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## CHAPTER ONE

374

### INTRODUCTION

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#### 376 **1.0 Overview**

377 The international students who come to Malaysian universities are mostly non native  
378 speakers of English, and they come from different language and cultural backgrounds. It  
379 appears that many are even unaware of the fact that different activities and area of use require  
380 different language proficiencies and coping strategies. This might lead to a point where some  
381 believe they can survive their academic life on campus with the general English language  
382 proficiency skills that they have, and that they use for a variety of purposes outside the  
383 university.

384 Being an international student myself, I have the advantage of having access to many of their  
385 ideas, experiences and problems. It seems apparent that many of the international students  
386 have problems with English within the university setting, and have some difficulty coping  
387 with the situation here. Therefore, it is the function of this research to investigate this matter  
388 and find the different language problems that the international students have in academic  
389 settings.

#### 390 **1.1 Background to the Problem and the Significance of the Study**

391 As a student of languages and linguistics I have often been asked to help my fellow students  
392 in other majors such as computer science and economics in carrying out various academic  
393 activities like editing assignments, preparing reports and presentation slides, clarifying lecture  
394 notes and writing letters of appeal. This convinced me that it was most important to help

395 them in some way by researching into the problems they have with English in academic  
396 settings.

397 A review of the literature in the field also indicates the necessity of conducting such a study  
398 because there seems to be no other studies, to the best of my knowledge, on Malaysian  
399 universities that attends to this problem despite its importance and relevance.

400 Attending to this problem is also important and worth the effort because this lack of language  
401 proficiency might lead to academic failures and the student might lag behind because of the  
402 language, not the subject of the study, which itself might end in frustration and  
403 discontinuation of the studies. After all, language is an essential part of education and the  
404 areas of difficulty need to be recognized and duly attended to.

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## 406 **1.2 The Problem**

407 The most tangible problem seems to be that the students are not really able to cope efficiently  
408 in the English language in many of the various academic situations within the university. The  
409 reason might simply be that they, the international students, may not be aware of the different  
410 uses of the English language in a university, and the levels of proficiency required for this.  
411 They might also not be aware of how different English in the university is from the English  
412 language they use in their daily lives. Students definitely need to use English in various forms  
413 according to the different contexts and situations that are special to university. Not being  
414 aware of the areas in which they need to make use of their English for specific and academic  
415 purposes, the students might not be ready to function efficiently and this would pose  
416 problems to their academic performance in general and their language performance in  
417 particular.

418 There have been a lot of studies regarding the problems of the international students in  
419 American and Australian universities and these studies have taken into consideration many  
420 factors that might pose difficulties for the international students including social, cultural and  
421 academic (Ballard,1982,1987;Burns, 1991;Samuelowicz,1987). There are also a lot more  
422 studies in the form of unpublished doctoral dissertations in American universities (Han, 1977;  
423 Ellis, 1978; Antanaitis, 1990; Koyu-Fogel, 1994).

424 Several researchers have looked into general problems among international students, while  
425 others have focused their attention on academic problems in relation to students' English  
426 language proficiency. For example, Phongsuwan (1997), trying to figure out the problems of  
427 Thai students in an eastern American university, also found that besides difficulties with the  
428 new social life, customs, cultures, and learning methodology, the students reported English  
429 language problems with pronunciation, inadequate vocabulary, low reading and writing speed  
430 ,and native speaker speaking rate.

431 Only a few studies have focused on the language problems of the international students in  
432 academic settings in particular. Most of the studies are on the adjustment problems in which  
433 language might be included as a more or less marginal factor; it has not been the sole focus.  
434 The lack of literature is even more apparent in Malaysia where there are many students from  
435 around the world following their studies mainly in the medium of the English Language. This  
436 lack is very obvious in the research concerning academic problems in general and language  
437 problems in particular, and this is the main reason motivating this study.

