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Malaysian University Students' English Academic Reading and Writing Ecology: A Preliminary Description

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a preliminary description of university students' ecology of academic reading and writing in English. Data was collected through three online discussion forums, where students could post and discuss about their perceptions and experiences in academic reading and writing. Using a grounded approach, data from these online forum posts were thematized. To ensure credibility of students' responses, the third forum post was used to triangulate data from the first two forums. Findings indicated that the students had specific experiences of reading, through their mention of various academic texts assigned by their lecturers; however, academic writing was found to be rather general, given the lack of specific information and experiences found in students' responses. Beyond the university, it was found that students may not be reading materials in the English language, and that their reading was of a variety of genres. These findings bring about the assumption that the ecology for reading and writing, especially in the English language, is confined to the educational setting. It is suggested that English language instructors could leverage on materials students encounter outside the university to encourage reading and writing in English.

KEYWORDS: Language ecology, academic reading, academic writing, English for academic purposes

Introduction

Increasingly, researchers in the areas of academic English and communication are acknowledging that language learning is a dynamic process that extends beyond the language classroom (see Chong, Isaacs, & McKinley, 2022). This takes on the sociomaterial view of learning, where social and material elements found within the environment of the students may contribute to their

learning experience. Sociomaterial elements may be classroom materials used for learning (Guerrettaz, Engman, & Matsumoto, 2021), or pedagogical exchanges between teacher and student, such as evaluative dialogue or feedback (Loo & Imperial, 2022), and even students' practice of learned literacies outside of the classroom context (Zhang, 2022). All these point towards the spatial nature of literacy, which may be embodied in different forms depending on the materials encountered (Burnett et al., 2014). In the language learning setting, taking a sociomaterial approach places the whole classroom ecology as a potential opportunity for students to learn. For English for academic purposes (EAP), this creates a more authentic experience for language learning, given that students may notice language instruction not only from the formal English language classroom, but also through actual English language encounters beyond that classroom (Loo, 2021). Given the possibility of supporting students' English language development through their varied language encounters, this study aims to offer a preliminary description of university students' English language ecology. In particular, this study utilizes a qualitative approach to illustrate students' ecology of English academic reading and writing. By doing so, we may draw insights into what may be leveraged to enhance what university English teachers are already doing in their classroom, and also address challenges that other researchers have raised regarding academic reading and writing, especially in the Malaysian context (e.g., Terpstra-Tong & Ahmad, 2018; Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018).

An Ecological Perspective on Learning

An ecological examination takes interest in learners' learning experiences and processes in their own terms, without the need to impose any existing templates of learning onto them (Tudor, 2003). This is closely linked with the sociomaterial approach for learning, where material and even immaterial elements constitute valuable catalysts for learning. This notion shifts the onus of learning away from the formal classroom setting; instead, it views learning as potentially shaped by an array of factors, including relationships and interactions that learners have outside of their classroom (Tietjen et al., 2023). Moreover, according to van Lier (2010), since an ecological outlook towards learning is process-oriented, 'actions and activities of teachers and learners' are thus observed and understood as a 'multilayered nature of interaction' (p. 3). When learning is conceived as such, learners are then positioned as those with agency, who are invested and motivated to initiate or take part in processes that may facilitate their learning experience. Furthermore, due to the comprehensiveness that an ecological examination aspires to achieve, its interest in the learning process expands throughout the spatial and material realms found in the larger educational environment (Laihonen & Szabó, 2023). For the students, it allows them "to connect and integrate different spaces, resources, tools, situations, relationships, activities, and themselves in ways that they find meaningful and affect various transformations (personal, material, and virtual)." (Jackson, 2019, p. 87). This inevitably conceives learning as a possibility even with the immaterial – elements that are not tangible in the learning environment, such as engagement with peers or teachers, or reflecting upon information or experiences (Burnett et al., 2014). Taking an ecological perspective for language learning has been found to be valuable, as it accounts for language being used in the totality of the lives of the learners, instead of being confined to only a certain space, such as the English language classroom (Tudor, 2003). This has been demonstrated by Loo (2021), where he found that students did look out for opportunities to enhance their English language knowledge. In particular, participants involved in this study had

independently identified advanced and sophisticated academic vocabulary from research articles to be learned and potentially be used in their own writing.

