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### REVISITING ENGLISH LEARNERS' ACADEMIC WRITING NEEDS

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#### Abstract:

Unlike Malaysian schools that use syllabi issued by the Education Ministry, Malaysia's public universities have full autonomy of their syllabi. English language courses and curricula in public universities are usually based on the needs of stakeholders; government, community, academicians, learners, and also parents (Avci, Ring, and Mitchell, 2015). Traditionally, most English language courses focus on learners' proficiency and aim to equip learners with general, social, academic, and employment language skills. In this century, there is a need to keep up with the learners' latest needs and requirements which are closely related to technology and globalisation. This present quantitative study attempts to tap into the current needs, perceptions, and views related to academic writing in English of one of the stakeholders in a public university in Malaysia. A group of learners in a public university was given a questionnaire that contained questions related to academic writing and the English language at the undergraduate level. The findings of this study will help syllabus designers first identify the value and importance of the existing syllabi and then, if necessary, craft the syllabus based on the current needs and views of one of the university's stakeholders.

**Keywords:**

Stakeholder, Academic Writing, Needs Analysis, Public University

**Introduction**

Malaysia is one of the many countries that adopts a bilingual education system. This is because Malaysia acknowledges the importance of balancing both national and international needs and challenges which can be seen in the linguistic educational policies (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013). English is a second language in Malaysia's education system and is a compulsory subject at both primary and secondary levels of education (Gill, 2002).

English is seen as a 'lingua franca' and is still widely used as a medium of communication in many domains such as in commerce, in academic disciplines and for recreational purposes. In Malaysia, the English language plays an important role in society even though it does not have the status of an official language of the country. This is because English is an essential tool to access knowledge from the internet, television, radio and also from international information.

Therefore, Malaysian tertiary institutions students need to be proficient in the English language as most of the educational resources or reference materials are available in English. At the university level, English is also compulsory, but learners enrolling in the undergraduate programmes are divided according to their Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET) results. Education has been revolving with the development of English language teaching and learning in Malaysia's public universities. It mainly focuses on three main categories; proficiency courses, English language degree programmes, and Teaching of English as a Second Language programme.

Writing is an integral part of the academic community. Students are often required to write either project papers, reports, letters and paper works. Academic writing can be written in any language; still, the common language used is the English language. However, achieving academic writing competency is not an easy task what more in a second language, English. Academic writing competency relates to one of the four language skills that a person needs to acquire when it comes to language and communication. Acquiring the writing skill is not an easy task as it requires a combination of a few skills such as writing readiness, grammatical rules and presenting ideas effectively. Writing also requires the students to be aware of the discourse community, the subject matter and also the writing genre because it will determine the vocabulary used and also sentence pattern (Yah Awg Nik et al. 2010, Langan 1987, Gunning 1998, Parker 1993, Pearsall and Cunningham 1988).

As learners progress from high school to tertiary education, their writing tasks and requirements change relatively. Academic writing plays a major role in obtaining a degree. In Malaysian universities, academic written assignments are important because students have to complete academic tasks such as writing term papers and research reports. In most universities, ongoing assessment is used instead of depending on only exam-based assessment. This means

that students have presentations, assignments, project papers and dissertations to write and complete. The majority of the on-going assessments require students to write, and thus, to succeed and obtain a degree, it is crucial to be competent academic writers.

To cater to the demands of the academic community, English of Specific Purposes (ESP) courses and modules emerged. Richards and Schmidt (2002:181) define ESP as 'the role of English in a language course or programme of instruction in which the content and aims of the course are fixed by the specific needs of a particular group of learners.' From ESP emerged more specific language courses such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP). EAP, as defined by Flowered and Peacock (2001:8), is 'the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language. As many know, EAP is a needs-driven course catering to the needs of learners to succeed academically (Bruce, 2011; Hyland, 2009).

