

## **Academic oral communication difficulties encountered by Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian university**

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This mixed-methods study examined academic oral communication difficulties encountered by Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university and how they overcome these difficulties. The study also examined the correlation between students' academic oral communication difficulties and their prior learning experience. Questionnaires, focus group interviews, and journal writing were used to collect data. Descriptive statistics and Spearman correlation analysis were used to analyse the quantitative data. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify academic oral communication difficulties encountered by the students and how they overcome these difficulties. The study revealed that the major academic oral communication difficulties encountered by these students are speaking accurately, communicating ideas fluently, speaking with clear pronunciation, and communicating ideas confidently. In the process of overcoming these difficulties, the students reported that they employed some strategies such as joining English proficiency courses and attending seminars, workshops, and conferences. Furthermore, the study revealed a strong negative correlation between most areas of academic oral communication difficulties and students' prior learning experience. Thus, it is recommended that these students need to be involved in various academic oral activities to survive in other similar contexts where they need oral skills for successful academic performance and effective communication.

### **Introduction**

Higher education in Malaysia has witnessed a massive expansion and restructuring, resulting in diversification of the sector and emergence of private higher education (Lee, 2004a, 2004b). Furthermore, universities in Malaysia have been developed in order to produce a highly skilled workforce and to attract international students. Malaysian universities have recently attracted more international students, especially from countries in the Middle East, Africa, and some Asian countries (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Pandian, Baboo & Mahfoodh, 2016; Sirat, 2010). However, most of the international students in Malaysia come from the Middle East and Arab countries (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Singh, Pandian & Singh, 2015). In 2003 international students numbered 30,397. In 2010, the number of international students in the country reached 86,919. There were 111,939 international students in 2011 in several Malaysian institutions of higher education (Aziz & Abdullah, 2014; Cheng, Yang, Chen & Chen, 2014). Yeong (2018) mentioned that international students in Malaysia has reached 113,407 in 2015. Yet, the Malaysian government expects the number of international students to reach 200,000 by 2020 (Pandian et al., 2016; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010).

In fact, Malaysia has become one of the new players in the market of recruiting international students in Asia, in addition to other countries such as Singapore, China, and India. The Malaysian government gives continuous support for making Malaysia an international education hub in the region. However, international postgraduate students pursuing their higher studies in Malaysia where English is the medium of instruction in most postgraduate programs need to have a good level of proficiency in English language skills to cope with academic requirements. In Malaysian universities, all postgraduate students are required to use oral communication skills in various academic activities such as classroom discussions, conference presentations, seminar presentations, research proposal defence, and *viva voce*.

Generally speaking, several studies in the Malaysian context have focused on the academic difficulties in general and needs of international students (e.g. Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Mahfoodh, 2014; Singh et al., 2015; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010). However, little work has explored difficulties in academic oral communication as perceived by international students in Malaysian universities. Exceptions are a few studies that are reviewed in the following section. Since the educational background and learning mode of international students who choose Malaysia as their destination to pursue higher education studies would be different, their problems and academic difficulties are worth examining. Furthermore, despite the increasing number of investigations related to international students in Malaysia, comparatively no empirical studies have examined the correlation between international postgraduate students' difficulties in academic oral communication and students' prior learning experience.

Recent studies that have focused on issues related to international students' academic and sociocultural life in Malaysia include Mahfoodh (2014), Singh et al. (2015), Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016), Shafaei and Razak (2016), and Shafaei, Nejati, Quazi and von der Heidt (2016). Yet, international students coming from Middle Eastern and Arab countries who constitute the largest numbers of international students in Malaysia have been under-represented in research. Furthermore, Yemeni postgraduate students' academic difficulties have not been adequately addressed in previous studies. An exception is the study carried out by Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016) who examined academic reading difficulties of Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university. Therefore, there is a need for studies that investigate international postgraduate students' difficulties in academic oral communication, and the correlation between these difficulties and students' prior learning experience.

Taking into account the gap in previous research as explained above, there are two major purposes of this study. First, this study investigated Yemeni postgraduate students' difficulties in academic oral communication in a Malaysian public university and how they overcame these difficulties. Second, this study examined the correlation between students' difficulties in academic oral communication and their prior learning experiences. Specifically, this study addresses the following three research questions:

1. What are the difficulties encountered by Yemeni postgraduate students in academic oral communication while pursuing their studies in a Malaysian public university?

2. What is the relationship between Yemeni postgraduate students' difficulties in academic oral communication and their previous learning experience?
3. How do Yemeni postgraduate students overcome difficulties in academic oral communication?

