who are having problems with that. —L2E

Translation

A lecturer admitted that the English language proficiency of his students from China is low and they faced difficulty writing in English. However, this did not hinder them from expressing their ideas in their own language. To overcome the challenges of writing in English, the students wrote in Mandarin and used Google translator to translate the Mandarin version into English. According to another lecturer, this strategy is ineffective due to mismatch in information in the original and translated texts.

…in terms of connecting everything together… for example, they read something, they want to quote, they don't really know how to gel in everything, to relate everything, so sometimes, writing becomes choppy. You have bits and pieces, loose bits and pieces here and there. I think that is the most problem that I had faced getting things to sound right…getting thing to mean something. Not just choppy little bits here and there. —L2D

Mismatch in Academic Writing Culture

The findings indicate prior learning culture at undergraduate level greatly affects academic writing practices of the students. One of the trends that prevailed in the findings is prior learning culture influenced how they coped with their writing in master's programs. The students in the master's programs are bound to integrate their previous learning experiences into present graduate study and its impacts their current academic practices.

> … the cultural background and the system they used, before they come for the master's program… This is how they've been taught; this is how they've been writing… they write in their own language… They've no English even though they're good in talking but in terms of writing, that's the main problem… So which means in their country, writing is not very important, it is not a priority. —L2E

Cheating in Writing

A common practice among students from China is to write in Mandarin and then have their work translated into English by friends. This finding resonates with Ahmed (2018), who asserted that academic dishonesty and cheating among students is on the rise. To overcome cheating, confronting a student is an effective deterrence. Furthermore, it promotes academic integrity.

> Sentence are very simple and you know… what the supervisor ask they never change and they do something else and we caught student. We ask them, "okay now write a sentence," "oh I use google," "oh I use translation"…something like that. Okay now do the translation now... "oh it's not connected to internet." "Okay we will find internet for you." And that's what we did. We call in for VIVA. Although it's not compulsory. Just to allow her the opportunity to defend herself that this is really her own work and she was not able to do that. —L1C

In other similar cases, students' spouses doing PhD wrote the master's dissertation for them [the students]. According to a lecturer, this tactic was detected when a student who could not speak and explain his work in English in class but wrote well in English: "he has to ask his wife" (L1D).

Challenges in Academic Reading Practices

Interpretation of Reading Material

A lecturer reflected that the students faced challenges in grasping the idea or message read in a text due to slower reading pace. According to another lecturer, slower reading pace also affected the students' comprehension. In addition, the same lecturer stated a reason for this challenge in reading was due to "the factor that the fundamental theories originated from developed countries." This situation contributes to the knowledge gap that arose from prior reading experience during the students'

undergraduate study. The students from developing countries faced comprehension problem as they were unable to relate to the theories that originated from developed countries. He added that the lecturers also should not expect these students to successfully comprehend the reading material based on their high expectations.

> …comprehending reading content, grasp of language, working system, governance system of the country from where the reading material comes from, interpret according to their own capabilities [is not] what is expected by lecturers. —L3E

Furthermore, the students did not take the initiative to consult their lecturers to discuss their reading and depended on their own interpretation governed by their prior educational background and academic experiences. This pattern is also apparent in the students' style of writing. The negative effects of the students' lackadaisical attitude are reflected in their examination.

> Because our subject is quite subjective, there's not really a right and wrong answer but they do not really fulfill our requirement so number 1 is comprehension and interpretation for all these references material. —L3E

Subsequently, another lecturer from the same faculty stated that the students were unable to understand the terminology used in the written examination question. This led to students enquiring during examination and the lecturers having to explain in detail the requirements of the examination questions during the examination.

> So, they are sometimes allowed to bring a dictionary, for them to use inside the… Yes, to that extent. —L2E

Intensity of Reading

A lecturer highlighted that the students were also not enthusiastic in reading. He found the students in his faculty depended only on lecture notes to do their assignments or answer the final examination questions. The lecturer stressed the students must be encouraged to do more reading to gain value added knowledge apart from depending on lecture notes.

