

**WRITING FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES: PROBLEMS FACED
BY ARAB POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS OF THE COLLEGE OF
BUSINESS, UUM**

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating the academic writing problems of the Arab postgraduate students of the College of Business at Universiti Utara Malaysia and to provide solutions to these problems. For this purpose, four research questions were posed and the answers to these questions were provided and discussed. The data for the study were collected via (face-to-face) interviews. The informants of this study were postgraduate students from the College of Business at Universiti Utara Malaysia for the academic year 2008-2009. The findings of the study revealed that the students faced problems in relation to vocabulary register, organization of ideas, grammar, spelling, and referencing.

Introduction

Nowadays, English plays an important role in education and students are expected to communicate effectively in institutions where English is the medium of instruction. Learners face the task of mastering content area in subjects such as mathematics, social studies, science, and business which are taught in the target language (English). In such cases, teaching and learning of English can help the students to deal successfully with their academic demands and to perform successfully in their disciplines and professional contexts (Adams & Keene, 2000).

In the academic context, Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) point out that the students are required to produce specific writing genres such as essay, summary, critical review, and research paper. However, focus on the distinguishing regularities of structure of different text types can help learners build a repertoire of the organization and the relevant language forms of different genres. It can also make learners aware of the socio-linguistic role that texts play in particular discourse communities.

In postgraduate studies in Malaysia, as pointed out by Baskaran (1983), English plays a vital role in helping to initiate students into the academic community in acquiring not only the language proficiency necessary but the specific genres pertaining to these communities.

Like any second language learners, Arab learners face many problems in acquiring English. Many studies (Abbad, 1988; Hisham, 2008; Rabab`ah, 2003; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984) have been conducted in the Arab world to investigate the problems of acquiring English among Arab learners. Zughoul and Taminian (1984: 4) found that “Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English.” Rabab`ah (2003) emphasized that there were problems of acquiring English among Arab learners because of formal instruction by language teachers who are native speakers of Arabic. Another reason given by Rabab`ah (2003) was the limited opportunities Arab learners have to learn English through natural interaction in English since they only encounter native speakers of English who come to the Arab world as tourists. Hisham (2008) investigated the problems that Arab students of business might have at University

Utara Malaysia. He found that those students face problems in vocabulary register, grammar, and referencing.

Abbad (1988: 15) admits the weakness of Yemeni learners of English, and he states that “in spite of the low proficiency level in English of most applicants (Yemeni learners), they are accepted into the English department.” In most of the Arab universities, high school graduates are still accepted to pursue a program, such as English Studies, in spite of their weaknesses in that language. Arab learners find it difficult to communicate freely in English. Abbad (1988) mentions that their problems are due to the inappropriate methods of language teaching and the learning environment which some judge are unsuitable for learning a foreign language.

The students appeared to have many problems when writing in English, like not knowing how to organize their ideas, because it is a new experience for them. For students to succeed in a foreign language generally, and writing skills specifically, they need to surround themselves in a language learning environment. In the case of the Arab world, Arab learners have little opportunities to use the foreign language in their society. As a result, many problems occur when they study at a university where the medium of instruction is a foreign language like English.

Literature Review

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is divided into English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). It aims to prepare students, in a relatively short period of time, to communicate, read, and write better so they can work

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appropriately and successfully in certain activities. In order to achieve this goal, ESP activities have to be presented in context because context is the central idea of ESP. The other point that has to be taken into consideration in teaching ESP is to use authentic materials; this will lead the students to acquire what they need to develop for their jobs (Hutchinson & Waters 1987). According to Dudley-Evans (2001), the absolute characteristics of ESP are:

- ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learners.
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the specialization it serves.
- It is centered not only on the language (grammar, lexis, register), but also on the skills, discourses and genres appropriate to those activities.

English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)

EOP can be grouped into business English, professional English (e.g. English for doctors, lawyers) and vocational English (e.g. English for tourism, aviation, and nursing).

Several studies (Flanegin and Rudd, 2000; Goffman, 1979; Pakir, 1999, Puvenesvary, 2003) have been conducted on the importance of English in the occupational fields. Flanegin and Rudd (2000) discuss the need and importance of English skills in all professions. In addition, they emphasize on the importance of communication skills in the business and management fields by suggesting some solutions to enable students to be good communicators in business majors. Goffman (1979) indicates that business negotiations are carried out and letters are usually written in English. This sometimes discomforts those whose first language is not English.

