Academic Literacy of EFL Arab Postgraduate Student at The National University of Malaysia

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Research Article

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Abstract

The study identifies the language learning strategies used by Arab postgraduate student at University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in order to master the English language required for postgraduate study. The study attempted to provide a deeper understanding of how an EFL learner employs strategies and practices to overcome the challenges of English language learning in nonnative context for academic purposes. The findings of the study give insight to the challenges of learning English in nonnative environments and ways in which individuals overcome the limitations of successfully acquiring the language. The study traces the English language development of the case study from his initial introduction to the target language to the current status and level of his English proficiency. The research paradigm method used is a case study method which allows for an in depth explication of the selected case. The strategy inventory of language learning SILL Oxford's (1990) was used as an instrument in addition to the interview with the case study. The research results revealed that the case study used all 6 types of language learning strategies which are categorized by Oxford (1990) most of the time. These strategies are; Memorization, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social strategies. These strategies seems to have a direct relationship with the progress made in the level of English proficiency by the case study. Most significantly, the study implies that Arab students need to develop academic literacy skills in reading English texts to learn English and to involve socially in academic and social contexts. That is the case study however shown that it is possible to learn English through reading in English and also by social involvement.

Introduction

The significance of the academic context lies in the fact that it is the context in which language skills are necessary obligation to achieve the academic study properly. Thus investigating the acquisition of academic skills of English language in the academic environment particularly investigating English language skills of ESL/EFL postgraduate students is of present interest among Language acquisition researchers in the area.

The language skills that are required by postgraduate students are a very critical element of ‘Academic Literacy’ skills. The members of academic context need to have a degree of proficiency in academic literacy to allow them to cope with the needs and demands of academic life. Academic literacy is defined as the "specific language demands of reading, writing and oral participation characteristic of particular disciplines. Graduates use language to acquire, demonstrate and apply their disciplinary knowledge and to articulate critical and provisional judgments in the course of their studies and subsequent careers" (Neeley, 2001).

The practices of academic Literacy are seeming to be a kind of social behaviors that are formed by the relationships between students and their purposes of reading and writing. "Literacy practices are also shaped by the ways our brains work with language and textual structures" (Neeley, 2001). That is, when we want to master literacy practices, we need to accomplish certain strategies of language learning in
both the social and academic environments; this is because of the fixed correlation between social
relationships surrounding the texts that we read and write and the language structures presented in these
texts.

As students; the number of Arab students in UKM is increasing in the recent few years. All of them are
postgraduate students doing MA and PhD programs in different faculties especially Engineering, Science
and Technology, Faculty of Economy, Education and Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities. They
are coming from different countries with different educational backgrounds from Iraq, Jordan, Saudi
Arabia, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Oman, Algeria, and Palestine. Based on their background
education they have poor academic literacy skills of English language. They haven't exposed enough to
English language because of poor use of English language in their universities and also because they
have no opportunity to practice English language in their countries.

One of the very big problems for Arab students is the proficiency of English language. The majority of the
students who need to have the English language courses prepared for international postgraduate
students at UKM are from Arab countries. They form about 75% of students in these courses. Arab
students have difficulties in the four language skills reading, writing, speaking and listening generally.
Inadvertently, these language problems lead towards difficulties or in performing academic practices.

Based on their educational experiences in Arab countries, Arab students don't have the English proficiency
and academic literacy skills. In Arabic countries, they study English language in classrooms only; they
don't have the opportunity to practice English to enhance their English language proficiency. Furthermore,
the little use of English language in the academic environment in Arab countries resulted in weak
academic literacy for Arab students.

Literacy skills are a crucial need in the academic environment for postgraduate students as reading and
writing are basic practices for them, they have to read and write a lot. Neeley (2001) defines academic
literacy as ways of thinking, speaking, reading and writing within the academic environment. The
importance of academic literacy skills of Arab graduate students as non-native speakers of English
language lies in the fact that it is the medium of instruction for postgraduate study at UKM. Thus, this
work is an investigation of the academic literacy skills of a case study Arab student in UKM.

The current study will answer the basic enquiry about the acquisition of academic literacy skills by a case
of Arab student tracing his language development. The academic literacy skills that the case needs are
the academic reading and writing, as in postgraduate studies students need to read and write a lot. They
also need to speak and listen to their lecturers, supervisors, and to their colleagues as well.

**Background**

Many studies have been conducted to examine the acquisition of academic literacy of nonnative
postgraduate students who choose to study in the English language. For nonnative postgraduate
students the term academic literacy doesn't only mean the ability to read and write, it goes beyond the
ability to read and write to have all language demands of reading, writing, oral presenting, and also to have the essential disciplinary knowledge.

