The Academic Writing Experience of Jordanian Postgraduate Students at a University in Malaysia

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Abstract
Writing in English for academic purpose is a difficult task for many Jordanian postgraduate students (JPS) as English is a foreign language to them. This study aimed to explore academic writing problems encountered by JPS at a Malaysian university and to investigate how they address the problems. Employing a case study approach, a total of 182 online questionnaires were administered via email to registered JPS at UniSZA to which 90 responses were received. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 17 of the respondents to get further clarification of the questionnaire data and to gain rich insights into the phenomenon being investigated. The findings reveal that JPS faced several problems such as lack of vocabulary, difficulties in expressing the ideas, organizing the sentences and creating paragraphs, paraphrasing, the inability to build critical discussions and ideas, erroneous grammar, spellings, weak referencing and difficulty in finding the article/journal for literature review. In order to address these problems, they acquire help from their classmates, seniors, teaching faculties, participate in educational forums, workshops and lectures, attend paid tuition classes, translate Arabic to English, subscribe to journals and magazines and used online resources. The JPS recommend the provision of extensive language support at the university, regular lectures and workshops on improving academic writing and availability of language enrichment centre at the university to aid JPS to resolve their problems related to academic writing.
Keywords: Academic writing, Arab researchers, English as a second language, Jordanian postgraduates, scaffolding theory

Introduction

In the recent years, there has been a significant growth in the number of international students in Malaysia. Since 2014, Malaysia continues to jump the rankings of UNESCO's international student mobility questionnaire from the 12th place to the ninth. The postgraduates from the Middle East contribute as one of the largest blocks of students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Although there is no exact statistical figure available to confirm the number of Arab students in Malaysia, the increase is evident in many universities in Malaysia (Al-Zubaidi & Richards, 2010). Among the South East Asian countries, Malaysia adheres to use English as the medium of instruction at the universities. Therefore, it is common for the universities to offer English language courses to the postgraduates. However, the English courses are generally designed in the context of the Western education system which does not adequately support Arab students' needs. The Arab postgraduates who come to Malaysia face difficulties in their efforts to adjust with the English language communication and the education system. The reason behind the difficulties lies in the insufficient practice and least exposure to English in their home country. Majority of the universities in the Middle East lag in updating their educational programs for the students so as to confront the upcoming challenges and meet the demands at the international level. When the Arab students enter the foreign domain of academic system, they find themselves to be outdated, baffled and lost. It is common for Arab international postgraduate students in Malaysia to fall short and face difficulties in their academic skills. This creates barriers in their academic progress. The Arab students lack sufficient English skills (Al-Zubaidi & Richards, 2010, p. 112) because they have little opportunities to speak English since Arabic is their native language. Zughoul and Taminian (1984, p.4) found that Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English. Rabab`ah (2003) stresses that acquisition of English among Arab learners is problematic because the formal instructions are delivered in Arabic language.

Salem (2007) points out that second / foreign language learners face difficulties to write effectively owing to the limitations in vocabulary usage, exposure to idioms, proverbs and phrases, lack of knowledge about the culture, least experience with second language use and little cognizance of writing skills. Salem (2007) studied the views of 50 male students whose major was English in relation to academic writing at the undergraduate level at the University of Al Azhar, Egypt. He discovered that students would feel overwhelmed on being asked to write on a particular topic. They felt lost and anxious as they did not know how to start, develop or end the essay. The lack of technical skills along with the shortcoming to critical thinking proved to be a major hindrance for the students to write English compositions. Repetition of ideas, reporting of invalid points, erroneous grammar and punctuations and inclusion of irrelevant information was common to witness. Malaysian universities take several initiatives including basic academic skills, language and cultural support along with professional development classes to help students develop their language proficiency. This study aims to explore how Jordanian Postgraduate students (JPS) at a Malaysian university address challenges related to academic writing during their course of postgraduate studies. The research questions explored are: 1) What are the academic writing problems faced by JPS at UniSZA? and 2) How do they address the problems?

Review of literature
Understanding academic writing
Academic writing aims to address a scholarly community where the students are actively involved

in learning. The basics have to be established at the primary stages of schooling as it directly impacts the scholarly achievement at the tertiary level of education. The academic writing is solely dependent on the students' power of accessibility, evaluation, synthesis of words, thoughts, themes and views of those around so as to develop their skills of academic articulation.

This leads us to ask the question, "What is good academic writing?" The answer is, any writing that meets the expectation of the audience (Mudawy & Mousa, 2017). According to Ellis (1999) and Nor and Rashid (2018), proficiency in reading comprehension is a prerequisite to writing competency. The ability to converse in a second language prepares the learners to express themselves through writing their thoughts. However, that is not enough in the context of second language acquisition especially in the case of Middle East nationals where Arabic dominates the spheres of communication and interaction and English is widely acknowledged as a foreign language which is comparatively less focused at primary level.

