

Narrative Experiences of Indonesian Academic Sojourners Studying Master's Degree in English-Speaking Countries: A Cross-Case Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The study of academic sojourners' experience has been discussed and reported from different perspectives such as social, cultural and linguistic, which are generally contextualized in a single case. Little empirical evidence has been framed from language education lens, particularly on the cross-case analysis of their academic experiences in English-speaking countries. Therefore, this study is focused on examining the experiences of seven Indonesian academic sojourners studying master's TESOL in the UK and Australian Universities. The stories of seven Indonesian academic sojourners and their artefacts were thematically analysed. The current findings showed that reading and writing were the most prevalent challenges they have to deal. Based on data analysis, these two skills were quite demanding, which in many cases led to their emotional disturbance. Although the sojourners struggled to cope with their emotional distress, they creatively sought suitable strategies to anticipate and solve their problems, spanning from recognizing self-learning style, changing habits, going to the university writing centre, and joining study groups, to asking for help from colleagues. The implication of the study calls for the inclusion of (classroom) academic cross-cultural understanding in language teacher education.

Keywords: *Academic sojourners, Cross-case analysis, Narrative experience and Language skills*

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic sojourners can be referred to international students who visit new or unfamiliar places to obtain academic knowledge and return to their native place upon achieving their academic goals (Ward et al. 2001 in Arifeen, 2013). Due to different cultures from their own or unfamiliar experiences, the academic sojourners experience culture shock (Brown & Holloway 2008; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015; Yukselir 2018). Wu et al. (2015) in their study of Japanese students studying in the U.S Universities indicate that the language issue such as accents, speed, and pronunciations is a significant challenge for the sojourners to tackle. This challenge tends to impede the Japanese sojourners from engaging in classroom interactions in Australian universities (Yanagi & Baker, 2016). In this sense, language proficiency can potentially obstruct the sojourners to perform academic better. Yeh and Inose (2010) argue that the sojourners who possess higher English language proficiency incline to feel more confident to participate in academic activities compared to those who have lower English language proficiency.

In addition to the language barrier, Brown and Holloway (2008) & Yukselir (2018) indicate that

feeling far away from home can lead sojourners to culture shock, resulting in poor academic performance. Also, the different academic culture is a prominent factor contributing to culture shock experienced by the sojourners (Zhou et al., 2008). While the teachers in the UK universities expect the students to be autonomous, the Chinese sojourners tend to rely on their teachers' guidance (Gu & Maley, 2008). This different view causes students to be negatively associated with dependent learners (Hsieh, 2011).

Not all sojourners experienced culture shock. They just experienced culture bump (Wu & Hammond, 2011). Culture bump can be understood when the sojourners find themselves in difficult circumstances. Yet, they remain motivated to meet new challenges and are willing to explore strategies to improve their academic ability. Culture bump can also be found in the Langley and Breese's (2005) study of American students studying in the Ireland universities. They show that the sojourners obtain positive values and experiences, although they find hard times during the study. Yuan (2011) also highlights that although the sojourners find the difference in an academic situation, they still actively participate in the classroom.

Most current studies on academic sojourners' experiences have been focused on a single case. Some of them are about Chinese students in the UK universities, Japanese students in Australian universities, or African students in Chinese universities. A further study focuses on a cross-case analysis of academic sojourners studying in English-speaking countries to extend our understanding of their academic settings experiences. Therefore, this study examines Indonesian academic sojourners' experiences studying a master's degree in TESOL in the UK and Australian universities.

2. METHOD

This research adopts a cross-case analysis. A cross-case analysis is defined as an analysis that examines themes, similarities, and differences across cases. Since this study is focused on analyzing themes, similarities, and differences in two cases, this study perfectly corresponds to the definition of cross-case analysis. The primary data of this study was collected via interviews while the supplementary data was gathered from their artefacts. The data obtained from interviews were transcribed in verbatim and analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and cross-checked with the data collected via artefacts.

