Academic English Skills for Postgraduate Studies: Perspective from Muamalat

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ABSTRACT

To investigate the English language needs for postgraduate studies in Muamalat, we interviewed a few postgraduate students and academicians from the discipline of Muamalat at selected higher learning institutions in Malaysia. We transcribed and analysed the interviews to identify the learning situation, present situation, and target situation for English language skills needed in postgraduate studies in Muamalat. Our analysis suggested the need for Academic English skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening, as the participants emphasized the importance of Academic English skills for postgraduate studies in Muamalat. This implies the importance of English in the discipline of Muamalat and the need for English language training tailored for postgraduate studies in Muamalat.

Keywords: English for specific purposes. English for academic purposes, Needs analysis. muamalat, Postgraduate education

INTRODUCTION

The growth of Islamic banking system in Malaysia has resulted in greater demand for professionals in the field of Muamalat. It was forecasted that Malaysia would need more than 10,000 workforces in Muamalat-related fields by 2015 (Amir Shaharuddin, 2013). The local higher education providers have responded to this need with the offering of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes with specialisations in Muamalat, Islamic Banking and Finance, and Islamic Economics.

The Muamalat system is rooted in the principles of Islamic economics as determined by Sharia, and it is different from today's conventional economic system which is rooted in the *laissez-faire*, the capitalist economic system. Therefore, academic studies in Muamalat should be unique compared to conventional economics. Swales (2011) argued that there are conventions defined by the communities involved in a particular academic discipline. Such conventions are constitutive of the group members' knowledge. This means that, as Muamalat is different from conventional economics, the discipline requires a specially designed English Language course which prepares the postgraduate students in their specialization.

English is regarded as the important language of knowledge (Crystal, 2002) and it is needed by the postgraduate students to succeed in their studies, as most of the important texts and periodicals are mostly written in English. Therefore, several studies have been carried out with regards to the English language needs of postgraduate students in Malaysia (Maros et. al, 2012; Rahman et. al, 2009). However, the cited studies only focused on the English language needs of international postgraduate students at a public tertiary institution. Furthermore, no studies have addressed the English Language needs of postgraduate students in Muamalat. Hence, the study attempted at narrowing the gap by identifying the English language needs of local and international postgraduate students in Muamalat at selected tertiary institutions in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent studies on English Language needs for postgraduate studies have been carried out since 2006. Most of the studies were carried out in the United States and Europe (Kim, 2006; Peters & Fernandez, 2013; Shin, 2008) while one study was carried out in Asia (al-Khasawneh, 2010). All of these studies involved postgraduate studies in Business (al-Khasawneh, 2010), Social Sciences (Kim, 2006), Engineering (Shin, 2008), and Architecture (Peters & Fernandez, 2013).

Various data collection methods have been used to study postgraduate students' English Language Needs. These studies utilized a quantitative method (Kim, 2006) while the remaining studies utilize a qualitative method (al-Khasawneh, 2010; Liyanage & Walker, 2014; Shin, 2008;), as well as mixed-method (Peters & Fernandez, 2013). Kim (2006), al-Khasawmeh (2010) and Peters and Fernandez (2013) focused on specific skills while Shin (2008) focused on general skills for postgraduate studies. For data collection, these researchers used the survey method (Kim, 2006), semi structured interviews (al-Khasawneh, 2010; Liyanage & Walker, 2014; Shin, 2008), and questionnaires and case studies (Peters & Fernandez, 2013).

The findings from these studies indicated that social sciences postgraduate students in the United States need strong listening and oral skills for academic purposes, such as participation in whole-class discussion (Kim, 2006) while Shin (2008) found that Korean postgraduate Engineering students need to be skillful in all four English skills. Shin (2008) also found that learning new terms or specialized vocabulary in Engineering is necessary. Futhermore, postgraduate Engineering students require knowledge in the discipline of engineering which includes writing rules and convention. Hence the English Language skills for postgraduate studies are specific and academic oriented.

