Perceptions of Challenges in Writing Academically: Iranian Postgraduate Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

Academic writing skills are essential tools that postgraduate students reading for their doctoral degree have to master to be able to produce dissertations, research reports and academic assignments of quality in the course of their studies; and publish research-based articles in established journals. This paper discusses the perceptions of a group of Iranian postgraduate students pursuing their doctoral degrees at UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia) on the challenges they face in writing academically. They provided the data for this paper via their responses to a survey. The findings indicate that these postgraduate students perceived some academic writing skills to be more challenging than the others. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of the findings; and recommendations on how the situation can be improved.

Keywords: academic writing, perceptions, challenges, tertiary education, postgraduate students

1. Introduction

Many international students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds pursuing their postgraduate studies at institutions of higher learning abroad (Lea & Street, 2006; Hyland, 2008; Turner, 2011) are expected to be versatile and flexible to cope with the demands of their studies; and living in a foreign country. One of the prerequisite crucial requirements is for these students to be competent in writing academically (Pecorari, 2006) in the English language (the medium of instruction in most public universities abroad) to succeed in conducting their research and reporting the research findings in the form of a dissertation/thesis and disseminating the findings to society to expand the frontiers of knowledge to a wider context via publication in august journals. These budding scholars can share their ideas and findings from their research effectively only if they have the ability to write well academically.

In writing academically, postgraduate students are required to integrate a number of higher level skills such as organizing ideas into logical order, paraphrasing, summarizing and proofreading (Elton, 2010). To elaborate, prior to the production of the dissertation or any academic writing assignments, postgraduate students have to search for relevant information on data bases; read, screen, analyze and synthesize information gleaned from related texts and articles to support their stance and statements made in their writing. Furthermore, they are also expected to have a repertoire of appropriate vocabulary and to adhere to the standard academic writing convention in their writing.

Postgraduate students reading their doctoral degree at UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia) have to fulfill another requirement i.e. to publish two articles based on their research and dissertation in journals recognized by UPM well before they undertake the viva (oral examination) of their thesis. This requirement will ensure that novel research findings are shared and disseminated to the public and enhance the academic standing and reputation of both the author and UPM (Kamler & Thomson, 2006a). To be able to do this, postgraduate students have to be competent in academic writing skills, otherwise good ideas will be obscured by weak writing.

Iranian postgraduate students studying in various disciplines at UPM may have problems to fulfill the academic writing requirement for their dissertation as well as in producing two research-based journal articles, due to the disparity in their formal educational background in Iran and the expectations UPM place on its postgraduate students: to excel in their studies and to publish their research in reputable journals.

English has been taught through teacher-centric approach and autocratic learning style (Naji Meidani & Pishghadam, 2012) at all levels of education in Iran. Iranian learners learn English formally from the middle school level onward (Ghorbani, 2009; Atai & Dashtestani, 2013) with the purpose of acquiring basic English language proficiency. From middle school level to tertiary level, in learning English, the emphasis has always been on rote learning of grammar, vocabulary development and reading comprehension (Naji Meidani & Pishghadam, 2012; Karimnia, 2013) Iranian

learners receive very little exposure or no exposure at all in speaking, writing and communication skills. Their training in rote learning rather than in thinking critically to acquire knowledge (Kamler & Thomson, 2006a) in Iran may not stand them in good stead for their doctoral studies at UPM. For instance, in doing the literature review, they may be able to provide extensive literature which may not be coherent or critical (Mohd Riji, Syed Tajuddin, & Ahmad, 2013). Their non-existence training in writing (let alone writing academically) will make it difficult for them to develop and express their ideas succinctly in writing (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006).

To date, to the researchers' knowledge, no study has been conducted to investigate the challenges Iranian postgraduate students face in writing academically in English to produce their dissertation and academic assignments. This fact has given the researchers the impetus to research this topic from the postgraduate perspectives.

This research aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are Iranian postgraduate students' perceptions of academic writing?
2. What are these postgraduate students' perceptions of the challenges of writing academically.

2. The Study

The fieldwork of the study was conducted at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), a premier research university in Malaysia as it has many Iranian postgraduate students studying in various disciplines at its 16 faculties. 52 Iranian postgraduate students reading for their doctoral degrees in various fields of studies at the university voluntarily participated in the study. Their level of English language proficiency ranged from intermediate to very good. All of them have passed the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) examination in at the very least Band 6, thus fulfilling the minimum English language proficiency requirement of the university. The 52 participants were those who responded to the researchers' invitation via the Iranian postgraduate website to participate in the study.

The instrument used in the study was a survey. It was used to gauge the participants' perceptions towards the significance of academic writing in relation to their studies currently, their career in the future and publishing their findings in reputable journals. The survey was an adaptation of a survey formulated by Evans and Green (2007) and consisted of 15 essential academic writing skills which were categorized into two parts namely i) general academic writing; and ii) language related skills that can affect the participants' clarity in writing. The 52 participants had to respond to a 1-5 range Likert-type scale of rating with range [1] to denote 'very easy' to range [5] to denote 'very difficult'. Data obtained from the survey were analyzed statistically using SPPS.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings from the survey indicate that these Iranian postgraduate students have positive perception of academic writing. The findings demonstrate that these postgraduate students had high level of i) intrinsic motivation to learn academic writing (Mean = 4.37, SD = 0.56); ii) extrinsic motivation to master academic writing skills in order to perform in their doctoral dissertations, writing research papers and academic assignments related to their studies, well (Mean = 4.50, SD = 0.50); and iii) extrinsic motivation to master academic writing and academic writing convention, to enable them to publish articles based on their dissertations in reputable journals (Mean = 4.50, SD = 0.66) recognized by Universiti Putra Malaysia, while still pursuing their studies at the university.