Spak (1997) defines the academic literacy as the ability to read and write various texts assigned in [University]. He states that academic literacy that is essential for graduate studies is more than the ability to read and write effectively and knowledge of one's chosen field of study, research skills, and good reading and writing skills form only the foundation for the acquisition of academic literacy (cited in Braine (2002: 60). Spak (1997) gives an efficient and comprehensive definition for the notion “academic literacy” and his definition is completely academic.

Researching in academic literacy, Riazi (1997) carried out a study examining the disciplinary literacy. He studied Iranian doctorate students, all education majors. He concluded that graduate students interpret writing tasks in terms of their personal, educational, and career perspectives. The main problem investigated by Reazi's research is how non-native speakers of English language acquire the field-specific literacy required to their academic disciplines in postgraduate programs. He confirmed that non-native postgraduate students acquire the academic literacy skills by the purposeful interaction between those learners and their environment. Riazi's study results supported those who conducted research in academic literacy.

The theorists of literacy view the literacy as a particularly situated practice of reading and writing within the surrounding society, involving the values of people, their attitudes, and beliefs about literacy and the discourse of literacy (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic 2000). Braine (2002) went beyond these theorists views when he argued that academic literacy extends beyond the ability to read and write. In the study Braine investigated the acquisition of the academic literacy by non-native postgraduate students who study in English medium. He explored the understanding of academic literacy, identifying the areas that need to be examined, and better approaches that could be utilized to enhance the understanding of academic literacy.

Braine (2002) looked at the acquisition of academic literacy within an academic environment as consisting process of people, institutional setting and learning materials (e.g., lectures, classes, advisors, and reading). It is said to be dependent upon the interactive relationships of students, teachers, advisors, and classmates.

Morita's study (2002) related to Braine's work (2002) examined the learners’ identities and power while performing academic literacy practices. She illuminates the conflicting and transformative process of L2 academic discourse socialization in her qualitative case study of a group of graduate students in a TESOL program. The study presents a considerable explanation of how L2 graduate students’ identity and power are negotiated and reconstituted while participating in academic communities of practice.

Like Braine (2002) and Marita (2002), Ghee (2005) relates the literacy practices to the social context. He states that like every other human activity, literacy practices structure social relations. That social relations are built into literacy practices signifies that literacy is inherently political and ideological.
and caught up with broader social concerns involving such dimensions of identity as class, race, and
gender.

Literacy is acquired through a socialization process embedded in social practice, patterned by social
institutions and interaction between learners and their academic discourse community members. These
interactions influence the learners’ attitude to second language academic literacy (Ferenz, 2005). Ferenz
(2005) also states that within an EFL context, L2 advanced academic literacy often involves a transition
between knowledge acquisition in L1 and knowledge presentation in L2, which may prove problematic for
novice practitioners. Here Ferenz relates the acquisition of academic literacy to the background of the
learner himself including social, cultural, and educational background. The problematic thing here is the
differences or the gaps between the two contexts of learning for the learner which in some cases give the
learner weak-constructed base.

Regarding the issue of academic literacy acquisition Ghee (2005) states that the acquisition of academic
literacy in a second language (L2) is inherently challenging and complex, the process requires that
students consciously and unconsciously come to terms with new ways of making sense of literacy
practices that may be at odds with their familiar and desired ways of being and speaking. Students are
further challenged by having limited control over the second language, which represents both an
important linguistic resource and form of power.

Based on all the above views, the current study investigated the acquisition of academic literacy skills
needed by a case of Arab student in postgraduate studies at UKM. Academic literacy practices acquired
through a socialization process embedded in social relations (Ferenz, 2005), they also structure social
relations (Ghee, 2005). The study examined the acquisition of academic literacy skills by the case
through his involving socially and academically in new societies. Many factors related to the process of
acquiring academic literacy by the case; the kind of the strategies and practices of language learning
which are employed by the case and also the involving with new societies were the most related factors
to be investigated in the study.

**Methods**

As stated in chapter one, the study traced the English language development of an Arab postgraduate
student at a Malaysian university. The study investigated the case of the student from the point that
nonnative speaker of English language which is the medium of instruction of his postgraduate study in
Malaysia. This study is also identified the language learning strategies he applied and the academic
literacy skills developed as well as the academic literacy problems faced by this case and how he
managed the challenges of English proficiency to continue his postgraduate study in Malaysia.

The study was carried out as a case study. Punch (1998) says that the basic idea of case study is what
one case or a small number of cases will be studied in detail using whatever methods that seem
appropriate to understand the case in depth. A case study research employs a number of research
methods to secure data, observation, questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis.
Data Collection

Two instruments were used in this study to collect data, taxonomy of language learning strategies to show what English language learning strategies (SILL) were employed by the case study and an interview to show what learning practices were committed out by the case study that helped him in his learning the language and also to identify the problems of academic English language skills he still experience.

