

Written Assignments from the Eyes of Academicians

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Abstract. Realizing the need for courses to equip learners at the tertiary level to be academically competent, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses are offered in many learning institution around the world. The course aims to help learners to competent members of the academic discourse community and responds to the learners' need to read texts and write different types of academic assignments in English. In view of the purpose of EAP courses, this study is set out to identify the perceptions and practices of academicians of different disciplines towards English second language (ESL) learners' written assignments. It employs a quantitative study by using a set of questionnaire. The results indicates the perception and practices in relation to the rules, organization and linguistic conventions of a written assignment. The finding from this study is beneficial to EAP course designers and also to the teaching staffs. This is because this study highlights what academicians from various disciplines require in a written assignment. It is also useful for learners where they are able to be better writers because they know what is required of them when submitting a written work.

Keywords: Written Assignment, Esl Writers, Academician's Perception.

1. Introduction

In the present era, in many parts of the world education is accessible to all. In Malaysia for example, there are many tertiary institutions available which are owned by either the government or private bodies in all the 14 states in Malaysia. Students' assessments are not completely exam-based thus they have to consistently complete their assignments and also writing dissertations. Thus, to succeed and to obtain a degree, it is crucial to be competent academic writers.

Academic writing can be written in any language however, the common language used is the English language. This is because English is seen as a primary language 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 role of English plays an important role in the 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 communication. Therefore, Malaysian tertiary institutions students need to be proficient in the English language as most of the academic resources or reference materials are only available in English. As a result, most undergraduate programs allow students to write their assignments in English.

In view of the role of English in tertiary institutions in Malaysia, a course such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is important. EAP is a course that was first designed to prepare foreign students who studied in an English speaking country with the language and also academic demands of the academic community. One of the main purposes of EAP courses is to ensure that students become competent members of the academic discourse community. Many applied linguists (Ellis, 1993; Flowerdew, 2000; Hyland, 2003) acknowledge that English is better learned in context and EAP courses have prepared the platform for this to happen. For non-native English speaker learners, an EAP course prepares them to study in an English medium academic environment and thus making this a need-driven course. Malaysian students at tertiary level are either ESL or EFL learners and the Malaysian education system does use English as a medium

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especially at the tertiary level. Strevens (1988) has characterized EAP courses as English language teaching which is specific to the learners' needs, relating to certain disciplines and activities, and focusing on specific language (syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics) and analyses of the specified discourses.

In EAP courses, it is acknowledged that academic text differs in terms of linguistic feature, citation feature and purpose across disciplines (Hyland, 2009; Bruce, 2011). Thus, EAP courses should cover different types of social, cognitive and linguistic knowledge that appears in various subjects across the disciplines. This supports Lea and Street's (1998) theory that 'even though they may have a common nomenclature (such as essay), the curriculum will vary greatly in their expectation because of the particular epidemiology of the different subject areas. An EAP syllabus should take into consideration these bodies of knowledge and expectations that are similar and also different across the disciplines.

Acknowledging the role and importance of EAP courses in an English second language (ESL) scenario, this present study investigates the perception and practices of academicians across disciplines. These findings will help EAP academicians to ensure that their teaching is relevant and appropriate to what is considered a piece of competent academic work by other academicians across various disciplines. This study also assists learners to be aware of what is required to be competent ESL academic writers.

2. Methodology

This study aims to highlight the views, beliefs and practices of lecturers of the characteristics of competent academic writing work using the quantitative research method. The quantitative method is used because it uses descriptive statistics. The purpose of descriptive statistics is to quantify the characteristics of the data. The instrument in this study is a set of questionnaire. The questionnaire has 3 sections which are respondent's background, perception on what is important in academic writing assignments and practices related to rule. The first section consists of open ended and also objective questions. Section B and C, however contain statements which respondents have to answer using the 5 Likert scale. The population sample was selected from the lecturers in University of Malaysia Sabah. The respondents were assured of their anonymity on this questionnaire and were informed that the purpose of the questionnaire was scholastic motives and the enrichment of the students; educational experience at the University of Malaysia Sabah. The data which was collected was analyzed by means of the application of a Likert scale and graphs were formulated demonstrating the most frequently occurring number of answers among the respondents. The population sample was ($N= 17$). The respondents were assured of their anonymity on this questionnaire and were informed that the purpose of the questionnaire was scholastic motives and the enrichment of the students' educational experience at University of Malaysia Sabah (UMS).

