

## **Academic Speaking Practices of International Graduate Students in a Higher Education Institution in Malaysia: Challenges and Overcoming Strategies**

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#### **Abstract**

Malaysia is experiencing a progressive rise in the number of international graduate students enrolling in the graduate programmes. This phenomenon has urged researchers to look for ways to ensure that they go through a smooth academic journey. This research investigates the challenges faced by these students in their academic speaking practices and the overcoming strategies to overcome the challenges. Investigation was conducted by using an adapted questionnaire survey with a sample of 131 international graduate students in 10 taught Master programmes. Findings indicate the international graduate students faced challenges in their academic speaking practices in the English as a second language context. The findings and results, if taken seriously by the Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia would help to further improve and enhance academic speaking practices' experience in their graduate study.

Keywords: international graduate students; higher education; academic speaking practices; challenges; overcoming strategies

#### **1.0 Introduction**

Recently, non-English speaking countries, where English is the second language (L2), such as Malaysia, Singapore and South Africa are increasingly attracting foreign students (Crewe, 2004; Rienties et al. 2012). For example in Malaysia, postgraduate students from the Middle East countries contribute one of the largest blocks of students (Norhisham Mohamad et al., 2008, p. 168; MoHE, 2010). In the countries mentioned by Crewe (2004) and Rienties, Beusaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet & Kommers (2012), especially Malaysia there is a wide gap in research conducted pertaining to academic literacies practices, especially academic speaking practices of the international graduate students (IGS) in English as a second language (ESL) context (Wahiza Wahi, O'Neill & Chapman, 2012). This is unlike the English speaking countries with high international students' (IS) intake and established research base on the issue of internationalisation of higher education (HE).

#### **2.0 Background of the Study**

The increasing number of IS studying in Malaysia has brought about various issues such as students coming from different linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds. Carroll and Ryan (2005) pointed out that IS bring to an institution a diversity of competencies that have been progressively built from childhood, primary, secondary and prior tertiary learning experiences. These students have already experienced a culturally defined approach to academic literacies in learning at first-degree level in their native country's higher education (HE) system.

In relation to non-native speakers' of English prior academic background, becoming literate in different discourse can be particularly stressful as they have to try to reconcile contradictory desires to adjust to and resist new ways of practicing academic literacy in a new education institution in a different country. L2 academic literacy research results highlight that becoming literate in different discourse traditions is a challenging, complex and lengthy process (Belcher & Braine, 1995; Prior, 1995; Spack, 1997; 2004; Zhu, 2001; Casanave, 2002; Shi & Beckett, 2002; Leki, 2003; Zamel & Spack, 2004). Based on past research conducted in English speaking universities, researchers found NNSE face hurdles comprehending lectures, taking part in tutorial discussions, writing essays and theses, reading course books and designated articles and communicating with lecturers, supervisors and fellow students (Hellstèn, 2002; Hellstèn & Prescott, 2004; Wong, 2004; Sawir, 2005).

Furthermore, Green (1987), Stewart & Spille (1988) and Conrad, Duren & Haworth (1998) have provided argument that there is extremely limited literature on how students experience their master programmes, much less the effects of their experience on students themselves and literature also does not draw on students' perspectives. Therefore, the findings of this study will augur well for research in this particular area. In relation to this research in a Malaysian university, stakes are high in the taught Master programmes. These taught Master programmes comprise of coursework (CW) or mixed mode (MM) programmes that require students to attend lectures, participate in tutorials and fulfill various academic literacies demands. The learning in taught Master programmes in the university is facilitated through classroom lectures, tutorials, seminars, individual project work, industrial or business placement, problem-solving classes, group projects, research dissertation or discussion groups (Kaur, 2000).

Therefore, a motivation underlying this study is that there are many related studies only confined to the academic literacies practices of NNSE with English as their L2 or foreign language studying in the English as L1 environment, such as in the Anglo Saxon countries. This particular research study, therefore, explores the academic speaking practices of IGS in Malaysia, where English is the L2 and is used as the MoI for graduate studies (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman & Mohd Ishak, 2010; MoHE, 2010).