The use of English is even more widespread because of the business-environment revolution. In fact, Pakir (1999) points out that the spread of English is most likely to continue because of the rapid spread of telecommunication, mass communication, business, and internet links. Thousands of international non-native to non-native communication and deals are undertaken daily in a huge number of settings: trade, diplomacy, tourism, journalism, science and technology, politics etc. As a result, there is a need to ensure there are competent writers and speakers of English. Puvenesvary (2003) reveals the importance of being a competent writer of English in the banking sector in Malaysia and the consequences of poorly-written business letters to clients.

Methodologies for Teaching Writing for Academic Purposes

Prior to discussing the theories related to writing for academic purposes, a few studies will be highlighted in relation to writing problems (Arndt, 1987; Badger and White, 2000; Davies, 1988; Hyland, 2003; Jordan, 1997; Kambal, 1980; Myles, 2002; Paltridge, 2001; Silva, 1990; Smith, 1982; Swale, 1990; Tribble, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; and Zughoul and Husain, 1985).

Kambal (1980) analyzed errors in three types of free composition written by first year Sudanese university students. The study took into consideration the major syntactic errors made by these students in the verb phrase and the noun phrase. Also, Kambal (1980) reported that the three main types of errors made in the verb phrase are verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement. He discussed errors in tense within five categories: tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses.

The findings of this study reveal that the third-person singular marker was used redundantly, and they also revealed the use of the incorrect form of verb *to be*.

Zughoul and Husain (1985) point out that the lack of lexical variety, subordination, and their heavy reliance on redundancy that does not add any new information to the text are the main problems learners have in writing skills. As a result, L2 practitioners are still in search of a coherent, comprehensive theory of the teaching of writing. The major writing theories proposed in the literature are product, process, and genre.

Product Approach

According to Silva (1990), the product theory of writing highlights form and syntax and it emphasizes rhetorical drills. The product theory focuses on the written product rather than on how the learner should approach the process of writing. In this theory, writing concerns the knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development is the result of the imitation of input (Badger and White, 2000). In addition, Arndt (1987) argues that the importance of imitation and a model in this theory are not only for imitation but also for exploration of analysis. Similarly Myles (2002) confirms that if the students are not exposed to written model texts, their errors in writing are more likely to subsist. In fact, Jordan (1997) indicates that the students are required to focus on a model, form, and duplication. In other words, the students study model texts and attempt various exercises that enable them to draw attention to relevant features of a text, and then replicate them in their own writing.

Process Approach

Another theory which was proposed in order to teach writing is the process theory. Hyland (2003) indicates that the process theory focuses on how a text is written instead of the final outcome. He adds, the process theory has a major influence on understanding the nature of writing and the way writing is taught. Therefore, the process theory emphasizes on the importance of certain procedures such as pre-writing, drafting, evaluating, and revising. He pointed out that the process theory would involve introducing techniques that help the students identify and engage a topic; students are required to show multiple drafts of a work. After discussion and feedback from evaluators, the students would revise the drafts. Rewriting, revision, and editing are essential parts to writing in this theory

In a similar vein, Jordan (1997) states that process writing enables the students to make clearer decisions about the direction of their writing by certain procedures such as discussion, tasks, drafting, feedback, and informed choices. The advantage in adopting the process theory is in updating the importance of the cyclical and recursive nature of writing that is employed by native writers where 'ordinarily pre-writing, writing, and re-writing frequently seem to be going on simultaneously' (Smith, 1982: 104).

Tribble (1996) explains the process-based approach in teaching academic writing. He says that the students first brainstorm in small groups the topic to be discussed in writing; this helps them to generate ideas before starting to write. This is followed by gathering an outline of the essay and individually writing its first draft. Students revise their first drafts

and give them to other students for peer-reviewing and commenting on. The final stage is editing the essay by the writer himself/herself to eliminate all language errors. Thus, this approach focuses on process rather than product.

