Emerging issues among Southeast Asian writers: Research article writing in Brunei Darussalam

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ABSTRACT

In communications, the ability to express coherently in a language understood by others is vital. English is a common language for cross-boundary, cross-culture and cross-continent communication. However, non-native speakers may find it challenging to write research papers at the level of sophistication required by international research audiences. This paper discusses the issues faced by non-native English writers from Southeast Asia including Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. Among the emerging issues faced by young Bruneians writers are the differences in writing structure between their native language and English, critiques on their language inadequacies, and challenges in self–promotional strategies. This paper also addresses ways of reducing these emerging issues as provided in the reflections of two young Bruneian research article writers.

Keywords: issues non – native writers, Brunei writers, research article writing, ignorance

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Recently, with the spread of English as the global language, English proficiency has been perceived as one of the important skills for professionals in various fields, which includes Business and Technology. English language also has become the means of communication between nations in the area of the judiciary, economics, and education; and in fact in almost all aspects of global negotiation [1]. In the business and technology environment, the option of switching over to the other party’s native tongue in intercultural encounters is increasingly yielding to another option specifically of using a common language or a lingua franca, which is increasingly being dominated by the English language. This situation is common in other fields such as Science and Economics, where English has been regarded as the communication language between international researchers and / or scientists. As noted in a quote from a member of ResearchGate [2], ‘If you want your paper to be read by many scientists from all over the world, you have to write it in English’. While code switching is a valid option in spoken communications, the need to use English is imperative in writing research articles for international publications.

Writing research articles for publication is gaining importance among researchers, including those in the Business and Technology areas for various reasons, such as for career advancement [3], for sharing of knowledge [4], to secure research funding, for prestige [5,1],
to meet the requirement set by the research funders [6,7], and to meet the academic performance measures [8, 9]. Consequently, researchers are spurred on to publish their work in English-medium journals. Even though the Southeast Asian writers are at a disadvantage in having to compete for academic recognition in other language other than their own; writing research articles in English is still gaining importance amongst Southeast Asian writers because of the reasons pertaining to gaining global readership, having higher chance for being cited and establishing international visibility.

Countless studies have been conducted on the role of English language [10, 11], however there are fewer studies that look into the problems faced in writing English research articles amongst Southeast Asian writers. In view of that, this paper intends to highlight the findings of several studies on the issues faced by the Southeast Asian writers, and relate them to the issues faced by other non-native English writers globally.

2.0 RATIONALE OF PAPER

In Brunei Darussalam, the problems of writing English research articles were not explicitly reported in any articles either locally or internationally. However, it was openly discussed by one of the authors in an online forum mediated by a professional platform, ResearchGate. ResearchGate is a social networking site for researchers to share papers, ask and answer questions and find collaborators [38]. Thus, this paper is a collaborative effort among non-native writers from Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, to highlight the issues related to the usage of English as the medium of research communication, among Southeast Asian non–native writers. This paper is a unique project between two nations with diverse academic backgrounds, communicated solely through emails and ResearchGate. This paper began with the communication and agreed collaboration between the first two authors who are members of ResearchGate. Through this paper, the common and emerging issues from the three non–native English writers are discussed.

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF PAPER

This paper is significant in three major ways: it provides a list of common and emerging issues faced by non–native English writers globally; it identifies the common issues faced by Southeast Asian non–native writers; and it relates the individual experiences of the co–authors to the emerging issues identified.

This paper will also be an important reference point to research article writers in Brunei Darussalam albeit the individual experiences shared by the co–authors are basic and limited. Yet, the collaborative effort made to accomplish this research paper within a short period of time should be exemplary to research article writers in both nations.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

The paper is a compilation of secondary materials (from previous studies) and primary materials (reflections on the experiences of non–native writers with diverse backgrounds i.e. English, Science and Economics). Both materials are presented in tabular forms and quotes.

As this paper intends to be the reference point for research article writers in Brunei Darussalam, this paper will highlight the sentiments reflected by the non-native writers from Brunei which are consistent with the international and South East Asian literature, to accommodate the lack of literature in the Bruneian context. These reflections are tabulated in Table 3 and Table 4 respectively.
Although these reflections may seem like a fill-in-a-blank task for the non-native writers from Brunei Darussalam, but it took a great length for the co–authors to realise the emerging issues faced by themselves, and how relevant the previous studies to the problems faced by these co–authors, regardless of their diverse academic backgrounds. Therefore, the personal reflections highlighted are the findings obtained for this paper, which were analysed to reveal the consistencies with previous literatures.