Al-Zubaidi (2012) observes that different thinking habits of mind are meditated via oral as well as writing activities in the classroom. In fact, most the English academic courses dismiss the fact that Arab students have a different background in academic literacy. The English courses for postgraduate students are designed to benefit the Western students. Hence, they do not cater to the support needs of Arabs and local Malaysian students. Arab students are unaware about the instructions and rules of writing a thesis at postgraduate level and so they have negligible information and understanding with regard to the new academic system of learning and writing in English. Since writing thesis at postgraduate level is completely a new exercise which Arab students are unfamiliar with, they lack awareness about the depth of responsibility for their own learning and writing of thesis in English (Al-Zubaidi, 2012). Apart from writing a dissertation, many universities in Malaysia demand from postgraduate students to publish papers in referred journals during the course of their study. As Al-Zubaidi (2012) points out, most Arab students are unprepared to perform these tasks along with being unfamiliar with the requisite rules and regulations of required publications.

Education system in Jordan
English occupies an important place in the academic curriculum of Jordan. English is taught as a compulsory subject in government and private schools. But the teaching hours for the subject are not enough as they teach only for six hours per week. English is taught as a second language, whereas all other subjects are taught in Arabic language. The students only practice reading and speaking while listening is not practiced. The teachers teach English with the help of Arabic language. Some private schools have native speakers of English as teachers but that does not help the students to practice English in the primary area of socialization. English language has deteriorated pedagogically because the results that were demonstrated by K-12 schools took a back seat (Alhabahba, Pandian & Mahfoodh, 2016). The results of high school examinations in English language subject in Jordan show that only 18% could successfully pass the test in Arts stream whereas 15% of the total test takers in all the streams had successfully passed the exam in 2014 (Jordanian Teachers Syndicate, 2015). As per the results of a national evaluation of basic language skills in both Arabic and English conducted by the Ministry of Education among first, second and third grades students in Jordan, only 22% out of all students were not able to read in Arabic and English (Jordanian Teachers Syndicate, 2015) There is an absence of a general educational body that can take the responsibility for maintaining the national standards and providing guidelines to the educators due to which the key components or necessary training needed for imparting

effective learning strategies is neglected which indirectly degrades the students' learning capacity (Asassfeh, 2015). Since the development of language stems from primary socialization at home, negligible usage of English language empowers the disinterest in learning English as a second language since Arabic is emphasized to be the primary language. Hence, lack of supportive environment at home to learn English also adds to the writing difficulties in academic life.

The problems in academic writing

According to Salem (2007) points out that problems in academic writing arise from four main areas: i) English as a second language; ii) academic culture; iii) lack of knowledge in writing; and iv) unexpected patterns of academic writing. Lalasz et al. (2014) emphasize that lack of proficiency in English leads to academic dissatisfaction and stressful conditions where students avoid engagement with their lecturers least they fear that they would make mistakes. Students face many writing difficulties, such as inability to distinguish between spoken and written English, outlining the draft before writing, identification of skills mandatory for writing and avoiding redundant words and phrases (Fadda, 2012). The most common language problems faced by students are grammatical problems in the field of tenses, prepositions, syntactic, subject – verb agreement and the use of articles, punctuation problems such as missing, additional or misusing of punctuation marks, and spelling problems such as replacing, deleting, missing, adding extra, disordering, breaking or writing non-existing words (BaniYoune & Albalawi, 2015). In a more recent study, Saleem and Rashid (2018) show that the academic writing problems faced by Arab learners are also caused by their low level of self-efficacy.

Review of recent studies

The commonly found writing issues were reiterated such as vocabulary register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, and referencing in the study on Arab postgraduates in Malaysia (Al-Khasawneh, 2010). Al-Zubaidi (2012) conducted a study to determine the major language difficulties encountered by Arab postgraduate students in their academic writing in English. He found that the students require resources so as to build their comprehensive language skills. Imani and Habil (2012) investigated the writing strategies incorporated by the Arab postgraduate students in their dissertation and thesis writing and found significant patterns of academic writing problems across both types of writing. Similarly, it was a frightening and scary experience for Arab speaking postgraduate students at University Technology of Malaysia (Abdul Kareem, 2013).

The review on the main difficulties faced by Arab postgraduate students in academic writing includes problems such as issues in language incompetence and citation and references (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Fadda, 2012), difficulty in drawing an outline of the draft and making a rough sketch of the write up before writing (Fadda, 2012). Therefore, challenges of academic writing within the Arab community is a critical issue that should be explored in-depth by the researchers (Imani & Habil, 2012; Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Abdulkareem, 2013).