Table 1 displays the participants' profile. Seven Indonesian academic sojourners were interviewed separately for between 45 to 60 minutes via WhatsApp telephone and face-to-face mode. Prior the interviews, the participants signed the consent form. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to eliminate the possible misunderstandings which caused by the language barrier. English translation was made after the transcription process completed. In regard to the involved participants, all have completed their master's degree (Master in TESOL and Master of Education (in TESOL) in the UK and Australian universities. The following is the participants' profile.

Table 1. The participants' profile.

Name (anonymous)	Study Program	Country
Satria	Master of Education	Australia
Fauzi	Master of Education	Australia
Raka	TESOL	Australia
Nabilah	TESOL	United Kingdom
Tomi	TESOL	United Kingdom
Luna	TESOL	United Kingdom
Puan	Master of Education	Australia

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are five prominent themes which emerge from our data analysis. The first finding concerns the challenges experienced by the sojourners in academic settings, and the second finding is about the strategies they used to cope with the challenges.

3.1. The Challenges and Struggles due to Pedagogical Differences

The data sets illustrated that writing is one of the significant challenges Indonesian academic sojourners face during their study in English speaking country universities. They were aware that they did not have sufficient writing skills to excel in their academic attainment, particularly when at the beginning of their study. As indicated by the sojourners, this lack of writing skill could be associated with the different academic practical guidelines when assessing students' work.

Extract 1.1

Puan: "At the first semester, I had no idea of making good writing, paraphrasing. I did not know it at all even to make one good paragraph. It was because when I was in my bachelor's degree, I did not get any rubric in writing. There were no guidelines, unlike in my master's degree... Thus, I just made as long as it could be and there was no words limit at that time and the longer the essay is, the better the score is"

From the extract above, it can be recognized that the sojourner's current university's pedagogical practices are more rigid and systematic than that of her previous university. In this regard, the absence of rubric in writing tasks during her undergraduate study contributed to her poor knowledge and insufficient ability to write academic writing. Moreover, her lecturers' marking was mostly based on the length of the writing, not on the content and technical writing.

The finding corresponds with the previous study conducted by Wu and Hammond (2011) who show that generally, the sojourners have problems with the speaking and writing skills. The identified problem that contributed to their lack of speaking and writing skills is the functional deficit in speaking and writing in their home university.

Another prominent finding contributing to the sojourners' challenges during their master's degree was reading and writing particular types of genre. Mostly sojourners said that they were not familiar with the typical reading materials that the master students should be expected to read. The sojourners said that

during their master's study, they were urged to read journal articles. In contrast, when the sojourners were in their undergraduate study, they were not expected to read journal articles, and some even were not familiar with this type of article.

Extract 1.2

Luna: "I was in English literature, so I got used to read novels. Therefore, when I was in my master's degree, I was so hard to understand the journal articles both from the lexical and the grammar. The second is about the language, it's very complex. The structure of the language itself... Like when I found strange terminologies, I was very confusing because I didn't understand it. For example, when I found the word 'schemata', I really didn't understand it."

Therefore, this gap of the knowledge made Luna confused when she started to read the journal articles. This deficit knowledge of reading particular genre – journal articles - experienced by Luna, also affected her writing performance. Luna found herself in confusing when she needed to put into words her ideas that she had read. Moreover, demonstrating the critical thinking skill in reading and writing was another aspect which potentially inhibits the sojourners' academic performance.

Extract 1.3

Satria: "when I was in my master's degree, the most demanded skill is writing, we need to write a lot because all the assignment is in form of writing. To read the journal article is a huge challenge for me, and then write it into a good essay is another huge challenge for me! I was so confused of how to write a good and comprehensive essay it was so much difficult. Because, in writing, the students need to find their own voice."

Satria considered that reading journal articles and writing essays were equally quite demanding and challenging. One factor identified contributing to his mixture feeling was about ways to criticize the articles and then put his critical analysis in his writing. In addition to critical thinking and critical writing that master students should be familiar with, they were also expected to possess critical reading skills, mainly when answering the questions on their assignments.