Considering that reputable journals will only publish high quality articles with sound contribution to the realm of knowledge; and adhering to the standard academic writing convention and individual publishers' house-style, getting their articles published in such journals would strongly showcase these postgraduate students' academic writing prowess.

Additionally, publishing in these journals ahead of their graduation would help them to fulfill the minimum requirement of publishing two articles based on their dissertations in established journals. Ability to prove that they have fulfilled part of the requirement of their doctoral studies will help them to ace their *viva* (oral examination of their dissertations) too. These postgraduate students scored low (M = 3.26, SD = 0.94) in learning academic writing for future careers, could be due to the fact that for the duration of their studies, these postgraduate students would like to focus on completing their studies and graduating first before venturing out to other aspects of writing. The findings delineated here have answered RQ1 regarding Iranian postgraduate students' perceptions of academic writing.

Details of the findings to answer RQ2: Iranian postgraduate students' perceptions of challenges in writing academically are tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1. Means of Perceived Difficulty of Academic Writing Skills

	Question	Means of Difficulty	SD
General academic writing skills (M = 2.91)	"Writing introductions"	3.84	0.78
	"Searching for relevant literature using databases and library resources"	2.21	0.54
	"Referring to sources"	1.84	0.61
	"Reviewing and critiquing the previous research and creating a research space (gap)"	3.90	0.57
	"Designing the research methods"	2.66	0.71
	"discussions on the data"	3.68	0.81
	"Writing references / bibliography"	1.76	0.65
	"Writing conclusions"	3.39	0.53
Language-related skills (M = 3.60)	"Understanding the specific language features of the academic genre (such as writing research paper"	2.69	0.70
	"Using appropriate lexical phrases (such as *on the basis of*, *it should be noted that*) freely to build sentences and paragraphs"	3.58	0.72
	Summarizing / paraphrasing	3.72	0.77
	Writing coherent paragraphs	3.88	0.12
	Linking sentences smoothly	3.70	0.75
	Using proper "academic" language and vocabulary (style)	3.86	0.74
	Using the proper grammar such as correct tenses, agreements, reporting verbs	3.59	0.80

Data in Table 1 illustrate that these postgraduate students perceived that they encountered greater difficulty with language related skills (Mean = 3.60) compared to in handling general academic skills (Mean = 2.91). In the category of general academic writing skills, these students found that critiquing existing research in similar topic and determining the research gap in order to situate the research they are undertaking into the existing literature on the topic (Mean = 3.90) to be the most challenging skills to acquire. Three other general academic skills that are just as challenging to master, in their order of difficulty are writing the introduction (Mean = 3.84), discussing the findings (Mean = 3.68) and tying up the loose ends in the conclusion (Mean = 3.39).

Conversely, these postgraduate students have listed skills such as writing references / bibliography (Mean = 1.76), referring to sources (Mean 1.84), searching for relevant literature using databases and library sources (Mean = 2.21), and designing research methods (Mean = 2.66) to be the less daunting tasks for them to handle.

In the category of language related skills, these postgraduate students perceived only one skill i.e. understanding the specific language features of the academic genre (Mean = 2.69) to be manageable. They perceived the other six language related skills i.e. writing paragraphs coherently (Mean = 3.88), using proper academic language and vocabulary style (Mean = 3.86), summarizing / paraphrasing sentences (Mean = 3.72), linking sentences smoothly (Mean = 3.70), using proper grammar (Mean = 3.59), and using appropriate lexical phrases to build sentences and paragraphs to be very challenging. These findings have answered RQ2 and indicate the areas that these Iranian postgraduate students have difficulty in, in fulfilling the requirement of their doctoral studies, in relation to academic writing skills from their perspectives.

These postgraduate students perceived that they have difficulty with general academic writing skills could be due to these skills deal with higher level thinking; and these postgraduate students have not been formally exposed or only been given a cursory exposure to these skills, resulting in them not really able to grasp these skills effectively (Marshall, 1991; Kubota, 1998; Cai, 2013). However, their perception that general academic writing skills are easier to handle compared to language related skills could have stemmed from the fact that inadvertently, they have been 'practicing' these skills all the while in the course of doing their academic assignments. In a similar vein, the general academic writing skills that these postgraduate students perceived to be less challenging and thus manageable for them to handle could be due to their familiarity with them and these skills are in the lower order thinking category.

Ironically, these postgraduate students perception of the challenges posed by the language related skills (Evans & Green, 2007; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Ankawi, 2015) is contradictory to the fact that they have learned the English language formally for so long in Iran albeit via an autocratic and teacher-centric approach (Naji Meidani & Pishghadam, 2012). Thus, this finding should create awareness among those in authority in education in Iran to improve on the methods of teaching-learning the English language to enable their prospective scholars to cope with the challenges and demands of their universities of studies, particularly with regard to academic writing. For the Iranian

postgraduate students, hopefully, being aware of their weak areas in writing academically will make them to take the necessary measures to rectify this issue for their academic survival. Additionally, findings from this study should make UPM as the service provider for its international postgraduate students to realize of the needs for the university to investigate issues that its clients face in the course of their studies pertaining to the preparation of their dissertations, in order for UPM to provide adequate training in academic writing skills to all its research students.

4. Conclusion

This paper has delineated Iranian postgraduate students' perceptions of challenges in writing academically. As their perceptions can influence their actions pertaining to academic writing, and eventually the quality of their dissertations and articles for journals, those in authority at UPM should address this issue and rectify any weaknesses to ensure that these Iranian postgraduate students could overcome the challenges they have in writing academically and enable them to produce quality scholarly dissertations and articles sought after by established journals, making it a win-win situation for all the parties involved.

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