English/Academic Reading and Writing at the University: The Case of Malaysia

Being able to read and write in academic English is fundamental to a student's success at the university, regardless of the medium of instruction (e.g., Rahman & Singh, 2022). The same may be said for university students in Malaysia, yet related research has highlighted challenges that these students face. In terms of academic reading, students in the Malaysian higher education setting have been reported to do so only for academic purposes, and not necessarily to improve one's overall proficiency in English (Muhamad, Azmi, & Hassan, 2019). While more research has taken an interest in academic writing, the findings have been generally the same. Writing extended texts in English is also confined only to formal educational settings, especially the English language classroom. Moreover, students' writing abilities are not necessarily developed sufficiently to cope with writing assignments at the university level. Singh (2019) reported that fundamental academic writing skills, such as summarizing and paraphrasing, were not yet fully developed. Furthermore, students do not necessarily have enough or appropriate vocabulary knowledge to help them complete writing tasks (see Osman & Bakar, 2009). These problems are perhaps due to a different English writing experience that students had before entering university (Singh & Kaur, 2016). This subsequently impacts teaching and learning activities, as English language instructors would need to create a supportive environment where differentiated help may be offered (Singh, 2019).

Given these observations, this study aims to offer some insights into Malaysian university students' ecology for academic reading and writing in English. The specific research question guiding this study is:

- *What is the academic reading and writing ecology of Malaysian university students?*

Findings from this study will shed insights into students' 'academic social space', which may detail how students utilize various elements outside of the formal classroom for language learning purposes (Soltani, 2018).

The Study

This study employs a qualitative approach to study students' academic reading and writing ecology. Specifically, a grounded approach was selected as this study's analytical framework, given its emphasis on having no pre-conceived notions regarding the phenomenon being investigated and allowing the collected data to shape the understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). This aligns with the conceptualization of students' learning ecology, where elements that shape the learning experience may be unique to individual students (van Lier, 2010).

Participants and Study Setting

Participants of this study (n=81) were first-year university students from different faculties, such as engineering, business administration, science, computer science, and the social sciences. They were taking an advanced academic English reading and writing course, taught by the researcher of this study. The course focused on developing students' academic reading skills that would enable them to do academic writing tasks. While this course was conducted in English, the students' other courses were not necessarily conducted in English. Other subject-specific courses were only taught in English if the lecturer was comfortable and confident, or if there were international students who did not speak or understand Malay, or Bahasa Melayu – the official language of Malaysia. This observation was also done in other Malaysian university contexts, seen in the studies of Barnard, Zuwati Hasim, and Sameephet (2023), Kaur (2020), and Rahman et al. (2021).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected through three online discussion forums posted on the course website hosted on the university's learning management system. The first forum post focused on reading; the second on writing; and the third aimed to triangulate the responses of the first and second forums. The forum prompts were not necessarily linked to the content and lessons of the course that the participants were enrolled in. These forums were started at different junctures of the semester (between September 2022 to January 2023). The prompts were kept broad so as to not inadvertently direct students' responses. Students were also informed that their responses would be used only for research purposes, and their posts and discussions on the forum may be disseminated anonymously. Responding in the forum was not compulsory and they were not graded. The reason for the flexibility in responding is due to the grounded nature of this study. Also, since the purpose of this study is to explore the ecology for academic reading and writing in English as experienced by the university students, it was necessary to be cognizant that students' encounters may be unique. In fact, there is the possibility that some students may have little to no need to engage in academic reading and writing in English beyond their EAP courses. The forum prompts and the number of responses are presented in Table 1.