The IGS attending institutions of HE in Malaysia who are highly capable and motivated have successfully met the universities' academic requirement that are the first-degree CGPA cut-off point and English language requirement. These IGS also fulfil the English language requirements such as the TOEFL or IELTS qualification. However, literature review that has explored academic literacies practices of the IGS in Malaysian local universities found them to be struggling in their reading, writing, speaking and listening practices that are the thrust of academic literacies. The NNSE IGS exposure to academic literacies from primary until tertiary level in their native countries has been mainly in their first language (L1) (Nambiar and Ibrahim, 2011; Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011a; Ibrahim and Nambiar, 2011b).

This attribute of the IGS gives impact to the academic literacies challenges when they come to Malaysia to further their study at graduate level. They are still unable to grasp the new and different academic expectations as well as adapt to the appropriate academic demands as mentioned in studies conducted previously in Malaysian HE institutions (Hafriza Burhanudeen et al., 2004; Kaur and Shakila Abdul Manan, 2007; Hisham, 2008; Koo, 2009; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Nambiar and Ibrahim, 2011; Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011a; Ibrahim and Nambiar, 2011b). Rabab'ah, G. (2003), Hisham (2008), Al-Khasawneh, F, M.S. (2010), Mahmud et al., (2010) in their research also revealed the IGS in Malaysian HE institutions faced challenges with their writing practices, reading practices and oral communication.

The struggle faced by them in their academic literacies at the research site university is further aggravated by the use of English, the MoI for majority of the taught Master programmes that have non-native speakers' of English IGS enrolment in the HE institutions in Malaysia. Furthermore, to date, most investigations surrounding the IGS conducted locally on the academic literacies issues have heavily focused on investigating their writing practices. As Braine (2002) puts it, "a fundamental shortcoming of most studies of socially situated academic literacy is their focus on writing tasks alone" (p. 63) and also the relationship between writing practices and learning and the production of written assignments (Wahiza Wahi, O'Neill,

Chapman, 2012). Duff (2010) in her research also stressed that other academic discourse socialisation such as oral academic discourse socialisation is the most neglected in studies of academic discourse that give prominence to writing and reading.

### **3.0 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are firstly, to identify the challenges faced by the international graduate students in their academic speaking practices in the taught Master programmes and secondly, to identify the overcoming strategies employed.

### **4.0 Academic Speaking Practices**

Developing good oral communication skills is necessary to participate in debates and discussions or to engage in problem solving and creative thinking (Wisker, 2005). These skills are crucial especially for the IGS to become members of the academic environment as highlighted by Johns (1981) and Morita (2002). According to them, academic oral communication needs such as doing presentations, mini-lecturers, group project work and class discussions are significant at graduate level in multiple contexts such as in the classroom, in teaching and in giving conference presentations. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), cognitive knowledge of the L2, knowledge of how to overcome communication challenges, knowledge of how to organise and plan a task, topical knowledge and learners' affective reactions are important elements to ensure learners' successful communicative performance in the target language. Learners' successful communicative performance is influenced by their communicative language ability (CLA). CLA consist of both knowledge or competency and the capacity for highlighting the competence in suitable, contextualised communicative language use (Bachman, 1990).

Bachman's (1990) further discussion of CLA describes the university classroom especially at graduate level emphasising participation in the context of making presentations, interacting with classmates, making queries and participating in group discussions. These interactions require the students to speak and display their academic strengths. However, at times, the students are not able to display strength in spoken form with weaknesses such as reluctance to speak, lack of confidence and worrying about their pronunciation. These weaknesses lead to them feeling embarrassed and being dismissed as inferior because their classmates and lecturers are unable to understand what they are trying to say. The weakness in their language proficiency camouflages their intellectual ability as reported by Leki (2001) that at times linguistic limitations were interpreted as intellectual inadequacies.

#### **4.1 Related Studies on Academic Speaking Practices among International Graduate Students**

A recent study on academic oral communication needs of East Asian IGS in non-science and non-engineering fields at an American HE institution identified participation in whole-class discussions, practicing strong listening skills, raising questions during class and engaging in small-group discussions as the four most frequently required listening/speaking-related classroom tasks in graduate courses. The respondents of the study also rated formal oral presentations and strong listening skills as the most important elements for academic success in graduate courses (Kim, 2006).