Extract 1.4

Fauzi: "when I think my IELTS score for writing is enough. Because I got 7.0, but it is not. So, at the first time when I tried to do writing

assignment, I always end up with not answering the questions. My essay does not really answer the question. And also when I try to deal with the paraphrasing, it's out of my expectations.

From the extract above, there is no quite linear link between the English language the sojourners learnt and the actual use of language in the real academic settings. The possible explanation for this condition is that the sojourners are not quite familiar with the critical reading skill. They did not fully understand the expected answers to the questions.

Unlike other sojourners who asserted that writing and reading skills are quite challenging, one sojourner told that he was inclined to have a speaking skill problem.

Extract 1.5

Raka: "What is very challenging for me is, when I get the oral assignment, which I need to do presentation and sort of that, and that's really not my thing. I did not have any issue on writing and reading skill, or probably about grammar. It isn't a big deal for me. Even now, I've published two journals. And the other one is still in press...and also speaking is not what I passionate about, so I'm very confused"

What made Raka differ from other sojourners regarding the academic challenges faced during their master's study is that he was quite confident about his reading and writing skills' performance. He provided concrete evidence that he could publish two journal articles during his master's study. However, for him speaking was a big challenge, as this skill requires him to have a systematic way of thinking which at the end, he should be able to articulate it in an obvious way. He wanted to say that passion could be a determinant factor for someone to excel or not in particular skills and for him, as speaking is not his passion; he is not quite excellence in speaking.

Also, instead of passion, which plays a crucial role on the sojourners to possess sufficient language skills, habits are considered the factor that helps the sojourners tackle the challenges they found during their study as illustrated by a sojourner in the following.

Extract 1.6

Nabilah: "I really like reading and writing since I was little, so they did not become a huge challenge for me...so far, I've never got bad comments on my writing performance...we need to be

in a rush to finish all the assignments, projects and paper in a limited time. That's the only challenge.

Nabilah explicitly said that her past reading and writing habits helped her fulfil academic expectations, including completing her course assignments and publishing her journal article. It was surprising that, when many sojourners found language skills a significant problem, Nabilah said that hectic schedule was the most challenging challenge during her master's study. What made her distress was that a late submission brought about consequences. This condition was also experienced by a sojourner, Tomi, as is depicted in the following extract.

Extract 1.7

Tomi: "the challenge that I experienced was due to the hectic schedule, because I've never experienced it before when I was in my bachelor's degree. So, it's all about how we manage our time well...the hardest one is when there are 4 of subjects which all of them require us to make essay and we need to submit it at the same time. It is very overwhelming. Moreover, our score will be decreased 5 per day if we are late to submit the assignment. So, it is very strict, and the worst, we will be sent home if our scores are always bad."

Failing to meet the deadline can be a severe problem for the sojourners like Nabilah and Tomi to get better scores and degrees. Therefore, they said that managing the hectic schedule to meet the deadline is much more important than the language skills themselves, as failing to meet the deadline means failing to get the degree.

Although the sojourners found relatively similar academic challenges during their master's study, they showed different strategies to deal with their challenges, as is explained in the following section.

3.2. The Strategies Used to Overcome the Challenges

The current research findings indicated that the sojourners had various strategies to deal with their academic challenges. The strategies used by the sojourners were primarily inspired by their previous experiences and were also informed by their surroundings. The strategies used by the sojourners spans from recognizing learning style, changing habits, going to the university writing centre, joining study groups, asking for help from colleagues to practising a lot.

Regarding the sojourners' challenges in fulfilling academic expectations, one sojourner said that he used the self-identification strategy to recognize his type. Having been recognized his characteristic, he then could seek an alternative solution to his problems.

Extract 2.1

Tomi: "At first, we need to understand how our characteristic is, then, we will consider how to cope the problems. Me myself, I really cannot be multi-tasking. To do everything, I need to do it one by one. So, to do the assignment, I will divide, for this day how many words I should write. And also, for taking a break to walk around and have vacation."