Methodology

This study employed a case study approach. Case study facilitates a detailed study of the social phenomenon in the natural setting without sacrificing the sensitivity of the complexity and the context (Punch, 2005). This study integrates qualitative and quantitative methods to enrich the confidence of the findings by capitalizing on the strengths of different methods.

Participants of this study are Jordanian postgraduate students registered in the year 2016-2017 at UniSZA. The purposive sampling was adopted to circulate the questionnaire among the JPS of UniSZA through email. The email addresses were retrieved from the international office of the university. Reaching out through email had two benefits. First it helped to reach out to the maximum registered JPS in the university and second it was a convenient way for them to respond to online questionnaire.

The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first section is related to participants' information. The second and third sections are compulsory opinionated statements and lastly, section four deals with subjective answers from the respondents. The completed questionnaires were analysed using descriptive and thematic analysis. To further augment the data, interviews were conducted with the same respondents who completed the questionnaire. In total, 182 online survey questionnaires were administered of which 90 responses were received and 17 in-depth interviews were conducted.

Findings
Demographic profile of the Jordanian postgraduate students (JPS) at UniSZA
Overall, 90 JPS respondent to the questionnaire, out of which 82 were males and 8 were females. There were 54 students pursuing PhD and 36 were pursuing Masters. Only one respondent was above the age of 40 and one was between 18 to 24 while the rest were between the age of 25 to 40 years. On an average the students had spent minimum 10 months in Malaysia. Only 40 students had more than six years of exposure to English language. Seventy two students did not appear for any English language qualification exam. Eighty four students did not prepare for any course in English language prior to commencing their studies in Malaysia nor were they oriented to any course at UniSZA for their postgraduate research studies.

Problems in academic writing
It was found that 32 respondents *sometimes* fell short of apt vocabulary to convey their expressions whereas 30 respondents *sometimes* used same words frequently owing to their inability to find new words. This is directly related to the usage of simple words in their academic writing as 38 respondents *sometimes* used simple words which had the highest response rate. It was found that only 18 students *never* abandoned their ideas as they *never* faced any difficulty in finding the pertinent words. However, 14 students *always* spent their time in consulting dictionary whereas only ten *always* used simple words. Hence, problems such as lack of vocabulary, repetition of words, incorrect usage of words, avoiding complex and complicated words were the major issues related to words in academic writing. Only four students reported that they *never* avoided using complicated words in their sentences whereas 36 students reported having *sometimes* avoiding the usage of complicated words in their sentences. As the masters' students struggled with words, the doctoral students faced issues in rectifying their errors. In order to maintain the level of research and expected academic writing, the usage of complicated words such as homophones could not be ignored. Almost 40 students, *sometimes* felt confused in using appropriate punctuation in their sentences. Twenty six students faced difficulty in grammar *sometimes,* whereas 16 students were *always* turned down for grammar inconsistencies. Paraphrasing was another mammoth task that had to be encountered as one of the difficulties in academic writing. Only 14 students expressed

that they *never* faced any problems with paraphrasing whereas the rest of the students had difficulties in paraphrasing.

Addressing the problems in academic writing
Seeking help from others (classmates, seniors, teaching faculties, etc.)
Only four respondents reported *never* seeking help in discussing their problems with others whereas the rest sought help and advice from their peers. Seven respondents reported that they did not receive any support from their supervisors and the university whereas 32 respondents reported with a positive response towards the support provided to them by their supervisors. The supervisors helped them by advising, correcting their grammar, sharing and discussing ideas, helping them improve their academic writing. Seeking help from classmates, seniors and teaching faculties was *sometimes* preferred by 28 students. The discussions and interactions often provided a yardstick and a subtle support system to share their problems and seek advice. Students often resorted to their friends and peers whom they thought were better in comparison to them to help them out in their writing problems.