> Lecture notes only provide an avenue for the students to think, to discuss and explore in his own words, based on what he has learnt, what he has read, what he has experienced, what he thinks should be done or what can be done, how certain ideas and approaches can be used. —L3E

Another lecturer responded that feedback she obtained from her discussion with fellow lecturers concerning academic reading habits, especially journal articles among the students, indicated that students take longer time to read the journal articles as it is a challenging academic literacy demand. Furthermore, in terms of frequency, they have to read a particular article more frequently compared with Malaysian students to ensure successful comprehension of the text.

Dependency on Lecturers' Notes

The issue of dependency on lecturers' notes was also raised by two lecturers. According to them, the students tend to read, write, and refer to whatever was given in the lecture notes only. The students were not "adventurous enough" to read additional literature beyond the lecture notes or to explore and gain additional knowledge on the lecture topic. One of the two lecturers also commented that students took part in tutorial discussions guided by lecture notes only. This phenomenon led to lack of criticality and rigor in tutorial discussions among students.

Lack of English Language Proficiency

A lecturer felt that lack of English language proficiency affects students' reading and understanding of high impact journal articles. Based on her personal opinion, the nonnative English speaking lecturer shared her experience of re-reading each of the highly rated journal articles such as SCOPUS or ISI rated articles repeatedly to gain understanding. This is due to the complexity of English language in those particular articles. Comparing her own English language challenges with the students', the lecturer was concerned with the students' struggle in reading English text, as English is a foreign language for majority of the students.

> …to understand these high-end journals, it so going to be quite a struggle. So, I don't think is attitude...is more of their skills and also the language itself. —L2D

Short Duration to Prepare the Dissertation

It is challenging for students to complete an academic task such as writing an assignment in the master's programs. It is also mutually challenging for lecturers who are teaching them. The challenges prevalent among students concern lack of research and writing ability. Lack of exposure in academic writing during undergraduate study impacted their current research experience in terms of dissertation writing.

> Because thesis is more to research isn't it, so they got a problem in terms of doing the literature reviews, research background, they even got a problem with the methodology. —L2E

The challenge in producing a dissertation in a short period further affected the students' progress in dissertation writing. This predicament of insufficient time is unavoidable as the full-time students' study period in most of the graduate programs ranges from two to three semesters only. These students have to complete their other coursework components (assignments, tests, quizzes), prepare their research proposal, defend the research proposal, write a dissertation, and defend their dissertation during their oral examination, which is evaluated by internal, and in some cases external, examiners. Furthermore, a lecturer commented external examiners put high expectations on student dissertations. Therefore, the students face difficulties coping with the expectations of dissertation writing.

Supervision issues further affected the academic challenges faced by the students. The issues concerning the lecturers who serve as supervisors are the responsibility of supervising a large number of students, limited consultation period for regular supervision, such as only once a month for each supervisee, and misinterpretation of supervisor's written feedback to students' dissertation drafts.

Lack of Resources

Searching and retrieving resources was a problem that impacted the progress of dissertation writing. According to a lecturer, in the TESOL master's program, the student needed "to read a lot to reflect on what is happening in their own environment." However, they faced difficulties in sourcing relevant articles. Some students were not very proficient with their computer skills and lacked knowledge on the availability of online resources. The lecturer also added that the students lacked the skills in accessing suitable resources. Consequently, the students faced challenges in obtaining good and reliable online-digitalized journal resources to help them in their writing. Therefore, the lecturer commented that she provided continuous guidance on doing Google searches to overcome the challenges faced by her students. She also suggested that the students attend short courses to familiarize themselves with the relevant techniques to access reliable journals.

> … they don't really how to go, where to go. Some of them sometimes come and ask me, what journals do I need to find, you know, what kind of journals I need to find…find out…how can I find out these journals. —L2D

In addition, the lecturer claimed the printed journals available at university library are outdated to 20 years back and updating is in process. This led to a lot of time spent searching for current online resources. Furthermore, the problem worsened as some journals only provided abstracts instead of full text, and a journal subscription fee is required to retrieve and read the complete text.

In the context of sourcing online reading material, a communication faculty's lecturer stated that sourcing reading material such as books through the internet is a "hassle." This is because access to certain books is blocked in Malaysia compared with other countries such as Australia, which provides open access or minimal fees for a wide range of academic books.

