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What is the problem with the statement of problem?: the case of postgraduate international students and the introductory sections of a project paper

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Abstract
This paper reports on an on-going action research that enquires into the academic writing of a project paper by international post-graduate students enrolled at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Preliminary observations reveal that many of these students are underprepared for the task, citing cross-cultural limitations stemming from differences in teaching and learning styles vis-a-vis here and their home countries. They also claim that they are not prepared for the autonomy that is presented in the data collecting process and the writing of the paper. This action research aims to address the problem with a focus on the Statement of Problem. Data for the study were collected through semi-structured questionnaires, interviews and document analysis. The researchers believe that if intervention is provided at the early stages of the writing, these novice writers should be able to achieve academic socialization.

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1. Introduction

In her 2009 address to the university entitled Gaining Momentum, Promoting Excellence: The UKM Knowledge Ecosystem, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia(UKM)’s Vice Chancellor, Tan Sri Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahbudin, unveiled several strategies that would propel the development of the research university. One of the strategies is a change to the cohort of students enrolled with an increase of the postgraduate population and a reduction of the undergraduate population to a ratio of 60:40. The premise is that the former will facilitate more research and publications, thus contributing to the Key Performance Index of the university.

This increase in post-graduate enrolment is not really new as statistics reveal that there has been a steady increase from 26.1% in 2006 to 32.1% in 2008. In tandem with this, the doctoral student enrolment has also increased from 28.0% in 2006 to 38.0% in 2008. Again this is in line with globalization and as UKM become more internationally recognised, her overseas student population has also increased from 14.0% in 2006 to 25.0% in 2008. This increase is made possible as many of UKM’s post graduate courses are conducted in English, and because Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, it becomes very attractive to a large cohort of Middle East students. It is this group of students that is the focus of this study.

The question is, what do these increases translate to the faculties, the lecturers as well as the incoming students? For students who come from a non-English medium of instruction, how quickly can they socialize into the UKM...
learning environment? Initially too, many of these students were accepted even without an acceptable level of English proficiency (IELTS and TOEFL scores). As such, it is not surprising that many encounter difficulties in academic tasks such as the reading up and writing of their project papers. As Adams and Keene (2000) have highlighted, it is crucial for the students to master English quickly so as to deal successfully with their academic demands and to perform successfully in their disciplines and professional contexts.

This paper reports on an ongoing action research project that enquires into the academic writing of Arab postgraduate students enrolled in a compulsory course for the Masters in English Language Studies (MESL) program in UKM. This project paper is awarded a weighting of 30%, and students go through a process writing approach. This core course is offered every semester and from the previous semester’s feedback (Semester 2 2009/2010), these international students conveyed their difficulties in the writing of the project. They cited cross-cultural limitations stemming from differences in teaching and learning styles vis-a-vis here and their home countries. They also claimed that they were not prepared for the autonomy presented in the data gathering process and the writing up of the paper.

Faced with such a scenario, and armed with insights gleaned from previous semesters, the researchers went through a reflective teaching phase to identify the problem and to develop a plan of action. The researchers realised that to address the problem of writing the entire project paper is too broad, a decision was made to focus only on one stage of the writing – the Statement of Problem. This stage is usually subsumed under Introduction and as Swales (1990:137) writes, “Introductions are known to be troublesome, and nearly all academic writers admit to having more difficulty with getting started...” It is thus not surprising that the students do complain of such difficulty.

Hence this study aims to answer the following research questions:

i. What are the problems faced by students in writing the Statement of Problem?

ii. How can genre analysis help to alleviate the problems?

2. The Context

SKBI 6043 Approaches to Discourse is a 3 hour course over 14 weeks that is offered every semester. Students are expected to do at least 6 hours of pre-lecture readings per week. In addition, at least two recent articles will be uploaded on the university web-based learning portal. Apart from graded classroom tasks, the course also requires the students to submit a research project and the relevant part of the course synopsis reads as follows “To provide for the practical application of the course instruction, each participant is expected to conduct research on a particular topic in discourse analysis, using elicited or natural data collected during the semester.”

In Semester 1 2010/2011, the cohort of students taking SKBI 6043 over three succeeding semesters reveals an acute increase in the number of international students from the previous two semesters. There was a record number of 25 international students out of a population of 45 or 58.1%, as compared to 10 out of 27 or 37.1% (Semester 2 2009/2010) and 7 out of 15 or 46.7% (Semester 1 2009/2010). In terms of nationality, there were 9 Libyan students followed by Iranians (7), Iraqis (4), Jordanians (4) and one from China. The question is, how is this information translated on the ground?

In the first place, this growing number of Middle East students have been admitted into the course without the necessary proficiency in English language (as it was the practice then). Secondly and not surprisingly, these students suffered a culture shock resulting in a rather slow academic socialization. As the course is conducted in English, there is a large gap that the students had to bridge. This is in line with literature on the use of English from their home countries as reflected in Abbad (1988, Al-Khasawneh (2010), Zughoul and Taminian (1984) and Rabab’ah (2003). Abbad (1988) documented on the weaknesses of Yemeni learners of English, who despite their low proficiency, were admitted into the English department. Zughoul and Taminian (1984) found that Jordanian students committed serious lexical errors, while Rabab’ah opined that the lack of opportunity in communicating with native speakers and the lack of native speaker instructors have made learning English difficult for Arab learners.