While English is thought to be needed for social interactions, this is not true in the context of postgraduate students. Kim (2006) found that postgraduate students do not need English for social interactions as oral interactions are confined within classrooms. In other words, there is no after-class interactions required for academic purposes.

The problems in academic writing among postgraduate candidates have also been investigated. al-Khasawneh (2010) investigated the academic writing problems faced by Arab postgraduate students at a Malaysian university which involved 10 Arab students in the Business Studies. He found that the postgraduate students had issues in academic English writing particularly in vocabulary, grammar, spelling, organization of ideas and referencing. Hence, academic writing skills cannot be ignored for postgraduate studies.

Peters and Fernandez (2013) investigated the lexical needs of postgraduate students in Architecture. Their study involved 110 postgraduate Spanish speaking Architecture students in Spain. These postgraduate students faced problems in common scientific and academic vocabularies of higher education including uses of everyday words. To overcome this problem, the students preferred to use bilingual dictionaries although they can make use of monolingual

English dictionaries for lexical meaning. To conclude, postgraduate students do have limited vocabulary especially the ones that are not specific to their academic specialization.

Conflicts between Asian and Western EAP practices have also been investigated. Liyanage and Walker (2014) who investigated Australian teacher educators' perception towards Asian EAP practices at an Australian University found that Asian EAP practices are considered inadequate in the Australian context. Australian postgraduate instructors believed that graduates of Australian universities should possess skills in line with Western EAP values. This implies that writing conventions which vary across disciplines also vary across cultures.

In postgraduate studies, IT literacy is essential. Postgraduate students used the internet for material sourcing for various purposes including assignment writing and presentation preparation. This is due to the development of ICT which has changed the way information is disseminated (Katabalwa, 2016).

Bitchner and Basturkmen (2006) in their studies suggested that postgraduate students should be aware on the correct ways in writing thesis as it reflects students' investment of time and effort as well as his or her understanding of the literature on the topic of the research and on research methodology in general.

METHODOLOGY

Interview Participants

Semi-structured individual interviews were held with five (5) interview participants who were lecturers and postgraduate students from higher learning institutions in the Klang Valley region. Among the lecturer participants, one (1) was a postgraduate programme coordinator cum lecturer while another two (2) were instructors cum supervisors of Islamic Finance and Management respectively. Both instructors had had experience in teaching and supervising postgraduate candidates from the Muamalat specialisation.

For the student participants, one (1) was a postgraduate student in Islamic Banking and Finance, UKM and one (1) was a postgraduate student in Muamalat, KUIS.

The purposive sampling method was utilized to select the interview participants. The selected lecturer participants must at least meet two of the following criteria:

1. Taught courses.
2. Years of teaching experience related to postgraduate programmes in Muamalat.
3. Experience in academic supervision.

The selected student participants were postgraduate students who specialized in the field of Muamalat and its sub-disciplines.

Interview Questions

The interview questions adopted in this research were adapted from Bitchener (2006) and Hyland (2006). These questions were aimed to obtain input on the English language needs of the respective postgraduate students, particularly the tasks and activities which require the use of English (TSA), factors which may influence learning (LSA), and problems and weaknesses in the use of English in their academic studies (PSA).

Both interview questions and the Needs Analysis questionnaire were validated by an applied linguist from a Malaysian university to ensure the validity and reliability as well as trustworthiness of the instruments.

Research Procedure
The interviews were recorded with an audio recorder after the participants indicated their consent on a form. The interviews were then transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis
The data obtained from the interviews were analysed and categorised using content analysis. Content analysis is an appropriate method in determining the themes for data analysis. The analysis utilized Atlas.ti software version 8.0 as it allowed the researchers to:

1. locate the location of the respective theme in the interview transcription.
2. develop a coding system for data analysis.