Since this study utilizes a grounded approach, qualitative data were thematized based on emergent meanings. In particular, students' forum posts and discussions were understood based on their content, where recurring meanings were identified as a primary theme. These themes were then elaborated based on their context (Chong, 2019).

Reliability of a qualitative study is achieved through the appropriate selection of participants and data source (Diefenbach, 2009). Since this study is interested in the academic reading and writing ecology of Malaysian university students, this study only included such participants. On the other hand, the validity of qualitative studies may be achieved through the truthful presentation of data and the relevance of data with the broader field (Diefenbach, 2009). For the former, this study will present students' forum posts and discussions verbatim in the next section. For the latter, discussions regarding the data will be made in light of existing literature.

Findings

Table 1. Forum Prompts and Number of Responses

Forum Prompt	Number of Responses
What has your academic reading experience in the English language been like? Share some of your experiences.	24
What has your academic writing experience in the English language been like? Share some of your experiences.	45
To what extent is your experience reading and writing in English beyond or outside the university? Share some of your experiences.	31

As can be seen in Table 1, not all the students responded in the online discussion forums. The second forum had the most responses, followed by the third, and finally the first. The thematization of the data yielded several categories, which are shown in Table 2. The primary themes were 'general' and 'specific' for academic reading and writing; and 'utility' and 'interest' for reading and writing beyond the university. 'General' refers to students giving broad descriptions of their reading and writing experience, whereas 'specific' refers to students being able to mention or give a detailed discussion of a course, assignment, or academic text. On the other hand, the themes of utility and interest emerged through students' responses regarding their experience of reading and writing beyond the university. Furthermore, most of the students' responses regarding academic reading were specific, while their responses for academic writing were general. Students' reading and writing beyond the university were found to be driven by utility and not interest.

Table 2. Themes of the Responses from the Online Discussion Forums

	For academic purpose		Beyond the university (Forum 3)	
	General	**Specific**	**Utility**	**Interest**
Reading (Forum 1)	3	21	23	8
Writing (Forum 2)	43	2		

General Reading

The theme of general reading points towards reading to carry out and complete fundamental university learning processes. In this sense, reading is viewed mainly to gain information to understand course content and to fulfil course requirements. Such a view on reading is transactional and terminal, as it is restricted only to the parameters of a course. This was also reported in the study of Jamiah and Faiza (2020), where their sample of Malaysian university students read solely for academic purposes and to complete course requirements. What may be observed from the data of this study was also the extent of involvement of elements to the learning process. From students' responses, the engagement in academic reading was confined between themselves and the materials being read, without the involvement of peers or their lecturers, even

if reading alone is viewed as difficult. Furthermore, the process of understanding a reading is also viewed as an individual pursuit. This may be expected of a university setting, where students are typically evaluated as individuals.

> [1] Reading academic text is a must thing for students. Especially for science students who have lab sessions, they need to read a lots of lab reports. Sometimes it is very challenging in reading lab reports, because if you are not quite understand the title or subject that you are going to do experiment on, you are not going to fully understand the given text even though you have already read the text multiple times. You will face the same situation when you are reading a research article or journal. Basis knowledge is needed in order to understand well the topic and the objective. [sic]

> [2] I've read some academic text this week based on my academic reading. It is true that we must read a scientific book in order to learn something. Academic reading can be difficult for me because the text typically contains more words than the illustration. I can learn a lot by watching how something happens. It might be difficult for me to read alone. But I continue to read academic texts because they always teach me something new. [sic]

Specific Reading

Contrary to general reading, the theme 'specific reading' pointed towards particular reading experiences of the participants. Besides describing specific details of such experiences, participants also shared an extent of personal evaluation towards reading. This indicates how reading is not just a transactional process, but one where students are cognitively and emotionally invested (Pekrun, 2022). Students' emotional investment may be seen in descriptions of reading being 'mentally exhausting' [3] and the 'decrease in reading interest' [4]. These negative evaluations, according to students' posts, were mainly due to the complexity of the reading materials. Perhaps due to reading being viewed as a personal pursuit, students become more susceptible to viewing it as a daunting task.