On the performance of Arab post-graduate students writing in English in Malaysia, two studies need to be mentioned. Hisham (2008) and Al-Khasawneh (2010) investigated the difficulties faced by Arab students writing in English at a northern university in Malaysia, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Hisham (2008) focused on the writing of
business students and found that they faced problems in vocabulary, register, grammar and referencing. Two years later, Al-Khasawneh (2010) focused on the academic writing problems of Arab post graduate business students and found weaknesses in vocabulary, register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling and referencing. Two new areas here are spelling and organization of ideas. In short, the difficulties covered all aspects of writing.

3. The Research Design: Classroom-Based Action Research

The choice for undertaking classroom-based action research is simply because it is a form of self-reflective systematic enquiry. As Mertler (2009:4) alludes, “It focuses on the unique characteristics of the population for whom a practice is employed…”

While the literature shows that there are many versions of action research, this study has adapted the four stages of Kemmis & McTaggart (1988, p. 10). They are as follows:

| Plan Semester 1 20102011 |
|---------------------------|
| • paid attention to the cohort of students; read their admission forms to gain an insight into their profile, English language proficiency, |
| • identified tools of research: informal interviews; document analysis, observations |
| • Identified intervention strategies: scaffolding via genre analysis : 3 moves of genre – Swales CARS model |
| • Designed syllabus to accommodate direct and indirect intervention |

| Act |
|-----|
| • (Indirect Intervention Strategies ) |
| Week 1: Course Outline ( weekly topics +by 2 articles uploaded at SPIN) |
| Week 2: Lecture on Text and Genre (emphasis on research report- Swales’ CARS) |
| Week 3: Lecture on research in discourse studies |
| • (Direct Intervention Strategies) |
| Week 7: Students’ First Presentation (Introduction section) - Evaluated |
| Intervention via genre analysis |
| Consultations |
| Week 8-15 Further discussions on research project- research method, findings. |

| Observe | Observe the impact/effects of interventions |
| Reflect | Assess and reassess interventions |

4. Discussion of Findings

In Week 7 as the students presented their Introduction section in class, it was quite evident that many of them had not benefitted from the indirect intervention strategies that were afforded to them from week 1 of the semester. When they were given the additional two articles to read per week, the strategy was to provide them a ‘model’ to emulate as well as to increase genre awareness. This was followed by the lecture on text and genre with an emphasis on research reports in the social sciences. However, there was little uptake on their part. When the students submitted their work, it was evident that there were problems in all aspects of writing. A case in point is Sample 1, written by R., a female student from Libya.

Sample 1: R

| The role of media to produce racism against Arab and Muslims in western countries |
| Statement of Problem |
| The oppression and racism against Muslims and Arabs, who live in the west is increasing after the |

| Lecturer’s Comments |
|---------------------|
| Rework title- what is the focus? |
| Issue – racism? |
| Identify the moves- Move 1 – What is your research |
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September events. Some people believed that racism was born after 11 September events, but this is not true; it may be increased at this time, or than before, whereas the roots of racism have been a long time ago. The view of western for another civilization, specially, Arabic and Islamic civilization, is bad and low view. The racism was appearing the writers and intellectuals writing, as they mention for racism in different arts such as the novel, cinema, theatre and drawing. They are portraying Arabs as a group of riffraff always whose love bloodshed. Also, they look the same view for the immigrants how chose to stay in their countries.

Sample 1 is a good representation of the problems faced by Arab students in dealing with the Statement of Problem. The text is authentic and has not been edited.

R has attempted to investigate a topic that is meaningful for her and many of the Arab students - representations of oppression, discrimination, Islamophobia, racism etc. This interest is however, not matched by their linguistic and rhetorical ability. One notes difficulties in register, vocabulary as well as organization of ideas, thus confirming Hisham (2008) and Al-Khasawneh (2010).

As applied genre analysis was employed as an intervention, the lecturer’s comments were thus limited to how that abstract can be improved in relation to the CARS model. R and the other students with similar problems were again shown Swales’ CARS model, but only the e 3 obligatory moves. In my consultation with R, this part was explained again. R was asked to identify the issue that she wanted to address - racism or anti Arab discrimination. Then she was asked to reflect on whether it is the ‘role’ of the media to produce racism. She was asked also to identify whether it is a construction or representation of news/ texts/images that allowed a reader to deconstruct issues of such nature. Further she was asked to peruse the texts to see if such constructions were overtly carried out.

Once R was fairly sure of her focus of study, she was directed to read the relevant literature on the issue as well as the possible approaches that may be employed for her investigation. Once she decided on the approach, she was asked to conduct a literature review on how such an approach is operationalised in cases of similar texts. This was to help her identify the gap that her research would help to fill.

As genre analysis entails much research, reading and synthesising, it was found that this is where the students are weakest at. During further interviews and feedback sessions, these students said that they would feel lost during the research period. After getting the relevant reading materials, they then faced another problem. They reported difficulties in identifying the salient points and then paraphrasing them. They too admitted that they could not paraphrase well as some of the ideas were complex while the texts were rather dense. The fact that rhetoric in English is linear while they were more familiar with a recursive style is also problematic. In short, the limitations found by Hisham (2008) and Al-Khasawneh (2010) have surfaced here too.

5. Conclusion

It cannot be denied that academic writing is an arduous task for international students, but it is a skill that needs to be mastered very quickly. What is needed is an access route that will make writing easier for the students. This action research has attempted to fill in a small part in the writing project of the students. The work is not yet completed but the insights gleaned from the introduction section have a major impact on the other sections of the project. What is obvious is that these students need help but they too must quickly rise to the challenge by being more independent and resourceful in their work. They need to work hard and to quickly embrace the culture of learning required of them. Faculty members too need to take cognizance of the fact that these learners have a steep learning curve as they shed off their previous learning culture. As such, the faculty must provide the appropriate scaffolding so that the writing process and project can be enjoyable and meaningful.

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