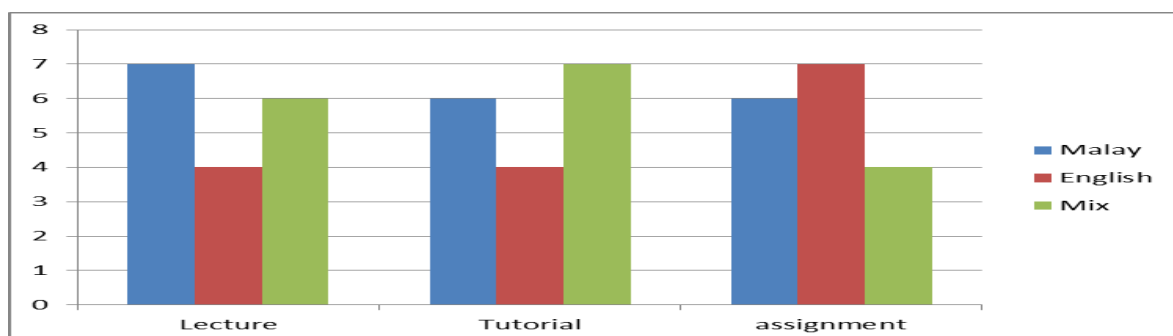
3. Result

3.1. Respondent Background

The questionnaire was distributed to 17 respondents comprising of 7 social sciences and 10 sciences lecturers. The social sciences lecturers were from the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences and the Centre of Promotional of Knowledge and Language Studies. The sciences lecturers were all from the Faculty of Science and Technology but from different departments; Physics, Geology and Chemistry.

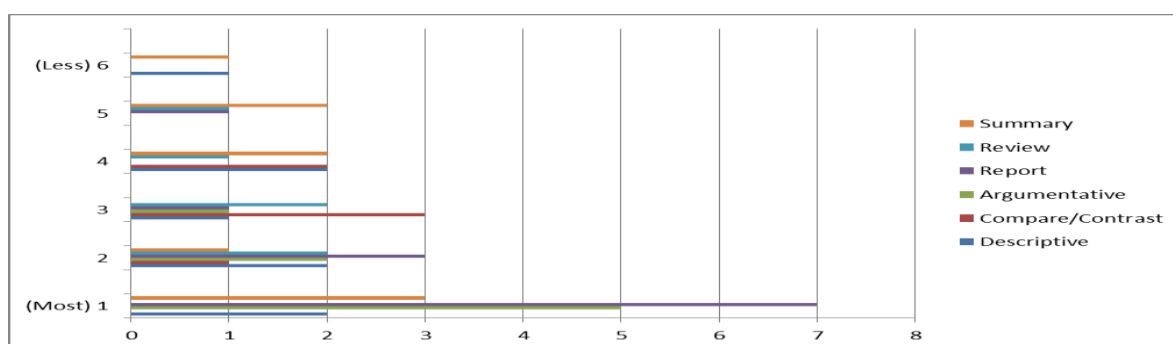
Table 1 shows the respondents use of language during lectures, tutorials and in students' written assignment. In view of the Malay language being the national language in Malaysia, 7 respondents used the language during lectures and 6 used it during tutorials. The English language was seen as less favoured with only 4 respondents using it during lectures and also tutorials. The use of both languages at the same time were favoured during tutorials with 7 respondents used both languages. However, when written assignments are concerned, the English language is most favoured by 7 respondents who stated that they require their students to write in English compared to 6 respondents favoured Malay and only 4 allowed the use of either Malay or English in students' written assignment.