5.0 FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

In previous studies, a number of research writing problems faced by non–native writers globally have been identified and reported by many researchers. The issues commonly faced by the Non–Native (NN) writers can be categorized into three areas (Table 1), that is:

i. Lexicogramatical area [12,13],
ii. Discourse structure [14,15] and
iii. Cultural differences 16, 17, 18.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Issues</th>
<th>Source: Secondary materials</th>
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<tr>
<td>Lexicogramatical area</td>
<td>Research writing difficulties in the lexicogramatical area were a major problem faced by Hong Kong scholars [12]. These included issues such as having less facility of expression, taking longer time to write, having a less rich vocabulary, having difficulties making claims for their research with the right amount of force and the fact that their composition was influenced by their first language. Non – native writers were also found to face problems in the usage of modal verbs, performative verbs and cognitive verbs [13]. Other aspects reported as problematic were appropriate vocabulary usage, difficulties in organizing the points, and command of grammar [19].</td>
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<td>Discourse structure</td>
<td>From a discourse perspective [20], it was suggested that non – native research writers should be more aware of hedging which is a linguistic device that can be strategically used to “to show politeness or to hide deficit of knowledge...employ uncertainty or lack of commitment”. Other studies on [21,22] warned that articles written by non – native writers “contain far more personal involvement” than native English writers and this “reader visibility” makes the text “resemble spoken language”.</td>
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<td>Cultural differences</td>
<td>Problems stemming from cultural differences were also reported by many researchers. One of the examples included the problems faced by Slovak RA writers on being “accused of being pretentious, overconfident and unjustifiably conclusive” when actually; the problems lay in the cultural differences [23]. The “lack of insight into the interactive functions of the English language” was identified among Slovaks writers. On this note, those writers were cautioned to fulfill the native speaker expectation and standards [23], and non – native research article writers should master “not only linguistic but also socio-cultural strategies”. The strategy of critiquing is commonly used to position the written study in the existing body of knowledge in research article writing. The body of knowledge is not only described but also critically positioned to create a research gap intended for the study being...</td>
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written. An absence of critique culture in English research articles was reported to be common among Spanish writers [24] and Brazilian–Portuguese [25].

Table 1: Issues of non–native writers globally in writing research articles

Table 1 reports the issues faced by non–native research article writers based on the three main issues that are: the lexicogramatical area, discourse structure and cultural differences.

In contrast to the global literature, in the context of Southeast Asian countries (Table 2), one common issue that arises among non–native writers is cultural differences. Due to the variations in culture, other common issues follow:

1. Differences in writing structure,
2. Critique inadequacies, and
3. Low self–promotional strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Southeast Asian countries</th>
<th>Source: Secondary materials</th>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>The importance of English language was recognized as the language for education and official records [26] and “considered as the language for access to information” [27]. Despite the status as the second language, publishing research article in English was still a challenge for many academicians in the country. “Language difficulties were another factor limiting publication [6] – to achieve publication in journal recognized by Web of knowledge, whether international or local, scientist must write in English, of which some of them have only an imperfect command”. In addition to the language issue, the length of time “taken to prepare the manuscript” was also another obstacle [28,29]. Writing structure was also a challenging issue [30, 31], for example structure issues surfaced from cultural variation [32]. The study [32] highlighted the cultural impact of local culture in research writing in Malay by Malaysian writers. Amongst them were the lack of emphasis on critical view in past research. For example, they “rarely posed challenges to other’s work” and there was a “lack of self-promotion presented in the introduction.” [32]. The Project–Justifying–Model which provides valuable input on describing how writers write in Malay language was proposed [32].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>The cultural differences in research article writing have been addressed by a few researchers [14,17], and the issue of “parochialism” was highlighted among Indonesian research article writers [17]. Parochialism refers to the rhetorical structures and the realities of the strategies used in the writing were described and justified from the local cultural perspective. In this case, the view presented was on local emphasis with little consideration for global readers. A few studies reported on the issues of parochialism who described parochialism as to be provincial and narrow scope [14,17]. The parochial phenomenon in the English research article by the Indonesian writers was attributed to the expected local practice in writing reports and documents to the government [17].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Studies on research articles by Thais [16] pointed out that the cultural differences that led to writing problems among Thai research</td>
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</table>
article writers. Similar to the findings in the Indonesia and Malaysia, Thai research articles were found to be lacking in ‘critique culture’ which is expected in the Anglo-western academia. The lacking of critique strategy was actually attributed to the Thai culture of respecting the seniors and older people [16]; which in turn had an effect on the writers to see critique writing strategy as unfavorable. Earlier works [33] also reported that Thais research writers tended to be reluctant to evaluate the works of others instead of stopping at summarizing the works only. The reluctance was in line with the conventional academic culture “to save face”, “respect a rigid system of seniority” as such it seems to be “inappropriate to criticize the works of their colleagues” [33]. It was also reported that unlike the conventional native model where, the research finding is mentioned in the introduction section, the Thais “were reluctant to reveal their research finding” in the introduction section [33]. Such reluctant denies the Thais from making self-promotional strategies in the early part of the article which could have capture the interest of the readers rather than risking the readers to read the whole paper to the end.