There has been research conducted on learners' perception towards academic writing and EAP courses. One of the latest researches is by Mazgutova & Hanks (2020) which looked at 14 Chinese pre-undergraduate students' perception towards their writing strategies used in an EAP course. Another research which was recently conducted looked at the challenges and solutions of ESL students' Academic Writing (Akhtar, Hassan, Saidalvi & Hussain, 2019). In 2015, Adi Badioazman studied Malaysian learners' engagement in academic writing in a second language (L2) in a higher learning institution. All this research attempted to look at the struggle and views of the learners and also academicians.

It has been acknowledged in many of the previous research that learners have different preferences, perceptions and views in relation to academic writing. Thus, this present study aims to find answers to the views and present academic needs of learners at a Malaysian university in Sabah.

### **Research Objectives**

This study was conducted because the researcher found that there was a need to have a better understanding of what the learners in Sabah need out of the English language courses offered by the university's English language department. This study aimed at identifying what learners actually require in an academic writing module in order to accomplish their faculty courses. This is significant to ensure that what learners learn are applicable to the faculty courses and thus will help them be competent academic writers. To achieve the objectives, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What are the faculties' common instruction and requirement when asking learners to produce written assignments?
- 2) What are the learners' perceptions and beliefs regarding what academicians should focus on in learners' written assignments?

## Literature Review

### *English for Academic Purposes Courses*

English for Academic Purposes emerged when non-native English speakers started studying in English medium universities. Many universities realised the need to equip the non-native English learners with knowledge and skills of academic writing, reading and also vocabulary. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) and Bruce (2011) have highlighted that EAP practitioners must look at what are the learners present knowledge and also look at what is needed by the learners to achieve success in their academic studies.

In order for educators to respond to the need for Malaysian students to read English texts and write different types of academic assignment in English, programmes in English for Academic Purposes are offered to undergraduate students in many Malaysian tertiary institutions. In most cases, these types of English courses will include students from various disciplines, such as those majoring in arts, humanities, technology or science subject. This can pose a challenge in providing the best and more relevant content and knowledge since academic writing requirements differ among the different disciplines. In addition, besides acquiring the disciplinary rules and organizational conventions essential to academic writing, students also have to deal with the high level of language used in new and, at many times, unfamiliar genres. Therefore, the writing demands and challenges when using English for academic purposes are major issues facing Malaysian universities and Malaysian students.

In order to cater to the writing demands and challenges in university, there are courses available for students to attend. In University Kebangsaan Malaysia, there are courses such as Academic Writing (SKB16014) which is compulsory for postgraduate students of the Center of Language and Literature Studies to attend. In University Malaysia Sabah, there is a module called English for Academic Purposes (UB00402) and English for Research Purposes (UB00502) that undergraduate students can attend.

### *Academic Writing*

One of the most important skills that are used by all students across the disciplines is the writing skill. This is because most of the tasks at the tertiary level will be writing. Students' assessment is most often a mixture of written assignment and examination. For example, science students would usually write lab reports, and business students write reviews.

Thaiss, Chris and Zawacki (2006) define academic writing as writing that is required and is used in the education world, such as in colleges and universities. Teachers would usually relate students writing of assignments as academic writing. The requirement of what constitutes competent academic writing varies according to the discipline in which the students are studying. It involves specialised discourses with set rules and organisational conventions which differ across subjects and genres (Osman, 2004, Samraj, 2005).

The general rule to academic writing is to write formally where the ideas are most often supported by citation. Citation is needed to ensure the validity of the ideas and facts, and it also indicates that the writer has read articles and books on the topic and is academically

knowledgeable in the area of discussion. The academically challenging task in order to cite appropriately is the ability to read critically. Critical reading demands a reader not only to understand the text but to read between the lines – strengths, flaws, implications and then comment and evaluate the whole text (Craswell, 2005). Linguistic elements such as the use of proper transition words and the tone also influence the formality of the writing.