However, Kim's (2006) investigation on postgraduate perceptions of listening and speaking requirements found that only one-third of the subjects reported of having problems with listening and note taking. Kim (2006) noted this finding could have been due to IGS assessed through longer written assignments in which additional background reading played a larger role as well as having note-taking skills for lecture listening through previous academic experiences. In any attempt to understand the oral communication needs of East Asian IGS in an American university, Mostafa (2006) stated that it seems that students were most concerned about leading class discussions. Participating in whole-class discussions was their second most difficult academic listening/speaking task, while participating in small-group discussions was their third most difficult task followed by formal oral presentations. Students also reported they experienced less difficulty participating in small-group discussions than participating in whole-class discussions.

The lack of fluency and confidence in speaking also means class presentations are a struggle to prepare and deliver and this impedes socialisation with other students outside their language group. Ferris (1998) and Kim (2006) have also proven that majority of international ESL students in university content classrooms in English-speaking countries report feelings of inadequacy and frustration while taking part in oral classroom tasks such as whole-class discussions and formal oral presentations. Liu and Kuo's (1996) survey of 51 IGS found that spoken English proficiency and knowledge of subject matter were the most influential factors contributing to a student's speaking up in class. However, a study by Tatar (2005) on Turkish IGS in a U.S. university found that Turkish students' content, form and frequency of participation differed across courses and situations. The students' participation in classroom was influenced by context-dependent factors, culture and academic perceptions. However, the students in Tatar's study did not find oral participation a major contributor to their own academic learning experience. The students participated more for affective reasons.

Research has found that many instructors do not provide explicit and appropriate scaffolding, modeling or feedback to support students' performance of oral assignments (e.g., presentations, critiques, projects) (Zappa-Hollman, 2007a; 2007b). Her studies indicated that most students are simply expected to be familiar with the genres required for academic essays or presentations and the criteria for evaluating them, even though these attributes and criteria may vary greatly from one context to the next. Hincks' (2010) research on academic presentations in English and L1 found that in EFL context the average speaking rate is 25% slower in their English context. This is contributed by the extra time needed for planning of speech in a L2.

Kaur & Sidhu (2009) in their study found that many IGS in Malaysia faced challenges because of high academic literacies practices' expectation imposed upon them by their Master course lecturers. These challenges involved the development and honing of their independent, critical thought. The IGS also felt inhibited by their English language proficiency during some discussions in class. The prospect of having to speak and write well in English was found to be daunting as many of them come from an EFL educational systems. These challenges are actually the effect of many of them coming from cultures of learning that dealt mainly with more traditional modes of learning that involve the transmission of knowledge from the lecturer to the students. Burns (2000) cited these group of students experienced 'study shock' that is normally experienced by students shifting between different cultures of learning.

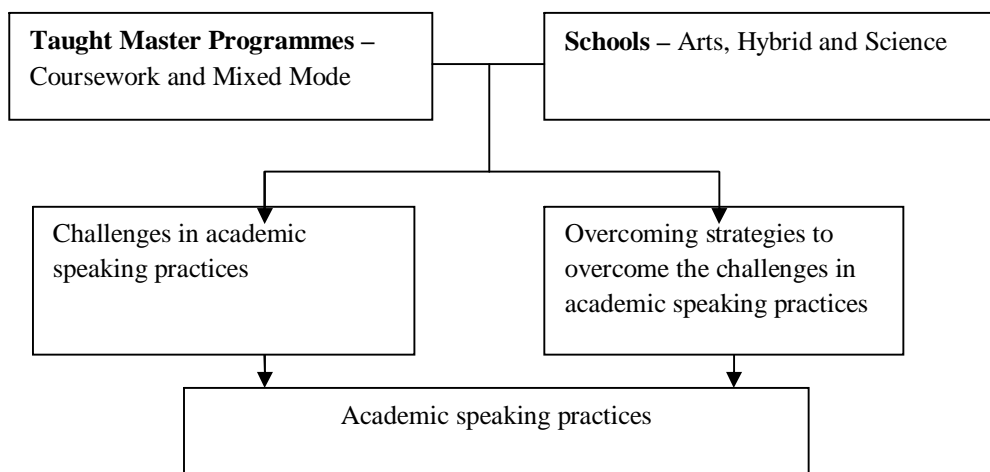
### **5.0 Research Design**

This study investigates the challenges faced by the IGS in their academic speaking practices and the overcoming strategies. The site of the research is one of the HE institutions in Malaysia that offers various first-degree and graduate courses with an enrolment of more than 20,000 local and IS. The institution has graduate students from more than 50 countries all over the world due to the proliferation of its CW and MM Master programmes and to the remarkable record of accomplishment in sustaining world class education quality with global recognition.