> [3] A challenging academic reading text that I have read this semester is a long journal article on fluid mechanics. One of the biggest challenges in this text is understanding the difficult physics terms that might have slightly different meanings the standard English. An example of this fact is the word 'stress'. In physic, 'stress' is a force acting on a unit area. However, 'stress' in standard English is a mental condition. Other than that, this long text will also cause mental exhaustion when reading words with minimal images for a long period of time. [sic]

> [4] As a student, academic reading materials is common source to get an information's in order to gain knowledges or to finish the assignments given. The challenging academic text I have read this semester was the International Relations Theory by Mark V. Kauppi and Paul R. Viotti. It quite challenging for me because the phrases that have being used in it way too philosophy for me to understand. It became more challenging when I do not know the meaning of the words and I had to search the meaning of it in order to understand. I like to read a lot but when it comes

to academic materials, my interest in reading a lot slowly decreased. [sic]

What was similar between the two themes was that academic reading was viewed as challenging. Various challenges were mentioned, such as the lack of knowledge of vocabulary and the length of the text that students had to read; yet, despite these challenges, all saw academic reading as necessary, as the process allowed students to gain new information or understanding of what was being studied. Nonetheless, it should be noted that through the students' responses, it may be implied that the reading of English materials was confined only to the university and for educational purposes. Moreover, it may appear that they have not received sufficient support in developing their academic reading skills. Since knowledge and skills in academic reading are developed over a period of time, the challenge mentioned here may be due to limited experiences in this regard, even prior to their university education.

General Writing

Similar to reading, it appeared that the ecology for writing in English is set within the university setting, with most of the responses providing a broad description of academic writing. In the theme of general writing, students discussed the writing process as being challenging for various reasons, such as length, the elaboration of content, and the interest in reading to write. Students were also not sure of the process of sourcing relevant information to support their academic writing assignments. From these observations, it may appear that the challenge for Malaysian university students lies in the pre-writing stage, where they need to understand and synthesize information to produce a written piece. This observation is aligned with what had been discussed in the previous theme on general and specific reading. As such, it may be the case that while students may view writing as an output that is doable and manageable, the process of getting to that point may be viewed otherwise.

> [5] Rather than one that is particularly challenging, I found that all the writing assignments that I have to be quite challenging. The assignments that I have mostly requires to write for more than 1000-1500 words. It takes time to write these as you must know on how to make your writing explanations more interesting to make the reader gain the knowledge that are necessary as well as conveying the information properly. Besides, I also need to do a lot of reading as a reference to help my writing. Ever since high school, I already used to write in English, so I am already used to writing assignment. [sic]

> [6] Due to my lack of information and ideas, writing for this assignment has proven to be rather difficult for me. Because of its length and my lack of writing experience, the essay has become really difficult. Due to the nature of the project, it is difficult for me to comprehend what the article or research paper is attempting to express because im not interested with these paper. Due to the nature of the project, it is difficult for me to comprehend what the article or research paper is attempting to express because im not interested with these paper. [sic]

> [7] A challenging academic writing assignment for me is to find an article or journal related to my point. Moreover, I don't know how to elaborate on my primary matter

or the issues of the essay because of a lack of vocabulary, less reading many books, journals, or articles that can help me to gain more pieces of knowledge and also make me easier to explain my main point to the readers and give an example to support my main idea. [sic]

Specific Writing

Under the theme of specific writing, students pointed out particular assignments that they found challenging. Through students' discussion, the issue of relevance emerged, as can be seen in [8]. This issue is concerned with the applicability of specific concepts to their general life or communication needs. This points towards a disjoint between what is learned in the classroom and what is used outside of the formal setting. Furthermore, in [9], the student mentioned that he/she has had no writing instructions since SPM (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*) or the Malaysian Certificate of Education. This would probably mean the student has not had writing instruction for about two years, since the student would have taken STPM (*Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia*, or the Malaysian Higher School Certificate) or a matriculation program before commencing university studies. More than just highlighting specific writing experiences, this theme also demonstrated students' affective response towards writing at the university, which may be seen as rather negative.

