CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

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

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

1.1 Background to the Problem and the Significance of the Study

As a student of languages and linguistics I have often been asked to help my fellow students in other majors such as computer science and economics in carrying out various academic activities like editing assignments, preparing reports and presentation slides, clarifying lecture notes and writing letters of appeal. This convinced me that it was most important to help
them in some way by researching into the problems they have with English in academic settings.

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

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

1.2 The Problem

The most tangible problem seems to be that the students are not really able to cope efficiently in the English language in many of the various academic situations within the university. The reason might simply be that they, the international students, may not be aware of the different uses of the English language in a university, and the levels of proficiency required for this. They might also not be aware of how different English in the university is from the English language they use in their daily lives. Students definitely need to use English in various forms according to the different contexts and situations that are special to university. Not being aware of the areas in which they need to make use of their English for specific and academic purposes, the students might not be ready to function efficiently and this would pose problems to their academic performance in general and their language performance in particular.
There have been a lot of studies regarding the problems of the international students in American and Australian universities and these studies have taken into consideration many factors that might pose difficulties for the international students including social, cultural and academic (Ballard, 1982, 1987; Burns, 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987). There are also a lot more studies in the form of unpublished doctoral dissertations in American universities (Han, 1977; Ellis, 1978; Antanaitis, 1990; Koyu-Fogel, 1994).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

a) What are the various academic activities that the international students engage in where they need to use the English language?

b) Which of these pose problems to the international students in terms of the use of the English language?

c) What are the perceptions of the lecturers about the problems that the international students have with the use of English for academic purposes?

d) What are the students’ and the lectures’ suggested solutions to these problems?

1.5 Scope and Limitations

The study will be carried out among students and academic staff in the University of Malaya, and will seek to discover both the language difficulties that the students have with regard to EAP and English in academic settings, as well as the perceptions of the students and staff with regard to solutions. The main limitation of the study is that the study will be conducted only among respondents in two faculties of the University of Malaya, one faculty from the
sciences, namely the Faculty of Computer Science and Information Technology (FCSIT), and
one from the humanities, namely the Faculty of Education (FEd).

1.6 Organization of the dissertation

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

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

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

Chapter Four is mainly about the findings of the research which are organized in terms of the
research questions. Firstly the quantitative data analysis is presented in tables and bar-charts.
The next step is the analysis of the qualitative data gathered via the interviews. The
quantitative and qualitative data analyses and findings are juxtaposed to present the overall
and multi faceted picture of the problems of the international students with regard to the use
of English for academic purposes.
And finally, Chapter Five concludes the dissertation. In addition to concluding remarks, suggestions and implications for improving EAP among international students, suggestions for further research are also given.