FINDINGS

Learning Situation Analysis (LSA)
The interviews carried out with instructors indicated that journals, textbooks and cases (taken from textbooks) were frequently used in class. This suggests that journals and textbooks were among the most useful while E-books were the least useful to enhance their English in their postgraduate studies. The excerpts from the interviews are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview Excerpts on Usefulness of Learning Resources

Participant	Interview Excerpts esponse
Participant 1	*'Benchmark pada international journal…'*
Participant 2	'All the cases would be in English.'
	'External materials as well as in the books'

Present Situation Analysis (PSA)
Table 2 presents the interview excerpts on the importance of English in the postgraduate studies in Muamalat. The participants agreed that they needed to know English. They also believed that postgraduate candidates need to be able to communicate in English. For reading and comprehending English text, the participants felt that they needed to possess the skill. Finally, on the ability to write grammatically correct English, one interview participant also indicated the need for the postgraduate candidates in Muamalat to write grammatically correct sentences in English.

Table 2: Interview Excerpts on the Importance of English for Postgraduate Studies in Muamalat

Participant	Interview Excerpts
Participant 1	'For sure 'it' (English) is important…'
Participant 2	*'Ok, sebelum ini memang penting, sebenanrnya memang penting. Kalau dalam MQA pun, dia (English) Bahasa pengantar untuk kelas, so memang Bahasa Inggeris.'*
Participant 3	*'Because you have this kind of problems, that's why the statement is confusing. …you know, you are PHD student so you shouldn't have this kind of problem'*

Table 3 presents the interview excerpts on the important English language skills in postgraduate studies in Muamalat. According to participant two, the most important skill is speaking, followed by reading and finally writing while participant one indicated that the most important skill is speaking followed by writing. The excerpts suggest that the four skills namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening are important in postgraduate studies in Muamalat.

Table 3: Interview Excerpts on the Important English Language Skills in Postgraduate Studies

Participant	Interview Excerpts
Participant 1	*'terutamanya dari aspek komunikasi … kalau mostly dalam coursework, … kita tengok dalam segi penulisan dia.'*
Participant 2	*'speaking, reading and writing…'*
Participant 3	*'I think all the four skills are important.'*

Table 4 shows the excerpts on the respondents' opinion on the English Language. The participants viewed English as important in postgraduate studies in Muamalat.

Table 4: Interview Excerpts on the Respondents' Opinion on the English Language

Participant	Interview Excerpts
Participant 2	*''Of course lah. For sure it is important…'*
Participant 3	*'Oh, definitely is important…'*

Table 5 shows the participants' opinions on the English language skills that need more practice. They felt that they needed more speaking practice and writing.

Table 5: Interview Excerpts on the English Skills that Needs More Practice

Participant	Interview Excerpts
Participant 3	*'… like they mispronounce.'* *'Some students do not master the writing style.'*

Target Situation Analysis (TSA)

Table 6 shows the interview excerpts on the english language needs for postgraduate studies in Muamalat. All in all, the excerpts suggest the needs for the mastery of academic writing and oral communication skills.

Table 6: Interview Excerpts on the English Language Needs for Postgraduate Studies in Muamalat

Participant	Interview Excerpts
Participant 1	*('Students write assignment in) English'*
Participant 2	*'Ya, oral (communication)'*
Participant 3	*'Writing style'*

Discussion

Firstly, the findings imply that postgraduate students in the field of Muamalat needed the proficiency level adequate for postgraduate studies in Muamalat. Hence, more practice is necessary for such students before and while pursuing their academic programmes in the discipline.

Secondly, the researchers feel that there is no resistance to the use of English in postgraduate studies. This is because the respondents indicated their awareness on the importance of English in the discipline of Muamalat.

Finally, postgraduate students in Muamalat are in a world where knowledge is borderless. As the learning materials are accessible from all over the world, thanks to the internet, the students encounter writings from scholars from different countries and disciplines. The availability of such materials provides a rich learning resource for both English language instructors and postgraduate students in Muamalat both for teaching and learning purposes.

CONCLUSION

English is crucial for the postgraduate candidate in Muamalat to succeed in their studies. This is due to the fact that the English language is the primary medium of instruction for teaching and learning. They participants indicated that postgraduate students in the field of Muamalat needed to learn more on the language skills expecially speaking and writing. Finally, online materials play a central role in the teaching and learning process for postgraduate students in Muamalat.

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