Besides the problem of format and critical reading, there is also the issue of completing the writing task. In order to complete the writing task, a good piece of writing would go through a few drafts in order to ensure that the content, structure and language used are correct and appropriate. In order to determine the appropriateness, the writer needs to take into consideration a few things, such as the purpose, readers, culture, and discourse community. The process of completing a piece of writing is most often cyclical and not linear. Cyclical process is when a writer revisits their writing a few times to edit and rewrite where necessary.

### **Methodology**

This is a quantitative study which uses a set of questionnaires to identify what the learners need out of the English language courses offered by the university's English language department. This study aims at identifying what learners actually require in accomplishing their faculty courses, especially focusing on their writing needs.

The instrument for this study was a set of questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed based on previous questionnaires used in research conducted by Ismail (2010) and Leki & Carson (1994). The present questionnaire has 5 sections; the respondent background, general information on university courses, perception and beliefs towards academic writing and educator, the reality of academic writing assignments and academic writing classes. Section 1 and 2 contain questions regarding the respondents and their university courses. Section 3 seeks to identify what learners perceive and believe should be carried out by educators in relation to the academic writing assignment. Section 4 serves to identify what is presently practised, and Section 5 contains questions related to learners' need in an academic writing class.

The respondents for this study were students from pure sciences field; engineering (9 respondents), agriculture (20 respondents) and FSSA (2 respondents) and business and accountancy (1 respondent). This is because the researcher only had access to these students during the research was conducted. The information from the questionnaire is then tabulated into frequencies and percentages. These figures and data are hoped to bring light to what the learners require from an academic writing class.

### **Result**

Based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, the results will be presented according to the research questions of this study. This study has two research questions, and all the answers are based on the respondents' questionnaire answers

***RQ 1 What Are the Faculties' Common Instruction and Requirement When Asking Learners to Produce Written Assignments?***

Based on Table 1 below, it clearly indicates that this public university uses English in their lectures, tutorials and also written assignments, and none of the respondents said that their lecturers used only Malay. English being the second language in Malaysia and Malay being the national language, it is not surprising when lecturers use both languages interchangeably in their lectures and also tutorials. However, for written assignments, all 32 respondents said that they are required to write in English.

**Table 1: Language Use During Lectures, Tutorial and in Written Assignment**

<b>SECTION 2:</b>	<b>General information on university courses</b>				
	<b>Malay</b>	<b>English</b>	<b>More Malay, Little English</b>	<b>More English, Little Malay</b>	<b>Same amount of Malay and English</b>
<b>Q. 1 Common medium of instruction during lectures</b>	Nil	28.1% (9 ss)	12.5% (4 ss)	50% (16 ss)	9.4% (3 ss)
<b>Q. 2 Common medium of instruction during tutorials</b>	Nil	28.1% (9 ss)	18.8% (6 ss)	37.5% (12 ss)	15.6% (5 ss)
<b>Q. 3 Common medium of written assignments</b>	Nil	100% (32 ss)	Nil	Nil	Nil

Table 2 focuses on the commonly written assignment types in faculties in this particular public university. It is obvious that written assignments are usually given as a group task (67.7%), followed by individual assignments (28.1%). However, one respondent said that he has never been asked to complete a written assignment in pairs

As for the written assignment genre, report writing is the most common (62.5%). However, there is one respondent (3.1%) who said he has never written a report. One respondent (3.1%) also said that he has never been asked to write an argumentative paper and a summary. Based on the respondents' data, the respondents are different learners, but they are all from the agriculture faculty.

One interesting finding is that majority of the respondents said that there are types of genres that are required from them. However, the other genres are not mentioned by the respondents. Only 2 respondents (6.3%) said that they had not been asked to write any other genre besides the 6 listed genres; descriptive, cause and effect, argumentative/persuasive, report, review and summary.