Participating in educational forums, workshops and lectures
It was found that only 28 students *sometimes* participated in educational forums that would discuss and share ideas on improving the academic writing. Only 16 students were found to *always* attending such events. The most interesting result of the study was that 34, *never* attended any workshops on writing skills organized by UniSZA and 26 students reported that they *never* attend any lectures pertaining to academic writing and 14 students *never* participated in any educational forums that discussed ideas on improving academic writing. Twenty six respondents reported *never* attending lectures specific to academic writing. Similar trend was found in the qualitative section where five students urged the need for the university to conduct lectures and classes on academic writing as interaction with the supervisor was not sufficient. Thirty four respondents reported having *never* attended any workshop in the university. This aligns with response provided by the respondents in the questionnaire where 22 students highlighted the need for the university to conduct extensive workshops, courses and sessions on various skills in academic writing.
Twenty four respondents *very often* attended paid tuition classes. Many students attended paid tuition classes to improve their academic writing. It was found that 75% of the students took some coaching to improve their academic writing. Twenty eight students affirmed that they *always* translate Arabic into English to express their thoughts. Almost one third of the students *sometimes* subscribed to journals that aided in providing help to improve their academic writing. Since students have issues with English language, understanding English is not easy for them and this is another hindrance for them in seeking help from written resources. Only 28 students *sometimes* looked for online resources that could help them in academic writing whereas 18 students *always* took help from the internet. Sixteen students *never* searched for online help. The questionnaire data reveal that only 16 reported *never* using online resources as an academic aid. However, four students confirmed in the qualitative section of the questionnaire that they always relied on the internet to help them with their overall postgraduate research. Twenty four students expressed their views on supervision stating their need for more productive meetings, critical feedback on their writing skills apart from the research content, regular follow-ups and timely correction of the chapters. It was found that majority of the students at master level required intricate and detailed feedback whereas the doctoral students were more concerned about the content discussion.

Discussion

Since Arabic is not widely used unlike English, the students have to work hard to achieve a minimal level of English language proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening. For educational prospects, all the four forms are indispensable. It is not uncommon to find Arab postgraduate students with low competence level in their English language proficiency while they pursue higher education in Malaysia (Yuen & Nisreen, 2014). Only 33.33% of JPS had been exposed to English language for more than five years. Thus, it is obvious for the majority of JPS to encounter various writing problems in academic assignments such as critical reviews, paraphrasing, grammar, cohesion, summaries, thesis writing, lack of ideas, vocabularies, spellings, and punctuations. Writing research articles and theses in English requires a high standard of academic writing (Rabab'ah, 2003). Despite having an exposure, almost 84.4% of the JPS found difficulty in grammar, paraphrasing, finding the right source/ article/ journal for literature to review, lack of cohesiveness in writing, disorganized patterns of idea and discussion formats, weak referencing and weak vocabulary. This was similar to the findings of the study conducted by Al-Khasawneh (2010) which explored reasons for failure in academic writing. As a result of academic writing problems, the JPS suffered from anxiety, frustration and writer's block which further lead to feelings of procrastination and delay in submission of their assignments. They used alternative resources such as internet, software such as Grammarly, auto-correct on word to help themselves. However, the authenticity of the internet sources is always doubtful in the absence of an expert human guidance at the time of learning. The unguided methods of learning have their own drawbacks as one cannot configure the veritable content especially in the case of amateur learners. They also sought help from their friends, colleagues, and attended paid tuitions. The JPS who could not afford to visit expensive external coaching centres or pay heavy amount for editing each version of their written draft. Moreover, with the increasing level of academic studies, it is difficult to find support that would be readily available to discuss topics on academic research. Translation was also used as a strategy to communicate and express the thoughts and ideas by the JPS, but even this strategy was not fool proof as translation created difficulties in cognitive issues when word by word translation was attempted from first language L1 to second language L2 to translate 'the idea' as a whole (Odline, 1989). With weaknesses in second language, the JPS faced other issues of difference between grammar of English and Arabic. It also became difficult to find the exact word form of Arabic word in English. Therefore, resorting to translation in all condition was found to be inappropriate because literal translation did not work in all cases (Rass, 2015) and did not deliver the intended meaning. It further burdened the JPS with added responsibility of checking the meaning of the translation in English language. The JPS were found to be weak in vocabularies, spellings, grammar and organisation skills of writing, they resorted to the strategy of avoidance in their approach to encounter the problem. Avoiding the problem did not resolve their issue neither it provided them any solution. In fact, it further overstated their weakness.

Almost 95.5 % of the JPS avoided using complicated words and chose simple words in their writing. Similar strategy was opted by postgraduate students of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia universities as studied by Fadda (2012). A total of 91 % of JPS preferred to repeat the words as they ran out of vocabulary. According to Tyldesley (2013), the strategy of repeating words often opted by students who have weak proficiency in English language. Eighty percent of the JPS chose to abandon their ideas as they could not find the apt words to express and this was identified as

one of the key challenges among Arab postgraduate students in five Malaysian universities Malaysia as revealed by Al-Zubaidi and Richards (2010).

Conclusion
The JPS' needs and priorities were often not fully satisfied and looked after with the limited available support from the supervisor and reliable sources of improvement. The JPS struggle with their limited skills to overcome their problems in academic writing. The JPS turn to their own resources for supporting themselves in academic writing which further impedes their growth. The necessary support that should be provided by the institution for development and growth of the students is inadequate at the university level. The provision of academic workshops on improving the English language proficiency of Arab postgraduates along with regular lectures and seminars on research writing, thesis organization, grammar and paraphrasing will help the students to overcome their existing problems in academic writing.

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