Strategy Inventory for Language Learning

This study used SILL designed by Oxford (1990) for learners of English as a second or foreign language, this inventory comprises 50 items questionnaire for ESL/ESL learning(See Attachment A). Oxford’s SILL is a widely used instrument especially in learning strategy research. The 50 item SILL comprised 6 parts; A, B, C, D, E, & F.

Interview

The interview conducted in this study to find answers to research questions. Structured interviews was conducted with the case to obtain information about his main academic literacy problems and how he can overcome all these problems. The second purpose of this interview is to identify the learning strategies that the case used in his leaning the English language. Focusing on the effective strategies which are he practiced to acquire skills of English language. The interviews was carried out as face-to-face with the case and they were tape-recorded. The evidence for the interviews is provided as an appendix of the interviews transcription. The interviewers was informed before the task carried out.

Results And Discussion

Many practices were carried out by the case for the sake of English language learning and English language acquisition as well. He received English language as a learner at the beginning of his education, as English is a part of the syllabus in the curriculum. It is a compulsory course in primary and secondary schools in Jordan. It is also the medium of instruction for some secondary schools such as the school at which the case had studied for his last three years of secondary study.

Based on interview data, the case study revealed that he employed some learning practices that helped him understand content delivered in English: Reading in English and social interaction with English speaking members of the community. One of the main practices followed by the case is learning English through reading in English. Reading was the basic and major practice for him to survive in that secondary school; he was consuming more time read to learn English learning. When the case study was in India for his bachelor’s degree, he was also reading English newspapers on a daily basis. One of the most important benefits of his reading practices was the daily progress of his vocabulary. Reading daily newspapers have helped a lot to enrich his vocabulary. Reading often and regularly is one of the useful strategies used by good readers. As they read, their reading improves and they feel daily progress as the case said.
Another practice used by the case that is learning English through social interaction. As it was revealed in the interview data, the second important practice of the case to learn English language is to be involved with the social community in India and Malaysia. To achieve this successfully the case decided to be physically away from the Arabic community on the campus and at the place of his residence. Being involved with the social community obliged him to use English language to communicate with the community members. The interaction with the people, including classmates, friend, and other community members helped to enrich the case's speaking skills and vocabulary. They usually correct his spoken mistakes; while they also encourage him to speak using English.

Reading can be seen as both a process and the result of the process-product. The traditional product oriented approach to reading has been replaced with the process approach because it is recognized that different readers read at different levels and attain different understanding of a text (Nambiar, 2004: 4)

Being outside his country, social interaction with the community was the second effective practice adopted by the case to learn and acquire English language. Involving with the social and academic community in India and Malaysia gave the case a chance to communicate using English language. To achieve this successfully the case decided to be physically away from Arabic community to use English language strictly in his communication. According to Ghani (2003) sociable and extrovert learners seek out social conversation in English. They are satisfied that they can get the general meaning without knowing every word.

Regarding the use of language learning strategies, the study found that there is a use of the six types of Language Learning Strategies by the case. The case employed all the strategies of language learning that are classified by (Oxford, 1990) as direct strategies; memory strategies, cognitive strategies, and compensation strategies and indirect strategies; metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies.

Oxford (1990) argues that many different strategies can be used by language learners: metacognitive techniques for organizing, focusing, and evaluating one's own learning; affective strategies for handling emotions or attitudes; social strategies for cooperating with others in the learning process; cognitive strategies for linking new information with existing schemata and for analyzing and classifying it; memory strategies for entering new information into memory storage and for retrieving it when needed; and compensation strategies (such as guessing or using gestures) to overcome deficiencies and gaps in one's current language knowledge.

The six types of LLS helped the case to learn and acquire English language but they used in different frequencies. Indirect strategies were used more than direct strategies. Metacognitive strategies are the higher rank of strategy use by the case study. Trying to find ways of using English was the main metacognitive strategies which are adopted by the case. One of the ways of using English, the case was frequently looking for people he can talk to in English. He was paying more attention about his progress in learning English. The frequency of the strategy use can thus be seen as an important influence on proficiency of English. The level of English proficiency depends on the type of the adopted strategies.
Social strategies were the second type of strategies to be adopted by the case. Involving with the social community helped the case a lot to learn English. It was one of his main ways to learn and acquire English. Being involved in the social community, the case practiced many strategies; if I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again, I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk, I practice English with other students, I ask for help from English speakers, and I ask questions in English.