Table 2: Mode and Genre of Written Assignment

SECTION 2:	General information on university courses				
	Very frequently	Occasionally	Rarely	Very Rarely	Never
<b>Q. 4 Type of written assignment</b>					
- Individual	- 28.1% (9ss)	- 46.8% (15ss)	- 18.8% (6ss)	- 6.3% (2ss)	- nil
- Pair			- 28.1% (9ss)	- 9.4% (3ss)	- 3.1% (1ss)
- Group	- 15.6% (5ss)	- 43.8% (14ss)	- 3.1% (1ss)	- 3.1% (1ss)	- nil
	- 65.7% (21ss)	- 28.1% (9ss)			
<b>Q. 5 Type/genre of written assignments</b>					
- Descriptive	- 37.5% (12ss)	- 37.5% (12ss)	- 25% (8ss)	- nil	- nil
- Cause and effect				- 3.1% (1ss)	- nil
- Argumentative / persuasive	- 31.2% (10ss)	- 43.8% (14ss)	- 21.9% (7ss)		- nil
- Report	- 28.1 (9ss)		- 25% (8ss)	- 6.3% (2ss)	- 3.1% (1ss)
- Review	- 62.5 (20ss)	- 37.5% (12ss)	- 6.3% (2ss)	- Nil	- Nil
- Summary	- 34.4% (11ss)	- 28.1% (9ss)	- 25% (8ss)	- 15.6% (5s)	- 3.1% (1ss)
- Others	- 21.9% (7ss)	- 25% (8ss)	- 34.4% (11ss)	- 6.3% (2ss)	- 6.3% (2ss)
	- 15.6% (5ss)	- 46.8% (15ss)		- 3.1% (1ss)	
		- 37.5% (12ss)			

### ***RQ 2 What Are the Learners' Perceptions and Beliefs Regarding What Academicians Should Focus on In Learners' Written Assignments?***

Table 3 shows the responses on the learners' hopes and wishes in relation to academic writing and what their lecturers should and should not do. There are 11 questions in this section. From the questions from table 3, it can be categorised into 5 themes; content and languages (Q1, and

Q2), references (Q3, Q4 and Q5), rhetorical structure (Q6, Q7, Q8 and Q9), vocabulary (Q10) and writing process (Q11).

For content and languages, the majority of the respondents said that content, facts and ideas are more important than language. For Q 1 and 2, respondents said that lecturers must pay more attention to content (87.5%) and facts (90.6%) ( 28 and 29 students respectively: very important and moderately important).

Valid ideas and points and proper citation and referencing are also important. 26 respondents (81.1%) said that ideas should be taken from valid references. Integrity in terms of proper referencing and citation are also acknowledged by the respondents with 22 respondents (68.7%) said these are very important and moderately important.

Rhetorical structure or also known as organisation is also important. Q 6 indicates the organisation is important (81.2%). However, organisation is less important compared to content (refer to Q1). Paragraphing and pages are not among the top priorities that lecturers should pay attention to when giving written assignments to learners. 18 respondents (56.3%) said that paragraphing is of little importance/not important, and 14 respondents (43.8%) said the number of pages is of little importance/not important. 27 respondents (84.3%) said that “A lecturer/tutor must have knowledge of a certain organisation style that is expected from students' written assignment” (Q9).

Theme four; formal vocabulary is also important to the respondents (75% / 24 respondents) said that “A lecturer/tutor should highlight the necessity of using formal vocabulary such as 'conduct a research' instead of 'do a research' or 'cannot' instead of 'can't' or 'men' instead of 'guys'” (Q10). The last question is related to the writing process. 87.5% (28 respondents) said that the process of writing the assignment is important and lecturers should allow submission of drafts.