Genre Approach

The genre theory in writing emphasizes on the social context in which writing is produced (Badger and White, 2000). Swales (1990) explains that the genre theory is a class of communicative events and that the members of the communicative events share some set of communicative purposes which are identified by the expert members. In the academic context, the experts will be the lecturers who are teaching the various subjects. As claimed by Davies (1988), students, teachers, and subject tutors are all involved in the written language for a selected field of study and the forms of expression permitted within the field. Davies (1988: 131) suggests that the students, in aiming to attain academic success ‘somehow discover the criteria by which the different genres they produce are assessed.’ He seems to suggest that the criteria are not made explicit to students.

Swales (1990) emphasizes the genre-based approach in teaching academic writing. He focuses on analyzing communicative purposes of the text read by learners and the means used by the writers of these texts to reach such purposes. In this approach, the students learn to write their own texts trying to achieve similar communicative purposes by way of choosing the most suitable and expressive language means for that.

Flowerdew (2002) views the genre approach as a dynamic approach which varies across time, across disciplines, and across instructors in the disciplines. Thus, the aim of the genre approach in writing is to help students master the conventions of a particular form of genre that is relevant to their specific situation. This approach requires collaboration with instructors from the disciplines, which may not always be possible (Flowerdew, 2002).

It is important for the teachers to have cooperation with the students, with the teacher taking an authoritative role to support learners as they move towards their potential level of performance. Similarly, Paltridge (2001) proposes a framework that involves exploring the texts and contexts of students-target situation, enabling reflection on writing practices, exploiting texts from various types of genre and creating mixed genre portfolios.

The Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the current study are:

- To investigate the types of writing carried out by Arab postgraduate students in the business programs at the College of Business at UUM.
- To investigate the writing problems that Arab postgraduate students face in their business programs at UUM.
- To find out the causes of the writing problems among Arab postgraduate students of business programs at UUM.
- To suggest some solutions to solve the writing problems among Arab postgraduate students in the business programs at UUM

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the types of writing carried out by Arab postgraduate students in the business programs at UUM?
2. What are the problems faced by the Arab postgraduate students of the business programs at UUM in relation to writing skills?
3. What are the causes of the writing problems among the Arab postgraduate students of the business programs at UUM?
4. How to overcome the writing problems faced by Arab postgraduate students of the business programs at UUM?

Subjects

The informants for this study were 10 Arab postgraduate students in the business programs of COB who are doing their master's degree by coursework at Universiti Utara Malaysia. The informants have sat for the UUM English Language Placement Test and only three have passed this test. The informants are 5 Jordanians, 2 Iraqis, 2 Libyans, and 1 Yemeni. The age of the informants range from 25 to 40 (see table 3.1). The original names of the students have been replaced with fictitious names in line with research ethics in keeping the identity of the informants confidential.

Research Instrument

This is a qualitative study and the researcher used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Gray (2004) indicates that the reasons for choosing qualitative methods for collecting data are: the need to attain highly personalized data, there are opportunities for

probing, a good return rate, and helps the respondents if they have difficulties with written language.

Research Design

This study is a qualitative study and it utilized semi-structured interviews in a face-to-face interaction to explore the students' beliefs and thoughts about certain topics, this is in line with Lynch's (1996) view that, the use of semi-structured interviews enhances the understanding of the data and makes the data collection more systematic as compared to the informal conversational approach.

Findings and Discussion

The findings reported in the next section are based on the four questions posed in the students' interviews.

Writing Types in the Business Programs

It was found that the business students interviewed were required to write several types of academic texts: project papers, article reviews, summaries, reports, article critiques, proposals, comparative analyses, book reviews, essays, and case studies (see table 1).

Table 1: Writing tasks in the business programs

Interview Q1: what type of writing do you carry out in your program?	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total (n=10)
Projects	1	-	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	8

Article Reviews	1	1	1	-	1	-	1	1	1	-	7
Summaries	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	3
Reports	-	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	1	1	8
Article critiques	1	-	1	1	1	-	1	1	1	-	7
Proposals	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Comparative Analysis	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	2
Book Reviews	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
Essays for Exams	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Case Studies	-	1	1	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	4

S=student

As revealed by the study, students of the business programs are required to produce various genres of academic writing such as projects, article reviews, summaries, reports, article critiques, proposals, comparative analyses, book reviews, essays, and case studies. This is because these' tasks require students to employ their critical thinking skills, read widely, and apply what they have learnt in their courses. This list of tasks provided partially concurs with the findings of Barbara et al. (1996) who pointed out that reports,

proposals, and projects are the most frequently written business tasks performed by business students.