This quantitative study utilised purposive sampling with the aim of selecting all accessible respondents who could provide accurate and reliable information regarding the research problem (Teddlie & Yu, 2007; Rubin & Babbie, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The criteria for inclusion of the IGS in the study are as follow: (a) respondents have to be full-time international master students in the CW or MM Master programmes; (b) they have to be in their second semester or later; and (c) they have to come from the Arts, Hybrid or Science schools at the research site university. Data obtained from the Institute of Postgraduate Study (IPS) of the research site university indicated there were 203 IGS registered in the 13 CW and 11 MM Master programmes offered in the 10 schools comprising three Arts, two Hybrid and five Sciences for the Semester Two (Academic Session 2011/2012). The Academic Literacies Questionnaire (ALQ) used to collect data for this study was adapted from Chang (2006) and Evans & Green (2007). The ALQ was used to learn about the challenges faced by the IGS in their academic speaking practices and the overcoming strategies. One hundred and thirty-one respondents in the age range of 20 to 47 years from the CW and the MM Master programmes completed the ALQ.

A pilot study was administered to a small sample ( $n = 21$ ) similar to the potential respondents. It helped to determine the consistency between multiple measurements of a variable (Hair et al. 2006:137). The Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient values indicate relatively high internal consistency with higher values than the minimum accepted value of 0.70 (George and Mallery, 2003; Pallant, 2010). The result of the pilot study indicated high internal consistency reliability with the alpha coefficient of .822. Table 1 provides the conceptual framework of the study. The dependent variable is academic speaking practice that is influenced by the challenges faced by the international graduate students and the overcoming strategies in their CW and MM Master programmes at the research site university.

**Table 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study**



## 6.0 Findings of the Study

### 6.1 Profile of the Respondents

The frequency distribution of each demographic factor was recorded and converted into percentage (%). The nationalities' pie chart indicates a blend of many nationalities ranging from the Middle East, Asian and African countries. Majority of the students are from the Middle East countries (64.4%). Iran has the highest number of respondents (26.5%), followed by Iraq (14.4%), Palestine (6.8%), Libya (6.1%), Yemen (3.8%), Jordan (3.0%), Saudi Arabia (2.3%) and Egypt (0.8%). The respondents from other Asian and African countries account for 35.6%. Slightly less than half of the respondents (49.6%) were from the five schools in the Sciences. This was followed by 29.0% of the respondents from two Hybrid schools and 21.4% of the respondents from three Arts schools.

### 6.2 Results of the Reliability Test

The Cronbach Alpha's value of the 10 items of challenges in academic speaking practices is .888. The statistical analysis indicated that the ALQ have high internal consistency reliability.

### 6.3 Challenges in Academic Speaking Practices

The questionnaire contains 10 items on challenges faced in academic speaking practices. Table 2 summarises the respondents' evaluation on the difficulty level of the challenges in academic speaking practices:



**Table 2: Challenges in Academic Speaking Practices**

Challenges in Academic Speaking Practices	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	Mean
Communicating ideas fluently	9.1	50.8	31.8	5.3	2.34
Speaking accurately (grammar)	13.6	46.2	30.3	9.1	2.35
Communicating ideas confidently	6.1	46.2	39.4	6.1	2.47
Speaking clearly (pronunciation)	9.1	42.2	39.4	8.3	2.47
Participating actively in discussions	5.3	43.9	46.2	3.8	2.49
Answering questions	4.5	40.9	47.7	4.5	2.53
Presenting information/ideas	5.3	39.4	49.2	3.8	2.53
Asking questions	3.0	29.5	56.8	9.8	2.74
Using visual aids	3.0	24.2	59.1	7.6	2.76
Speaking from notes	3.0	23.5	57.6	12.9	2.83