| Philippines | A study on research articles introductions by the Philippines academics [34] suggested that research gaps were not as regularly used as the norms and the research gaps are not being elaborated upon adequately in the introduction sections. Instead, the writers are more comfortable to outline the “research purposes”, specify “the limitations of the study”, and present “the nature of the present research”. Similar to the Thais, the Philippines writers were also reported to have low self-promotional strategy as in making minimal highlight to the significance of their study. |

Table 2: Issues of Southeast Asia non – native English writers in writing research articles

In the context of Brunei Darussalam, the issues commonly discussed were more on students’ performances in English subject at public examinations, in which the Bruneian students as non – native writers have to sit for international examinations meant for native [35]. These issues are common especially to educators in Brunei Darussalam. In Brunei, the importance of English language was emphasized during the period where Malay language was established as the dominant language of the nation, in order to achieve the educational objective by means of bilingual system of education [35]. Such education system in Brunei Darussalam provides opportunities for students to speak English in all subjects except for Malay language and Religious knowledge subjects in the secondary level and up to the tertiary level. Science and Economics subjects must be taught and learnt in English. In fact, English is a required course in the University, in which prospective students required to sit for IELTS and achieved at least a 6.0 point. During the undergraduate study, students are required to receive 8 units of English over a two year period which amounts to 112 hours of teaching [35].

On the other hand, issues on writing research articles are not widely discussed; and the difficulties faced by non – native writers from Brunei could either be ignored or assumed not present at all. This was evidently proved during the conference when this paper was presented, a group of academics from the same institution preferred to attend a parallel session that discusses students’ communication skills rather than the emerging issues of non-native research article writers, on top of other possible factors such as friendly support or topic relevancy. Nevertheless in this section, the difficulties faced by the non-native research article writers from Brunei Darussalam are reflected briefly in Table 3 and 4.
The significance of writing research articles based on the two subjects (Science and Economics) is shared below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Source: Primary materials from Science Education background</th>
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<tr>
<td>Differences in writing structure</td>
<td>To write articles to be published locally and internationally was never emphasized in the old days during the English units; however, the importance of writing content in research articles was highlighted by both Science lecturers and Science Education lecturers during the undergraduate studies in Universiti Brunei Darussalam. In pure science articles, the emphasis was on the experimental findings and data analysis. Performing correct statistical analysis is the upmost difficulty faced by young biologists. In science education articles, the emphasis was on the content of a selected topic. Therefore, the format of writing an article is important in shaping the writing structure. My first article published in the university journal was based on my essay written for course assignment entitled: What does it mean to be an exemplary biology teacher? There are guidelines that need to be followed by writers, although some writers might get discouraged to follow these guidelines. In my previous local and international publications, the APA formatting and referencing must be followed. For this publication, it would be my first time using IEEE referencing style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique inadequacies</td>
<td>Co – authoring papers, critiquing or giving critical comments is usually provided by the more experienced writers. However, between the non – native writers or with peers, we share the same inadequacies with other Southeast Asian non – native writers, especially when peers do not share the same passion in writing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self – promotional strategies</td>
<td>I agree with the other non – native writers from Southeast Asian countries. It is not a culture to write an article, thus it is not the culture of talking about it. It took me 15 years to discover a published article in an international journal with a high impact point, with me as a co – author but written by my former lecturer. It was not a big deal in the old days.</td>
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Table 3: Issues faced by a non – native writer from Brunei Darussalam with writing experiences of 5 – 10 articles published in local and international journals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Source: Primary materials from Economics background</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differences in writing structure</td>
<td>Writing an article is based on my experience, compared to writing assignments, where correct content is required. To start writing as a co-author is an important step in order to obtain the motivation, assistance and help with more experienced non – native co – authors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique inadequacies</td>
<td>Co – authoring this paper is a good opportunity for me to be involved in writing or publishing in journals. It is a good stepping – stone for me since this is my first time being a co - author. As a means to prepare myself for any critiques, I will need to see and understand</td>
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why my writings are criticized; if the flaws are mine, I will treat it as a challenge to improve myself. Therefore, critiques (if given) should be adequate and preferably constructive.