The identified tasks can provide English language instructors insights into selecting and implementing tasks for the English for Business courses. Teachers and curriculum developers can create business English courses based on the results of the needs analysis carried out in the study. Thus, teachers and curriculum developers can give special attention to tasks like projects and reports in the language courses, so that students can be well versed in these tasks. This is in line with the view of St. John (1996) and Chew (2005) who claimed that frequent target tasks can offer a tentative foundation for choosing and implementing tasks for the targeted Business English Communication course.

Problems with the Writing Tasks

It was found that while carrying out their writing tasks, the business students face problems in vocabulary, grammar, organization of ideas, spelling, and referencing (see table 2).

Table 2: Problems with writing tasks in the business programs

Interview Q.2: What are the problems you face in carrying out the writing tasks?	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total (n=10)
Vocabulary Problems (VP)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
Register (VR)	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
General (VG)	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	1	-	7

Capacity (VC)	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Paraphrasing (P)	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	2
Expressing Ideas (EI)	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	3
Grammatical Problems (GP) Prepositions (GPP) Articles (GPA) Tenses (GPT) Word order	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	1	1	-	8
Organization of ideas	-	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	3
Spelling	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Referencing APA Style (RS) Ignorant (RI)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1

As shown in this study, the postgraduate students of the COB programs at UUM have problems in English academic writing. The major problem that the students mentioned is vocabulary. This is because a reasonable vocabulary size is needed for students to function effectively in their programs. This concurs with Coxhead & Nation (2001) who stated that approximately 2,000 words are seen in most uses of the English language. The standard list of these words is the General Service List (GSL) of English Words. The GSL is divided into two parts, the first one is GS1 which contains 1,000 words and the second part is GS2 which also contains 1,000 words. GS1 covers about 77% of academic texts and GS2 25%. The first category contains words that frequently appear in academic texts regardless of subject areas, but they are not common in non-academic materials. As

a result, learners have to learn the words in the GS2 so that they would have less difficulty in pursuing their postgraduate studies.

In addition, Rabab`ah (2003) pointed out that the students often lack the necessary vocabulary when they are engaged in authentic communicative situations such as writing and speaking. As a result, the students will be unable to express their ideas freely and accurately because of their limited vocabulary. These difficulties can be solved by offering more discipline-specific reading courses in order to improve the students' vocabulary size and depth to help them in their academic writing. Also, the students become aware of what to expect in their academic disciplines. This is in line with Kasper's (2000) view that by providing materials that concentrate on content, the students can be aware of the concepts, audience, and the purpose of their academic disciplines.

Moreover, the findings of the current study revealed that the students face difficulties in grammar. Grammar is extremely important in conveying accurate messages. Key grammatical forms include tenses, voices, modals, articles, nominalization, and logical connectors (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Therefore, it is advisable to restrict these forms and create materials which enable the students to progress in their academic writing. This coincides with Hutchinson & Waters (1987), who emphasized on identifying the grammatical forms and produced materials that took these forms as their syllabus. Allen & Widdowson (1974) stated that the students' needs could be only met by

a course that develops the knowledge of how sentences are combined together to make meanings.

Another problem, which has been mentioned, was the problem of referencing. Writing references according to certain conventions (APA, IEEE, etc) helps the students to be scholarly writers and trains them in academic integrity. Using certain computer programs such as the End-Note program could help the students to achieve that purpose. As such, COB should conduct training sessions for students to use that kind of program which is available in the UUM library.

Causes of Writing Problems

It was found that the students attributed their problems in English to their weak foundation, environment, and methods of teaching English in their countries. Weak foundation is related to the status of English, the students' motivation to learn English, and the teachers' lack of interest. Environmental reasons include the use of the mother tongue, few opportunities to practice English, and isolated culture. On the other hand, methods of teaching English included the medium of instruction, using Arabic in English classes, writing done in Arabic, teachers' low proficiency in English, and lack of writing practice in educational institutions (see Table 3).