In this study, we used the term 'academic oral communication' to refer to the use of English language in the speech mode for the purposes of academic communication. 'Academic oral communication' includes English oral skills that international postgraduate students use in various speaking activities and practices such as oral presentations, proposal defences, and oral discussions. Thus, we cannot separate English oral skills and academic oral communication, because both of them are related to the use of language in oral activities and practices. Furthermore, we used 'academic oral communication', not English oral skills, to indicate that the concern of our study is the use of English in academic contexts because international students in Malaysia use English also in non-academic contexts. In fact, the term 'academic oral communication' has been used in several previous studies to refer to the same conceptualisation we used in the current study. Examples of previous studies that have used this particular term are Ferris and Tagg (1996), Ferris (1998), Kim (2006), and Cheng and Fox (2008).

In this current study, we focused on 'academic oral communication' for three reasons. First, previous studies on international students in Malaysia have not adequately addressed this topic. This is made clear in the following section in which we review related studies. Second, previous studies on international students in Malaysia have not considered the correlation between international postgraduate students' academic difficulties and their prior learning experience. Third, international postgraduate students need skills to communicate orally in English because several of their academic activities and practices depend on the use of oral skills.

This study has some contributions to make. One of the major contributions of this study is that it examines the correlation between difficulties in academic oral communication and postgraduate students' prior learning experiences. Another major contribution of this study is that it focuses on difficulties in academic oral communication encountered by Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia. This research topic has not been addressed in previous studies that have examined issues related to international postgraduate students in the country. Additionally, the findings of the current study are likely to be of concern for authorities in higher education in Malaysia, because this study uncovers some aspects of academic difficulties encountered by international postgraduate students. Understanding academic difficulties of international postgraduate students can help authorities in Malaysia to offer improved support to these students to achieve their goals and obtain academic success. Furthermore, this study contributes to the on-going attention that has addressed the experience of international postgraduate students in several contexts including Malaysia.

## **Literature review**

This section presents a review of related studies, in four sub-sections. The first sub-section provides a review of previous studies conducted in various Western contexts. This is followed by the second sub-section which reviews studies that have focused on academic difficulties of international students in Malaysia. Studies carried out on issues related to Arab and Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia are presented in the third sub-section. The fourth sub-section focuses on studies that have investigated issues related to postgraduate students' learning experience.

### **Studies on international students in various Western contexts**

In one of the early studies that examined academic oral skills of international students, Ferris (1998) focused on academic speaking activities of international students in the US context. She examined 768 ESL students' aural/oral academic needs and found that oral presentations and whole class discussions were the most difficult oral academic tasks for the students. Both Tatar (2005) and Lee (2009) focused on oral presentations and found that international students' classroom participation is influenced by various contextual factors, such as students' background, discussion topic, peer-dominance in the discussion, sociocultural values, and individual differences. In another study in the US context, Kim (2006) examined East Asian students' views regarding the required listening and speaking skills and found that oral presentations and listening comprehension were the most important skills for East Asian students. In the Canadian context, Cheng, Myles and Curtis (2004) explored 59 international students' perceived linguistic and cultural challenges and found that leading classroom discussions and giving presentations were among various language challenges for the students. Focusing on Chinese students in Canada, Yang (2010) found that the great challenge for the students was academic presentations, especially open discussion sessions.

Focusing on academic difficulties of 101 Australian and 101 ethnic Chinese students in Australia, Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones and Callan (1991) reported that Chinese students had difficulties in how to handle tutorials because they did not know how to use English to express their opinions in tutorials. Furthermore, in the same context, Briguglio (2000) identified that international students' reluctance to use English in oral activities is mainly determined by their previous educational experience in which the reliance was on rote learning. In another study in the Australian context, Yates and Wahid (2013) interviewed 10 international students to obtain their views on academic speaking and their effort to develop these skills. They concluded that the limited success of international students in academic speaking skills can be attributed to time constraints imposed by their academic lives. Thus, studies that have examined international postgraduate students' academic experience have been conducted mainly with international students in universities in USA, UK, Australia, and Canada (refer to Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Braine, 2002; Leki & Carson, 1997; Singh, Schapper, & Jack, 2014; Tardy, 2005). Taking this into account, the following sub-section reviews studies that have examined academic difficulties of international students in Malaysia.