Table 1: Respondent use of Language



Another important finding from these 17 respondents is the common written genre that they require their students to write. As indicated in Table 2, a list of 6 genres was listed and the respondents had to number the most commonly used genre is report and argumentative genre. The less common genres are summary and descriptive. Early research carried out on college writers discovered that successful written pieces which were submitted by students was dependent largely upon their representation of the writing task (Irvin, 2010). The writers' mental model for picturing their task made a huge difference. Writers need to understand and have a clear picture of what is needed to complete their writing. The picture which is related to the rules, organization and linguistic conventions needs to be considered by competent writers with regards to the given task. Thus, identifying the genre type is important in assisting ESL to be competent writers. Academic writing at tertiary level differs from writing at the high school level. In Malaysia, high school students would normally write descriptive and narrative stories with no need or minimal need to refer to the facts or evidence (Tan Kok Eng, 2006). Academic writing at tertiary level requires writers to present their ability of having the capacity to write in proper English. Academic writing also enables students to present their level of knowledge via the use of certain academic writing conventions and the citation of relevant reading materials.

Table 2: Written assignment genre

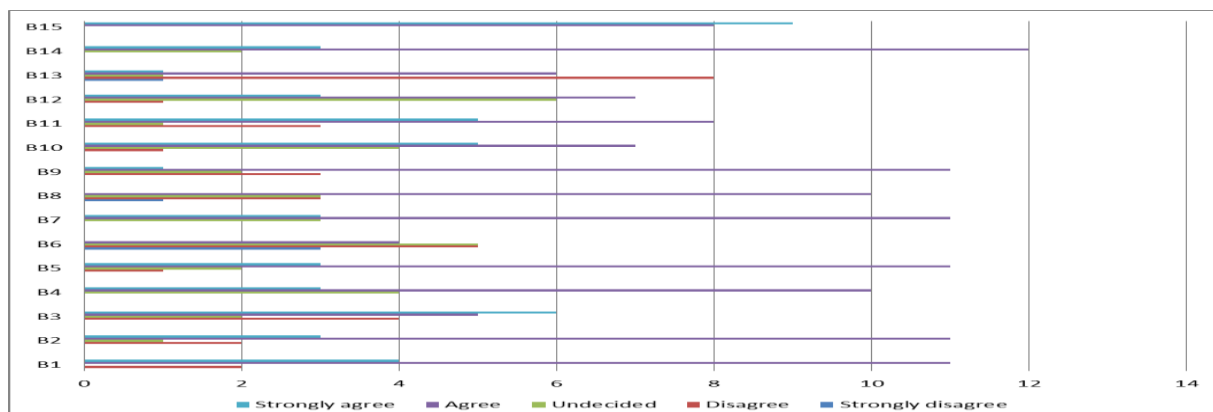


3.2. Perception on Important Aspects of Academic Writing Assignments

Section B of the questionnaire contained 15 statements related to perceptions towards, rules, organization and linguistic conventions in an academic writing assignment. The respondents had to evaluate the statements using the 5 likert-scale. Among the prominent findings are as follow:

- Content/facts are more important than language (11/17 agree) – Item B1 and B2
- Valid references/plagiarism/citation important (agree – strongly agree) – Item B3, B4, B8 and B15
- Organisation is important but not number of paragraph – Item B5, B6, B7 and B14
- 11/17 agrees that language is important when marking and for the use of contractions in writing 6/17 answered undecided – Item B9, B10, B11 and B12
- The common belief is that only content is important and it is not necessary to look at students' organisation and language usage in their written assignment – Item B13