Table 3: Causes of problems in writing tasks in the business programs

Interview Q3: Why do you think you have these problems in writing?	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total (n=10)
Weak Foundation (WF)	1	1	1	1	-	1	1	1	1	-	8
Status of English	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Motivation	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	2
Teachers' Lack of interest	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	4
Environment	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	1	-	1	8
Mother tongue	-	1	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	6
Few opportunities to practice English	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	2
Isolated culture	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Methods of teaching English	1	1	-	-	1	1	1	1	1	-	7
Medium of instruction	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	3
Writing done in Arabic	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	4
Teachers' low proficiency	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Using Arabic in English classes	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Lack of practice writing in educational institutions	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	-	4

Suggestions to overcome Academic Writing Problems

Some suggestions were provided by the informants to improve their writing skills. Most of them emphasized the role of COB, others emphasized the learners' roles, and some concentrated on the teachers' roles, and the writing development process (see table 4.4).

Table 4.4: Suggestions from the informants to overcome academic writing problems

Interview Q4: How do you think you can improve your Academic Writing skills?	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total (n=10)
Learner Autonomy (LA)	-	1	1	-	-	1	1	1	-	-	5
Reading Extensively	-	1	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	3
Extra Classes	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	3
Teachers' Role (TR)	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	5
Speak simple English	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Use multiple techniques	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
Correct students' errors	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Increase the number of writing tasks		1		1	1						
College Role (CR)	-	-	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Discipline specific materials	-	-	1	1	1	1	1	-	1	1	7
Discipline specific English test	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1

The students pointed out that teachers play an important role in improving their academic writing skills. They suggested that teachers ought to correct the students' grammatical errors. This coincides with Gocsik (1997) who argued that dealing with the students' grammatical errors, as they arise in students' writing is helpful. By doing so, it helps to build students' awareness of the different types of grammatical errors they are making and encourage them to check their errors by using grammar handbooks.

Moreover, the students proposed that teachers should employ multiple teaching techniques in order to improve students' academic writing. Using some fun activities like games and scrambled sentences would motivate the students' in learning English. This concurs with Ober (1992) who emphasized on including micro-writing activities that focus on the students' problems in writing and using activities that are simple and related to the students' academic disciplines.

The students also proposed that lecturers should increase the number of writing tasks. They believe that by doing so, they would strengthen their abilities in academic writing. In this way the students will be required to write some of the academic writing tasks, if these tasks were attached with the lectures' feedback. The students will be aware of their errors and will try to improve their academic writing after knowing their weak points. This is in line with Russell (1991) who suggested including more writing in discipline-specific courses because each discipline has its own terminologies of language use and style that can best be taught to students in the specific contexts of courses in the disciplines.

The students were aware that by providing discipline- specific English materials, they can develop their writing abilities. So, it is advisable for the college to initiate discipline-specific English classes where materials contain discipline specific register. It is recommended that the students take intensive English courses which are related to their academic disciplines. This is to help familiarize students with the writing demands of their disciplines. This is in line with Jordan (1997) who indicated that the students are required to focus on their academic genres and duplication. In other words, the students study genre texts and attempt various exercises that enable them to draw attention to relevant features of a text, and then replicate them in their own writing.

Conclusion

For the purpose of exploring the problems that Arab postgraduate students at COB might face, an investigation was carried out on the writing tasks that are carried out and the causes of these problems, and suggestions to overcome these problems were provided. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The findings of the current study may help the curriculum developers to improve the current curriculum of COB and design Business English courses that could meet learners' needs and wants. This coincides with Dudley-Evans (2001) who views ESP as a means to meet the specific needs of the learners. The ESP practitioners can utilize the findings of the study to design ESP courses which deals with the academic writing process.. Eventually, the findings of this study could also be used to improve the teaching methodologies that are used by English language teachers and content specialists. There must be cooperation between the business and the English faculties. This concurs with Bacha & Bahous (2008) who emphasized on cooperative teaching between different faculties based on content needs.

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ESP World, Issue 2 (28), Volume 9, 2010, <http://www.esp-world.info>

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