[8] Most of the writing assignment that I have does in this semester are hard in their own ways. However, one particularly challenging writing assignment that I have the most trouble with this semester is on one of my core subject in engineering. One reason it is challenging is because of how long the number of pages I would have to write to reach the minimum number of pages needed. Moreover, I would also have to write the assignment in research paper format which means that I would have to understand various science and technical terms that I don't normally use in my daily life. This causes more time as I have to determine the meaning every single difficult science terms and hence takes a lot of time to complete the writing assignment. [sic]

[9] Writing an assignment is rather difficult because, as an engineering student, I have formal and informal writing, not to mention my core subject, which has two or more tasks that need students to develop or improve the project. The lab report normally necessitates writing more than 1000 words, as well as conducting research and calculating the formula provided, which is usually difficult to answer. It is also fairly difficult due to the nature of the assignment, which requires me as an engineering student to have more information in order to do a research paper about a real-life subject, such as designing a bridge. Concerning the fact that I am not used to writing essays, it has no bearing on me because I have been instructed to write essays since secondary school in preparation for SPM. [sic]

Reading and Writing for Utility

From the third forum, there were two emergent themes. As stated earlier, the third forum aimed to triangulate information from the first two forums. Based on the students' posts, similar meanings could be gleaned from the participants' perceptions and experiences towards academic reading and

writing. One of the themes derived from the third forum is how academic reading and writing were done for utilitarian purposes. This referred to how academic literacy skills were used to fulfil university tasks. In students' posts, it also became evident that there was an awareness that language skills needed for the university were distinct. It was also shown how students may not necessarily have enough knowledge or skills in academic writing, and this was something that they had to learn independently.

> [10] As a student, i really do need the extent" in order to gain more knowledge in english especially in reading and writing and as we all know that we need the skills to get and to make any reports or articles for the lab, thesis, assignments and so on. i want to learn more about this academic reading and writing since speaking is not the same as we write and same goes to reading and regarding of this i just know that they are the different between the way reading and writing in the articles or news and novels. [sic]

> [11] My extent of reading and writing is not quite big. I only read academic material when I need information's in order to finish my assignment or when I'm curious about some issues. When I came into this class for the first time, I realized how much important academic reading for university student. A bit shocked when I found out that we need to write an Academic essay for our final project because I had no idea what it is at first but after a few weeks in this class I think I'll be able to manage it slowly but surely. [sic]

Reading and Writing for Interest

The next theme from the third forum was reading and writing for interest. This theme was comparable to the initial themes of general and specific reading and writing, from the analysis of the first two forums. In this theme, it became apparent the types of readings that students did. We could see how information that students encountered is mediated through digital tools and technology. Some students may also be reading as a form of escapism, such as the reading of novels and 'webtoons' – an online comic that is potentially helpful for language learning (Kim, 2023). Moreover, students may not perceive this as reading, given that the materials read were not necessarily academic.

> [12] Actually, I not rarely open the book and read it but I'm more like to read news with is about electronic such as brand of car and smartphone. I love to read comics too. That is the only thing that I'm interested in. So, the extent of my reading and writting is very low and also, I'm lack of vocabulary in writing. [sic]

> [13] My level of reading and writing is moderate. I only been reading romance novels. I rarely read research papers, news papers or facts books because I less interest with these books. It uses high level words in these books, which I rarely find in romance books. I read books to enjoy the story that is written in the book, which is a romance book, and try to understand the meaning of words that I have never read and searched for the meaning. [sic]

[14] My extent of reading and writing is quite low. Usually i only read webtoon or some books written by my favorite authors. I only read academic text in school before and prefer any academic text in Malay language. [sic]