**Scale:** 1 = Very Difficult, 2 = Difficult, 3 = Easy, 4 = Very Easy

Communicating ideas fluently, speaking accurately (grammar), communicating ideas confidently, speaking clearly (pronunciation) and participating actively in discussions are ranked as the five top challenges in academic speaking practices (mean range from 2.34 to 2.49). The respondents indicated the other five items on challenges in academic speaking practices range from difficult to easy. The findings indicate that the respondents generally find speaking as a challenging academic literacies practice.

The data in Table 2 indicates that communicating ideas fluently is the most difficult (59.9%) challenge for the respondents. More than half (59.8%) of the respondents reported speaking accurately with the use of grammatically correct sentences as very difficult and difficult. 52.3% of the respondents reported communicating ideas confidently as very difficult and difficult. Speaking clearly with clear pronunciation was reported by slightly more than half (51.3%) of the respondents as very difficult and difficult. Slightly less than half of the respondents indicated presenting information/ideas, answering questions and participating actively in discussions as easy.

A non-parametric test for two independent samples was also carried out to compare the difficulty level of the challenges faced in academic speaking practices between the CW and MM respondents. The Mann-Whitney U test which revealed a significant difference in the difficulty level of presenting information/ideas ( $Z = 2.693$ ,  $p = .007$ ) indicates that presenting information/ideas is more difficult for the CW respondents (mean = 72.36) compared to the MM respondents (mean = 57.05). A non-parametric test of four scales was also carried out to compare the difficulty level of the challenges faced in academic speaking practices among the respondents in the Arts, Hybrid and Sciences schools. The Kruskal-Wallis Test which revealed no significant difference in the difficulty level indicate all the items on the challenges faced in academic speaking practices by the respondents from the three groups of school are of the same difficulty level.

#### 6.4 Strategies in Overcoming Challenges in Academic Speaking Practices

Table 3 shows the frequency count of the five overcoming strategies employed by the respondents to overcome the challenges in academic speaking practices:

**Table 3: Overcoming Challenges in Academic Speaking Practices**

Overcoming Challenges in Academic Speaking Practices	YES (%)	NO (%)
Practice discussing orally the topics given in courses with other students	54.5%	45.5%
Force yourself to speak in class although it is difficult for you to speak because of shyness	43.9%	56.1%
Practice spelling and pronunciation	42.4%	57.6%

Talk to peers	39.4%	60.6%
Supplement linguistic strategy by other means during oral presentations, e.g., using educational media.	18.9%	81.1%

Based on frequency count, the findings indicate that the respondents prefer to practice discussing orally the topics given in courses with other students (54.5%). The respondents also prefer to force themselves to speak in class although it is difficult to speak due to shyness (43.9%). The two overcoming strategies that are not preferred by the respondents are supplementing linguistic strategy by other means during oral presentations (81.1%) and talking to peers (60.6%).

A non-parametric test for two independent samples was also carried out to compare the measures employed by the CW and MM respondents to overcome the academic literacies challenges in speaking. The Mann-Whitney U test revealed a significant difference in two overcoming strategies employed to overcome challenges faced in academic speaking practices that are practicing spelling and pronunciation and talking to peers. Mann-Whitney U test which revealed a significant difference in practicing spelling and pronunciation ( $Z= 2.053$ ,  $p=.040$ ) indicates that practicing spelling and pronunciation is more employed by the MM respondents (mean = 72.53) compared to the CW respondents (mean of 60.82). Mann-Whitney U test which also revealed a significant difference in talking to peers ( $Z= 2.410$ ,  $p=.016$ ) indicates that talking to peers is more employed by the MM respondents (mean = 73.50) compared to the CW respondents (mean = 59.91).

## 7.0 Discussion of the Findings

The challenges faced in academic speaking practices were participating in oral communication that included communicating ideas fluently, speaking accurately (grammar), communicating ideas confidently, speaking clearly (pronunciation) and participating actively in discussions.