| Self – promotional strategies | I am prepared to promote my writings and experiences formally and informally through various medias including blogs and media – info. |

Table 4: Issues faced by a new non – native writer from Brunei Darussalam with writing experiences of less than 5 articles published in local and international journals.

Writing a research article for the first time for a new non – native writer can still be considered difficult if done alone. Therefore, it is advisable to begin writing with other non – native writers as co – authors, which are executed in this paper. Regardless the backgrounds or fields of the authors, writing in English is equally important in either academic writings or journal publishing.

Finally, Table 5 summarises the difficulties faced by the co-authors of this paper in relation to the difficulties faced by non-native researchers from Southeast Asian countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Southeast Asian countries</th>
<th>Brunei Darussalam</th>
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</table>
| Differences in writing structure | Malaysia: Language difficulties; lengthy time taken to prepare manuscript; writing structure  
Indonesia: Parochialism issue in writings  
Thailand: Writing problems | Motivation is needed to start writing. Guidance and guidelines are needed to begin co-authoring paper.  
Not all co–authors share the same synergy or passion in writings. |
| Critique inadequacies | Malaysia: Lack of emphasis on critical view in past research  
Indonesia: Lack of critique culture  
Thailand: Lack of critique culture | Receiving comments or critiques, or making critiques differs from one writer to another, depending on how open they are to criticisms. |
| Self – promotional strategies | Malaysia: Lack of self-promotion in introduction section  
Thailand: Reluctant to self-promote in introduction section  
Philippines: Low self-promotional strategy | Ignorance is a more worrying culture compare to self-promotion strategy. |

Table 5: Summary of issues faced by non – native writers from Brunei Darussalam in relation to Southeast Asian non-native writers.

In Table 5, an addition to the common issues faced by the non-native writers of Southeast Asian writers including from Brunei Darussalam, which is one important contribution of this paper that need to be addressed by academics, is the ignorance to research article writing. If academics chose not to address this issue, all the three difficulties i.e. differences in writing structure, critique inadequacies and self-promotional strategies will not be observable, thus cannot be applied in the teachings of professional genre writing, if the interest of writing research articles is not instilled in young researchers. Thus, ignorance to research writing is an addition to the cultural variations that play significant roles in the writings of research articles by Southeast Asian non-native writers.
6.0 CONCLUSION

The issues highlighted in all of the studies above indicated that cultural variations play important roles in the writings of research articles by non-native writers. Relative to the significant issues rendered from cultural differences, there is a need for studies on how Southeast Asian writers use English language to meet the expectation of international research publication in various fields. Moreover, research article writing is unlike the general communicative writing and can be categorized as a professional genre. The teaching of professional genre can benefit from the genre approach [36, 37].

In relation to this study, careful consideration on cultural variations must be made in the application of genre approach for the teachings of professional genre writing. For example, the lack of critique culture can be overcome by providing techniques on how to criticize past research papers. In Bruneian context, ignorance to research article writings need to be addressed soon by academics, to emphasize the significance of research article writings, and increase the number of non-native writers among Bruneians.

With the evolution of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weebo and a more professional platform: ResearchGate [38], promotional strategies should become easier. The latter i.e. ResearchGate [38], emphasized in publishing articles and share it with other researchers, apart from exchanging ideas and discussing solutions to queries.

REFERENCES