Discussion

The thematization of the content of students' responses showed that the ecology for academic reading and writing in English, as well as reading and writing in English beyond the university, was limited to academic requirements. In this initial description of the students' ecology, it may be assumed that students were being assigned academic reading materials in English, but academic writing assignments may be sparse, given the lack of specificity in students' responses. This may have implications on academic skills associated with reading, such as synthesis skills. Unless university lecturers can identify other means of facilitating classroom activities that require the synthesis of information, academic reading may be at risk of being viewed only as a process for information gathering. This limits the prospect of knowledge production through information synthesis, typically carried out when writing an academic text based on various academic references (see Maguire, Reynolds, & Delahunt, 2020). Furthermore, students may view their learning experience as disjointed and abrupt if they do not receive sufficient support in developing their writing skills. Without support, students would find it difficult to regulate their learning and foster any sense of ownership or accountability towards what they learn. This may be a crucial concern to address, given that the reading and writing expectations for students' pre-tertiary education would be distinctly different from the reading requirements of the university.

More interestingly, beyond the university, reading appeared more common, though not of English materials, and of different genres and modality (webtoons) (Kim, 2023). From these observations, it may be assumed that Malaysian university students' English academic reading and writing ecology is restricted to academic material. Furthermore, engagement in academic literacy is restricted to the fulfilment of academic requirements, without any personalized investment or embodiment of the reading and writing process. In such circumstances, meaning-making is limited and students may not be able to trace what they had learned beyond the educational context (Burnett et al., 2014).

While this study only aims to provide a preliminary description of university students' ecology for reading and writing in English, it does offer some initial understanding of challenges that affect students' English language proficiency, especially in the Malaysian setting. For instance, the lack of productive language use (e.g., writing) at the university may affect students' communication skills. This has been identified as an issue, especially among Malaysian university graduates seeking employment (see Mohd Basir et al., 2022). The findings may also provide insights on the reported difficulty that university English language instructors have in implementing interactive or participatory-based teaching and learning activities (see Ramalingam, Yunus, & Hashim, 2022). It may be the case that students' lack of experience with reading and writing in English outside the university is a hindrance for these pedagogical practices. More than this, the focus on students' productive output, such as completing a written assignment, with little to no regard for relevant literacy processes limit the types of learning possibilities afforded to students. What should be considered is to consider a dialogic and dynamic view of learning, where students are drawn into

the learning processes. This would avoid learning from becoming transactional or teacher-centered (Loo & Imperial, 2022).

Based on the findings of this study, some considerations may be drawn for English language instructors. First, it may be necessary for instructors to source some of the reading materials that students encounter - either in other university courses or outside the university - as materials for teaching and learning. This may help improve students' motivation, as they are guided in reading materials that they need to understand. This may enhance the relevance of the EAP course within the wider university ecology. Second, English language instructors may work with lecturers from other programs, especially those whose courses require students to write an academic text. Such collaboration could focus on aligning the academic skills needed to complete reading or writing tasks, especially in the English language (see Alhassan, Bora, & Abdalla, 2022 for example). Third, to help students find meaning in what they are learning at the university, lecturers should strive to draw links between what is learned in the class to what students may encounter beyond. This may be important for students new to the university setting.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide a preliminary description of students' ecology of academic English reading and writing at the university, and reading and writing beyond the university. What was gleaned from students' responses was the imbalance of academic reading and writing within the university setting, and the lack of English language reading beyond the university. These findings shed light on some of the broader challenges that affect English language use in the Malaysian setting, such as in the areas of graduate employability. Besides this, it also points towards the seemingly minimal academic writing tasks that students are expected to do at the university. Future studies could consider examining whether students' reading and writing experiences may be enhanced through the integration of external materials that are non-academic in nature. A more rigorous mapping of students' English language ecology should also be done, for the purpose of identifying potentially valuable sociomaterial elements that could provide more meaningful English language encounters.

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