Breaking a downtime schedule into specific tasks could help sojourners like Tomi deal with his challenges during his master's study. Breaking down his specific tasks into details could provide him a clear guide on what to do and when to do the tasks. If Tomi was quite convenient with his strategy – self-identification to overcome his academic problems, another sojourner, Fauzi, used a somewhat radical strategy to change his habits.

Extract 2.2

Fauzi: "For coping my academic problems, I need to change my bad habit. I always did my assignments a week before it's due although it's given for a month ago hahahaha. Then, I realize I need to change it, because I got a lot of assignments, so, I need to be able to manage my time very well, especially to finish all the assignments on time."

Managing the hectic schedule during the master's study can only be achieved through a rather radical way, changing bad habits. Although explicitly, Fauzi did not indicate that he had 'real' bad habits; he wanted to articulate those joint efforts cannot cope with the deadlines. In this sense, he worked very hard to complete each assignment before the due date was perceived to be a radical way to meet the deadlines.

Another strategy used by the sojourner to deal with their academic problems was going to the university writing centre and consulting to their lecturers.

Extract 2.3

Puan: "when I got problems with my assignment, especially in making essay, I always went to writing centre. It is an academic facility provided by college. They always help the students who gets difficulties in writing, they help us how

to paraphrase, find a good idea, and so forth...all the lecturers really care about their students. If we need some help, they always give us some references. Moreover, they are very open to every opinion, as long as we have clear sources.

Puan knew that the university provided a free service for academic sojourners like her when they had academic writing problems, so she used this service to help improve her writing skill. By going to the writing centre, she admitted that she could better understand the technical problems she had in academic writing. This finding corroborates the previous finding, which shows that college facilities help reduce the academic tensions of the sojourners' problems (Milian et al. 2015).

Besides going to the university writing centre for help, the sojourner also went to their lecturers for help. Coming to lecturers also means that the students will solve their academic problems, as generally lecturers open up a space for discussions. Through this discussion, the knowledge gap between the students and the lecturers can be minimized. This finding is in line with the Wang's finding (2018), which shows that the sojourners recognize the host lecturers' teaching-learning style values. Valuing their lecturers' teaching style can help the students get closer to their lecturers, creating a more informal relationship. This created convenience situation can help students have more confidence to talk to and discuss their potential problems to their lecturers.

Not only coming to the lecturers, but the sojourners also used study group and colleagues' expertise to seek for solutions.

Extract 2.4

Luna: "...when I join this study group, it can help me to prepare the material that we will learn. So, although I did not have much time to read the journal articles, this study group will keep me having 50% of the journal articles...I also often ask my roommate's help to comment on my project. And I ask her to review my ideas that I'd like to put into my writing"

Although the study group is not the best place for sojourners to improve their writing skill, they were aware that the study group is essential to familiarize themselves to the content of journal articles.

This present finding seems to be consistent with the research conducted by Langley and Breese (2005). They found that the sojourners tend to obtain positive experiences by interacting and getting involved in social activities in the host university. Getting involved

in social activities leads the sojourners to build a good friendship with the home students, and through this way, they benefitted from getting access to the native language source.

Therefore, it can be recognized that Indonesian sojourners used different strategies to tackle their academic challenges during their master's study. Although it is also admitted by the sojourners that not all strategies work best helping to solve their academic problems.

4. CONCLUSION

The significant challenges experienced by Indonesian academic sojourners studying in the English-speaking country's universities are around language skills – reading, writing and speaking. However, not all sojourners found that language skills are the most challenges experienced during their master's study; instead, they said that meeting the deadlines and managing the hectic schedules are the more challenging to deal. Although the sojourners have almost similar academic challenges, they show different strategies to deal with their challenges. Their different strategies are recognized to be informed by their previous and current knowledge.

The findings of the current study suggest that Indonesian students need to familiarize themselves with the speaking, reading and writing habits, as pursuing degree overseas or in English speaking countries demands the students to demonstrate the high proficiency of speaking, reading and writing skills. This current study implies that the stakeholders should rethink to include the real pedagogical practices in English language teaching curriculum so that the gap between EFL learners (Indonesian) in the classroom is not far different from that of English language used in the English-speaking country universities' classrooms.

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