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### 441 **1.3 Significance of the Study**

442 This study is significant in various ways. For one, a review of the literature reveals that there  
443 are few, if any, studies in the field of English for academic purposes which address the  
444 problems of international students with regard to the use of EAP. In this field there are  
445 always needs analyses that are carried out before a course is conducted. This study will  
446 elaborate on the problems that emerge as the students use English in different areas for  
447 academic purposes. So the first significance of the study lies in the fact that it will address the  
448 areas that the students use EAP for the problems they face in the process of carrying out their  
449 studies.

450 The second point about this study is the methodology it uses. So far, in the existing literature  
451 (Phongsuwan, 1997; Han, 1977; Ellis, 1978; Antanaitis, 1990; Koyu-Fogel, 1994) only the  
452 students have been asked to highlight their problems in questionnaires or interviews. This  
453 study will also ask the lecturers who teach these students and supervise their postgraduate  
454 theses to comment on their problems. After all, they are the people who are academically  
455 involved with the students' performance, and their views would help us to get a clearer  
456 picture of the situation.

457 So this study, by focusing specifically on the areas of the use of English for academic  
458 purposes and the problems that may arise in the process of such use, will try to identify the  
459 needs and the problems of the international students in the University of Malaya. It does so  
460 by asking the users of the language, who are the students, and the people who are most  
461 directly related to the students in their use of the language, namely the lecturers.

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#### 464 **1.4 Objectives and Research Question**

465 The international students enter Malaysian universities with different language backgrounds;  
466 some may have to pursue English language courses while some are exempted. The researcher  
467 aims to discover if the English language proficiency that the students have is sufficient for  
468 successful survival in the academic domain in the university, or whether there are still  
469 problems they need to cope with.

470 The main objective of this study is to identify and suggest solutions for the problems faced by  
471 the international students in using English for academic purposes in academic settings.  
472 Towards this end, the following research questions have been framed:

- 473 a) What are the various academic activities that the international students engage in  
474 where they need to use the English language?
- 475 b) Which of these pose problems to the international students in terms of the use of the  
476 English language?
- 477 c) What are the perceptions of the lecturers about the problems that the international  
478 students have with the use of English for academic purposes?
- 479 d) What are the students' and the lectures' suggested solutions to these problems?

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#### 481 **1.5 Scope and Limitations**

482 The study will be carried out among students and academic staff in the University of Malaya,  
483 and will seek to discover both the language difficulties that the students have with regard to  
484 EAP and English in academic settings, as well as the perceptions of the students and staff  
485 with regard to solutions. The main limitation of the study is that the study will be conducted  
486 only among respondents in two faculties of the University of Malaya, one faculty from the

487 sciences, namely the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology (FCSIT), and  
488 one from the humanities, namely the Faculty of Education (FEEd).

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## 490 **1.6 Organization of the dissertation**

491 This dissertation will comprise five chapters. In the first chapter, the researcher presents a  
492 picture of the current situation and the rationale for conducting the study. She describes the  
493 problem in terms of both the paucity of literature in the field as well as the practical issues  
494 faced by the international students in the University of Malaya. The significance of the study  
495 is also described. Chapter One also states the objectives and research questions.

496 Chapter Two provides a review of the related literature and the works which have already  
497 been done with regard to this study. The gap in the literature which was pointed to in Chapter  
498 One will be further highlighted in Chapter Two where a detailed report of the studies in this  
499 field is given and the need for this research is established.

500 In Chapter Three, the methodology of the research is described: the participants, instruments,  
501 data collection procedures, and data entry and analysis.

502 Chapter Four is mainly about the findings of the research which are organized in terms of the  
503 research questions. Firstly the quantitative data analysis is presented in tables and bar-charts.  
504 The next step is the analysis of the qualitative data gathered via the interviews. The  
505 quantitative and qualitative data analyses and findings are juxtaposed to present the overall  
506 and multi faceted picture of the problems of the international students with regard to the use  
507 of English for academic purposes.

508 And finally, Chapter Five concludes the dissertation. In addition to concluding remarks,  
509 suggestions and implications for improving EAP among international students, suggestions  
510 for further research are also given.

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