For non-native speakers of English, the interaction with the social and academic community plays an effective role in the language learning and acquisition processes. This had been approved by Riazi (1997). He was investigating how non-native speakers of English acquire domain-specific literacy suitable to their academic disciplines in graduate programs. He came to a conclusion that non-native postgraduates acquire academic literacy skills by the functional interaction between those learners and their context.

Three affective strategies are mainly used by the case which are; I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of English, I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English, and I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making mistakes. These strategies helped the case to be involved in English speaking practice even when he makes spoken mistakes.

Oxford, Lavine, and Crookall (1989) referred to language learning strategies as actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques—such as seeking out target language conversation partners, or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task—used by learners to enhance learning. As further noted by these authors, such strategies facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information.

Many memorization strategies used by the case are related to the connection of new knowledge with his own knowledge. These strategies are; I think of relationship between what I already know and new things I learn in English, I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them, I physically act out new English words and I review English lessons often. The use of these strategies helped him to store in memory important information gathered from his learning.

Many cognitive strategies are involved in the learning of English language of the case study. These strategies helped him to manipulate the target language using all their processes. Reasoning, analysis, and drawing conclusions were the main cognitive strategies which are used by the case. Cognitive strategies which are employed by the case represented two main things; first, to talk with English language speakers by start conversation in English and looking for opportunities to use his English and second; watching English language TV shows spoken in English.

For compensation strategies, the main compensation strategies used by the case are make guesses to understand unfamiliar English words. The frequent use of compensation strategies was in certain instances when the case can’t think of a word during a conversation in English, in this case he used gestures. He used the same when he can’t think of an English word. Compensation strategies enable him to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitation in knowledge.
(Rubin, 1975) suggested that good L2 learners are willing and accurate guessers; have a strong drive to communicate; are often uninhibited; are willing to make mistakes; focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing; take advantage of all practice opportunities; monitor their speech as well as that of others; and pay attention to meaning.

Regarding problems of academic literacy skills the case still faces, the findings of the study revealed that the case almost has no problem with his proficiency in the four language skills; writing, reading, speaking and listening. He can communicate freely in academic and social context. He is able to understand when he is reading and listening to his lecturers, especially for issues relating to the majoring of his study. He also can write with some problems regarding the use of conjunction words. He can speak without any problems with his colleagues and lecturers. The use of computer technology helped him to improve his level of English proficiency and the new practices he use in Malaysia also add a lot to his English knowledge, for instance; oral presentations and assignments.

The use of language learning strategies helped the case study to have a level of English proficiency enabled him to overcome his problems of English language and to manage his own education. In a study related to the use language learning strategies Rausch (2004) states that an extensive investigation has shown the importance of language learning strategies in making language learning more efficient and in producing a positive effect on learners’ language use.

The current study deals with the case study as a good language learner according to the strategies of language learning that are used by the case to learn English language.

All the above strategies were employed by the case of study. The case study was too strategic in his learning and the use of language learning strategies has been a part of his daily life out of his country. According to Gnutzmann (2005), there are remarkable differences among equally successful language learners. Rather than limiting the description of the good language learner to one that is prescriptive and ignores learner differences, the more recent and inclusive view is that there are various ways that language learners can be successful. For the most part, these learners are strategic in their learning.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicated that the case of the study faces big difficulties to learn and to acquire English language. Many practices and strategies helped the case to acquire English language; reading to learn the language was one of the main practices that are carried out by the case. In primary and secondary education the case did not use any self-directed knowledge. He was relying on the knowledge that he was getting from the classroom. In the university, the use of LLS has the plays an effective role in the learning of English language of the case. He employs direct and indirect strategies to learn English language. Six types of strategies as they classified by (Oxford, 1990) were employed by the case; these strategies are Memorization, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social strategies. Metacognitive strategies are the higher adopted strategies by the case, being involved with social community have considerable help in language learning of the case. The use of LLS helped the case to
be able to survive and face the challenge of English in his postgraduate study in UKM. Recently he has English skills enabling him to communicate freely in social and academic context. The findings show that he has no problem with academic literacy skills as PHD candidate.

**Abbreviations**

LLS: Language Learning Strategies  
UKM: University Kebangsaan Malaysia  
SILL: Strategy Inventory Of Language Learning  
EFL: English as a foreign language  
ESL: English as a second language

**Declarations**

- Ethics approval and consent to participate
  
  Not applicable
  
- Consent for publication
  
  Not applicable.
  
- Availability of data and material
  
  Not applicable
  
- Funding
  
  Not applicable
  
- Competing interests
  
  No Competing interests
  
- Authors' contributions
The author, Abdullah Almadhady has designed the work and made the analysis and the interpretation of data.

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