**Table 3: Learners Perception and Views Towards Academic Writing and Their Lecturers' Practices**

<b>SECTION 3:</b>	<i>Perception and Beliefs towards Academic Writing and Educators</i>			
	<b>Very Important</b>	<b>Moderately Important</b>	<b>Of Little Importance</b>	<b>Unimportant</b>
<i>Q.1 A lecturer/tutor must pay more attention on content than language when marking students' written assignment</i>	13 ss (40.6%)	15 ss (46.9%)	4 ss (12.5%)	-
<i>Q. 2 A lecturer/tutor must pay more attention on facts than language when marking students' writing assignment.</i>	12 ss (37.5%)	17 ss (53.1%)	2 ss (6.3%)	1 ss (3.1%)
<i>Q. 3 A lecturer/tutor must pay attention on ideas that are only taken from valid references</i>	8 ss (25%)	18 ss (56.2%)	4 ss (12.5%)	2 ss (6.3%)
<i>Q. 4 A lecturer/tutor must emphasise on the use of proper citation (in-text and end-text citation)</i>	9 ss (28.1%)	13 ss (40.6%)	7 ss (21.8%)	3 ss (9.5%)
<i>Q. 5 A lecturer/tutor must always look for plagiarism by using softwares such as Turnitin</i>	9 ss (28.1%)	13 ss (40.6%)	8 ss (25%)	2 ss (6.3%)
<i>Q. 6 A lecturer/tutor must focus on the organisation of the whole written assignment when marking students' written assignment</i>	10 ss (31.2%)	16 ss (50%)	4 ss (12.5%)	2 ss (6.3%)
<i>Q. 7 A lecturer/tutor must indicate the number of paragraphs for students to write the assignment</i>	7 ss (21.9%)	7 ss (21.9%)	10 ss (31.2%)	8 ss (25%)
<i>Q. 8 A lecturer/tutor must always indicate the number of pages required for an assignment</i>	6 ss (18.8%)	12 ss (37.5%)	9 ss (28.1%)	5 ss (15.6%)
<i>Q. 9 A lecturer/tutor must have knowledge of a certain organisation style that is expected from students' written assignment</i>	10 ss (31.2%)	17 ss (53.1%)	3 ss (9.4%)	2 ss (6.3%)
<i>Q. 10 A lecturer/tutor should highlight the necessity of using formal vocabulary such as 'conduct a research' instead of 'do a research' or 'cannot' instead of 'can't' or 'men' instead of 'guys'</i>	9 ss (28.1%)	15 ss (47.9%)	7 ss (21.9%)	1 ss (3.1%)
<i>Q. 11 A lecturer/tutor should allow learners to submit a draft</i>	19 ss (59.4%)	9 ss (28.1%)	1 ss (3.1%)	3 ss (9.4%)

Based on all the findings listed above, a few points can be concluded. The results show that learners expect their lectures and tutors to know and pay attention to valid facts and

organisations. They find the idea of process writing which involves writing drafts is important. In regards to the writing genre, report writing is the top most common writing that the respondents have to produce in their faculties. According to Graves and Hyland (2017), in their book, there are various types of report writing; final report, lab report, and short lab report. They also highlighted on proposal writing and scientific proposal. This genre is not part of the EAP content available in this university.

### Conclusion

This study has two research questions that hoped to discover the public university's general mode and genre of written assignment and also to reveal what learners view as important in an assignment. These findings are hoped to help the centre of language studies or any other faculty that wants to prepare a good and useful module for an EAP module, especially for the university. As mentioned by Bruce (2011) and many other prominent researchers in the area of EAP, EAP courses are aimed at fulfilling the needs of learners to complete their studies in their own specific discipline. Based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, it can be said that English and Writing are important in this public university, and the learners highlighted that content and organisation is important. The writing process should also be looked into by faculty lecturers and not only by language lectures or EAP lecturers.

There are a few limitations to this study. The most glaring limitation is the number of respondents who participated. This is because there are 10 faculty but the respondents comprised of undergraduates of only four faculties and three are sciences, and one is a social science. Because of this, the findings from this research cannot be taken as the only reasons to back up an EAP course. Further research can be conducted to obtain views and respondents from other faculties too. Another angle that can be looked at is what are the respondents' view and wishes of an ideal EAP course.

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