### **Studies on international students in Malaysia**

Focusing on the experience of international students in Malaysia, the need to conduct studies on international students' academic and sociocultural difficulties has been widely emphasised by researchers in the Malaysian context (e.g. Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Mahfoodh, 2014; Singh et al., 2015; Yusoff, 2012). The major findings of these studies have shown that international postgraduate students in Malaysia face a substantial academic and sociocultural difficulties. These studies have also revealed a lack of studies considering oral communication in academic contexts and the difficulties faced by international students in academic oral communication. In a qualitative enquiry, Mahfoodh (2014) interviewed international undergraduate students to identify their difficulties in oral academic discourse socialisation. He reported that their major difficulties were related to linguistic knowledge, presentation skills, and content-related difficulties. He suggested that further studies should "examine how international undergraduate students attempt to participate successfully and actively in their new discourse communities and the strategies they employ to overcome the challenges they face in their socialisation of oral academic presentations" (p. 17). Singh et al. (2014) have confirmed that "[t]he scholarly bias toward Western and English-speaking settings in the study of international education overlooks the experiences of international students in emerging education hubs in Asia" (p. 1).

Some studies have examined challenges in academic writing and academic reading faced by international students in Malaysia. Singh (2015) examined academic writing challenges encountered by 64 students in some mixed mode masters programs, finding that difficulties of international postgraduate students in Malaysia included "writing methodology section, writing findings/analysis section, using appropriate academic style, writing literature review, writing coherent paragraphs and expressing ideas in correct English" (p. 16). Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016) focused on academic reading difficulties of international students in a public university in Malaysia. They reported that taking brief and relevant notes, using their own words in note taking, working out meanings of difficult words, identifying supporting ideas/examples, and managing their time for completion of reading academic materials are the major academic reading difficulties. Thus, studies that have focused on international students' academic difficulties in Malaysia have not properly addressed academic oral communication. The following sub-section is devoted to reviewing studies that have focused on issues related to Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia including Yemeni students.

### **Studies on Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia**

Arab postgraduate international students constitute a significant proportion of international students in Malaysia, and the number has increased recently (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010; Kassim, 2013). This increase has attracted researchers in the Malaysian context to focus on various issues related to their academic and social adjustment. Among studies examining issues related to the experience of Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia, only two have focused on Yemeni postgraduates. These two studies are Alghail and Mahfoodh (2015) and Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016). Most of the other studies have focused on academic writing skills encountered by Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia

(Abdulkareem, 2013; Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Almatarneh, Hmoud, Ab Rashid & Yunus, 2018; Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Huwari & Aziz, 2011). Most of these studies have revealed that writing problems are related to the use of English to express ideas effectively, construction of English sentences grammatically, and use of the correct English vocabulary in academic writing. It is important to note that Arab postgraduate students were not taught the most important writing skills in their previous educational programs prior to coming to Malaysia (Huwari & Aziz, 2011). Furthermore, these problems can be attributed to high levels of writing apprehension among Arab postgraduates (Huwari & Aziz, 2011).

Other studies that have focused on Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia have focused on cognitive adjustment, language barriers in general, and academic reading difficulties. Al-Zubaidi and Richards (2010) identified that Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia encounter various language and cultural challenges. Due to their needs for a certain level of proficiency in English, Arab postgraduate students have to pass some levels of intensive English courses before they register for their studies. Focusing on the cognitive adjustment of Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university, Alghail and Mahfoodh (2015) reported that their cognitive adjustment problems include dealing with people of higher status, dealing with people in authority, and understanding the local accent/language. These cognitive adjustment problems can be attributed to postgraduate students' sociocultural and educational backgrounds.

The participants in the current study are Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university. Similar to other Arab postgraduate students, Yemeni postgraduate students' first language is Arabic, and they share with other Arab postgraduates an educational background in which English is not the medium of instruction. We selected all participants from Yemen because we wanted to know how a group of international students who had almost the same prior learning experience perceive difficulties in academic oral communication.

### **International students' prior learning experience**

Most of the previous studies on international students in various contexts have revealed that their educational background is an important factor in academic success and perceived academic difficulties (Wang & Shan, 2007). Previous learning experiences are important because they shape international postgraduate students and their expectations before they commence at host universities. However, these studies have not adequately explored correlations between international students' difficulties and prior learning experience. International students in host universities mostly tend to compare and contrast their current educational experience with prior experiences in their home countries. This can help them to reflect on their progress and current academic achievement. Focusing on international students' intercultural adaptation in the UK context, Gill (2007) revealed that students' prior educational experience can be one of the explanations for the academic challenges encountered by international students. Singh et al. (2015) emphasised that due to their prior academic background, international postgraduate students in Malaysia encounter academic difficulties.