Table 3: Perception on Important Aspects of Academic Writing Assignments



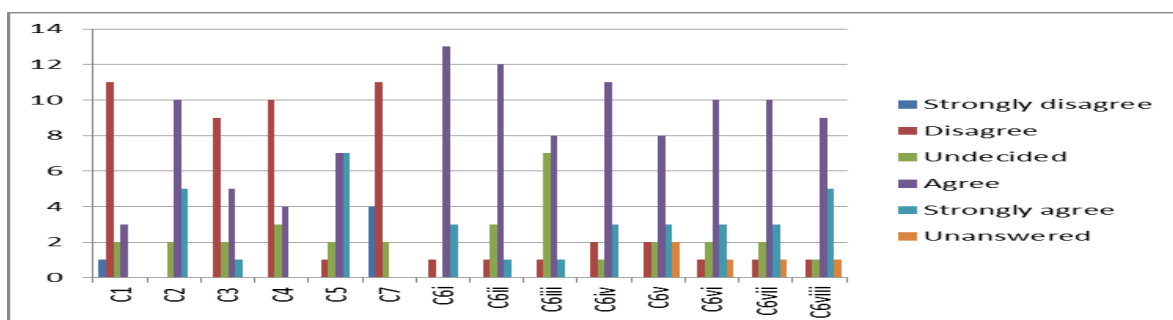
In a study which was performed by Boote and Beile (2005), a guideline was produced in order to analyze the quality of academic writing and research. A rubric which was composed of six elements was formulated. The six elements which were included in the rubric were the standards for inclusion or exclusion, the capacity of the academic writer to provide a synthesis of what was previous encountered in literature, the application of methodology, the implication of the research challenge, the rhetorical content and its formatted style. In conjunction, the six standards and the associated criteria establish ambitious anticipation for academic writing at the university level. . Academic writing which complies with these elevated standards indicates that the student has a comprehensive and elaborate understanding of the subject matter. This is a condition for significant academic research (Boote & Beile, 2005).

3.3. Practices Related to Rule, Organisation and Language Convention in Academic Written Assignments

This section has 15 statements on the lecturers’ practices in assigning written assignments to students. Among the important findings are as follow:

- Content is more important than language and plagiarism is believed to be an important element to remind students – Item C1, C2, C3, C4 and C5
- Content (13/17) is the main focus in 1st drafts followed by organization (12/17) and lastly language (8/17). However, in the final draft, content is less important (8/17) and organization and language are equally important (10/17) – Item C6i - viii
- All agree that students should be allowed to write drafts – Item C7

Table 4: Practices Related to Rule, Organisation and Language Convention in Academic Written Assignments



The findings from this present study are the opposite of what has been researched by other researchers such as Zaporozhertz (1987). He discovered that the majority of academic advisors, teachers and lecturers perceived that researching the available literature for academic writing endeavors as being a conventional occupation that the academic writing students should be able to complete without assistance. However in UMS, academicians stated that content, citation and references are very important and are most often

highlighted when assigning written assignments. Academic writing is a challenge to instruct to native students; it poses a greater challenge to teach to English second language students. These issues in acquiring these academic writing skills for English second language students are not insurmountable.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This present study helps to identify the perception and practices of academicians across disciplines in UMS and the findings will help EAP course designers and also academicians to cater to the other disciplines' academicians needs. This is important in order for the EAP course to be seen as relevant and important to students in order to obtain their scroll. This can be achieved by enabling the EAP lecturers and other faculty members at the University of Malaysia Sabah with regards to the design of curriculum and the instruction of the courses. Furthermore, the augmented cognizance of retention theory will facilitate the interactions which are present between faculty members and the English second language students (Tinto, 2004).

An EAP syllabus will usually contain the four skills (reading, writing, listening and reading) in relation to the learners needs at the tertiary level in the academic world (Gillett, 1989; Bruce, 2011). Writing is one of the most important skills that are needed by students across the disciplines. This is because most of the tasks at tertiary level will be writing. Consequently, writing in an EAP course should ideally achieve to help student writer to develop their discourse competence within a discipline specific setting in order to be able to conduct the deconstruction and reconstruction of its text and their related discourse, to help the writer to develop an authorial voice and identity within a particular discourse community and to help the writer to develop the competence to communicate in writing that is analytical and critically evaluative in terms of their field's accepted standards of judgment (Bruce, 2011: 129).

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