According to Ringbom (1987: 113-114) and Odlin (1989: 77-80), a justification for this challenge is the language distance between their L1 and L2 or L3 has effect on the amount of transfer that can take place between languages. Ringbom explained that for example, the Arabic speakers take a longer time to acquire English vocabulary because transfer from third languages seems to depend very much on relative language distance. This situation makes it difficult for them to learn English language.

Practice discussing orally the topics given in their courses with other students and forcing oneself to speak in class although it is difficult to speak because of shyness were the two most employed overcoming strategies. Other strategies included doing pre-presentation preparation, improving their English language literacy, using visual aids such as PowerPoint to improve their presentations and communicating online with native speakers of English. Supplementing linguistic strategy by other means during oral presentations such as using educational media and talking to peers were the two least employed strategies.

Strategies such as orally discussing the topics given in courses with other students, forcing oneself to speak in class, doing pre-presentation preparation, improving their English language literacy skills and opting for computer literacies practices such as Microsoft PowerPoint were used by the respondents to overcome the academic literacies practices in speaking. The respondents' academic socialisation in the graduate's community of practice has helped to improve their English language proficiency as their participation in the academic discourse community grew and improved their ability to express or present discipline specific knowledge that they possess or have acquired in their graduate study. However, quantitative findings indicate that majority of them did not supplement linguistic strategy by other means such as educational media during oral presentations.

Currently, there is no strict enforcement on the English language entry requirement by either the individual schools or IPS. There are schools at the research site university that either do not impose English language requirement (IELTS or TESOL) for the IGS intake or do not adhere to the English language requirement set

by IPS. Moreover, many respondents have cited low English language proficiency as the main difficulty in coping with the academic literacies demands and challenges. Therefore, this study recommends that the research site university strictly adhere to the English language requirement policy.

At the same time, the university should also not only depend on the standardised English language requirement across the board for all the Master programmes. A previous study such as Alco's (2008) has found IELTS and TOEFL not to be consistently reliable indicators of language ability in the academic setting. The university should also look into the possibility of designing and implementing a more effective in-house standardised English language placement test to evaluate students' oral English language proficiency. The results of this test will be a good indicator of students' oral communication preparedness to enroll into the programmes of their choice at the research site university.

In order to facilitate the development of effective learning to enable the IGS to become skilled speakers within the graduate education environment, the research site university should enhance teaching and learning through trans-disciplinary collaboration between content and language specialists' lecturers. Trans-disciplinary collaboration is a new field that is not yet given the deserved attention in Malaysian universities. Lecturers from both areas should also be encouraged to cross the boundaries of their discipline, collaborate and become familiar with a wide range of disciplines. Language specialists should be trained to become familiar with the discipline specific concepts and the language of the particular discipline.

At the same time, the content lecturers should be trained on the linguistic aspects and the academic speaking practices necessary of their discipline. The expertise of both area lecturers can be employed to create integrative language and content instruction courses that focus on specific discourses within the discipline to bring about an optimum exposure of the academic speaking experience for the students.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has revealed how the IGS in the taught Master programmes that bring with them academic literacies backgrounds that differ from the present institutionally accepted codes and conventions faced the academic literacies challenges and empowered strategies to overcome the academic literacies challenges. The findings present only a small part of a much larger picture of the academic endeavour especially the academic literacies experience of the IGS within a broader context of their past and present cultural, linguistic and educational experiences. Nevertheless, the findings have given us insights from their perspective on how they face the academic literacies challenges and employ necessary strategies in overcoming those challenges. The findings provide an avenue for a more expansive understanding of academic literacies that recognises value in linguistic and cultural diversity of the IGS in target English language discourse communities.

The study also reaffirms the idea that "an understanding of literacy requires detailed, in-depth accounts of actual practice in different cultural settings" (Street, 1993: 430) and the situatedness of academic literacies are multiple, changing and different from one academic context to another which reflects the Academic Literacies Model (Lea & Street, 2000). Moreover, the HE industry of Malaysia, which is on a serious quest to upgrade its education system to international standards and join the global ranking as provider of tertiary education for the international society should seriously consider the recommendations provided in this study seriously to ensure a positive learning experience for the IGS in the context of their academic speaking practices.



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