Content and English Language Integrated Learning

The higher education institutions need to address the challenges faced by the students in doing two kinds of learning activities consecutively. Two lecturers stated that the students in the graduate programs are involved in learning their discipline's content knowledge and, concurrently, are struggling with English language to acquire their discipline content knowledge as it is the medium of instruction in their graduate programs. The challenges of doing one learning task is daunting enough to be further exacerbated by the challenges of doing the second learning task.

> We can teach the students the English along the way but we are not a good teacher because we are scientist and we also have problem with our own

English language … For example, when I read my students assignment in English…at one point I said enough I cannot read because if I continue reading my English also is going to be like theirs. —L1J

According to one lecturer, the students from China are from an education system that does not prioritize English language and faced academic reading challenges that take longer time to resolve. However, based on his experience, the lecturer found students from countries such as Iraq, China, and India are "quite superior" in their content knowledge compared with other students from the Middle East countries. The lecturer further claimed that lack of English language proficiency, combined with the prior academic background, influence the students' daily classroom academic activities' performance.

So that is one of the challenges, technical skills, competence, communication skills and you know the way... how they approach the lecturer… when I'm teaching I still get the blank look you know typical Asians students…don't have any questions asked or during lectures… you won't know whether the students actually, understood what was being taught or not. —L1G

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has succeeded in identifying the challenges from the perspective of the lecturers, in which there is a dearth of current literature, and it adds to the existing literature in the context of Malaysian international higher education landscape. The challenges faced by international graduate students in their academic reading and writing practices are complex issues. The nature of the challenges are linked to other language skills such as speaking and listening, and these challenges create a network of additional academic literacy challenges. In addition, the findings indicate that more remains to be done to address the academic reading and academic writing practices challenges faced by international EFL master's students.

The study revealed an intricate network of academic reading and writing practices challenges from the lecturers' lens. The international EFL master's students faced academic challenges in their writing and reading practices, which were further impaired by the lack of English language proficiency. An area for consideration is the importance of teaching academic conventions to handle the required tasks in master's programs. Additionally, to improve the international EFL master's students' level of academic language proficiency, it is crucial to improve their English language proficiency either before enrollment into the programs or consecutively during their study.

At this juncture, higher education institutions play a pivotal role in ascertaining the readiness of the students to embark on graduate study. Short-term remedial or interventional programs (e.g., one semester) to prepare the students to deal with academic writing and reading demands at graduate level must be imposed on students to ensure smooth enculturation into the graduate community. Moreover, in reference to proofreading and editing, these services should be offered to the students. Due to the short duration of master's programs, and the need to complete various academic

demands, professional proofreading and editing services should be provided to ease the students' academic writing challenges especially in writing their dissertation.

An example of a long-term action plan is a detailed orientation/familiarization program. This suggestion echoes a previous study by Lan (2018). Such a plan to engage students with the academic community in a host country that practices different academic conventions will show positive results. It is hoped that the findings will also benefit the lecturers involved in teaching international EFL master's students. Furthermore, higher education institutions should facilitate adequate training and exposure for the lecturers to be ready to teach international students in a cross-cultural learning setting. Intercultural competence is an important element that lecturers must be equipped with. Lecturers must be able to embrace the learning diversity the students bring and adapt their teaching style to also accommodate the students' learning needs. Such as engagement is also asserted by Adrian-Taylor, Noels, and Tischler (2007) and Phan, Tran, and Blackmore (2019). Lecturers should be committed and supported with relevant professional and sustainable learning to develop their capacity to assist the students in academic and social welfare. Such measures in particular will help to reduce the impact of academic and social challenges faced by the students in their academic venture. Helping students to reduce or overcome the challenges in their academic reading and writing practices in their programs will provide quality engagement with their academic work in master's programs.

It is hoped that the insights gained from this study will be of value for future research and will benefit the international EFL master's student community. The research output will contribute toward the improvement of academic culture at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. At some point, a needs analysis at the graduate level is pertinent to identify the readiness of the students to embark on graduate study. As such, the needs analysis involves research at the undergraduate level in different academic cultures of the students' countries of origin. On the basis of the findings presented in the current study, the result can be generalized to a global context, as higher education mobility, especially among international EFL graduate students, is on the increase, especially in host countries that apply English as the medium of instruction for graduate studies.

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