To sum up, studies reviewed in this section have revealed that upon movement to an unfamiliar environment with rigorous academic demands, international students find themselves at risk of challenging adjustment. Nevertheless, it should not be generalised that all international students at host universities are unsuccessful due to academic and sociocultural difficulties during the whole period of their studies. Rather, we should view international students as community members who attempt their best to be successful and achieve their goals. Acknowledging the contributions of studies that relied on adjustment approach to understand the experience of international students, Marginson (2014) has presented an alternative approach to understanding international education. In this alternative approach, identity and agency are two important tools used by international students for self-formation in host countries. In this approach, international students are viewed as responsible and active agents who have their own roles in forming themselves.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study is based upon three theories: the theory of second language acquisition (Cummins, 1980), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1986), and academic literacies model (Lea & Street, 2006). Cummins (1980) believed that there are marked differences between basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). CALP refers to formal academic learning such as learning in university contexts (Huang & Finn, 2009). This formal academic learning refers to studying academic content and it includes the development of the four main language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Taking this into account, to succeed in their host universities, international students need to have a certain level of English language proficiency in order to cope with the requirements of their studies. Development of English language skills needs time and support so that students can learn content area vocabulary and also academic skills such as oral skills. CALP is essential for this study because international postgraduate students are viewed to be in need of time and support to overcome their academic difficulties. Thus, the development of academic language skills is important. Various studies that have examined issues related to international students have employed CALP in their research designs. For example, Singh et al. (2015) examined international students' listening experiences in a Malaysian public university, stating that CALP is required for learners in second language contexts.

This current study focuses on the ways in which international postgraduate students deal with difficulties in academic oral communication in light of the sociocultural theory which considers learning as a sociocultural act, not only a cognitive one (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). Vygotsky (1978) viewed learning as a social activity in which learners use language to construct meanings from authentic contexts with the help from others who are more capable. This theory emphasises the crucial role of social contexts in the internal growth of an individual while being involved in the socialisation process (Innes, 2004). This theory is considered important to support our study because “[w]ithout understanding the complex sociocultural context in which learners are situated, as well as the activities in which they participate, we cannot acquire a complete picture of their learning” (Kim, 2011, p. 282).

Furthermore, this study is supported by an 'academic literacies' model, which refers to the diverse and multiple literacies found in academic contexts (Lea & Street, 2006). Across different disciplinary fields, postgraduate students' engagement and participation in oral academic practices are crucial aspects, as possession of effective academic oral skills can be a crucial factor for successful academic life.

Based on these three theories, international students in Malaysia are expected to be members of disciplinary communities where they have to be involved in various activities pertaining to academic oral communication. They need to use English language in order to learn and communicate with others. They depend on their English language proficiency to learn the content in their disciplines. Apart from that, the process of international students' adjustment in the communicative community can be viewed as a type of mutual corresponding interaction in which the novices (i.e. international students) should be encouraged to engage themselves in different literacy practices to learn from others (lecturers, supervisors, and other senior international/local students). Through such interaction with experts in their academic discourse community, international students can learn and develop their academic communication skills. For these students, the process of learning is participation which entails active engagement and interaction. Engagement includes being involved in various activities that help students to succeed in acquiring knowledge to reach their desired goals. Interaction here can be understood as being a member in a specific academic/discourse community and being able to share knowledge and experiences with other members in order to activate engagement and make it successful (Kim, 2011).

## **Method**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach where both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data collection. Gay and Airasian (2003, p. 185) refer to this type of research as QUAN-QUAL "which integrates simultaneous qualitative and quantitative methods with equal weight". The first phase of this study was a quantitative phase in which data were collected using a questionnaire. In the second phase, data were collected using focus group interviews and journal writing. After we collected the completed questionnaires, we asked the students to keep journals for one full semester. They were asked to report difficulties they faced in the use of academic oral communication and how they overcame these difficulties. Meanwhile, we scheduled focus group interviews with 30 students at their convenience. Because the current study was carried in one university, it was not difficult for the researchers to meet the participants and interview them.

We choose this research design for some reasons. First, the use of a mixed-methods design is likely to increase the quality of the results and to provide comprehensive findings. Second, this research design can strengthen the researcher's understanding of the findings (Frechtling, Sharp & Westat, 1997). Third, the use of "both forms of data allows researchers to simultaneously generalize results from a sample to a population and to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena of interest" (Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska & Creswell, 2005, p. 224). In other words, a researcher can make generalisations from the

sample to a population which is normally something done by a quantitative researcher. These generalisations can be further supported and enhanced through thick descriptions of some aspects of the data, an approach normally taken by qualitative researchers.

### **Participants**

The respondents to the questionnaire were 92 Yemeni postgraduate students (82 males and 10 females) who were all in one Malaysian public university. Their ages were 25 and above and only four respondents were 40 years old or above. Random sampling was employed to administer the questionnaire. For the qualitative part of the study, purposeful sampling was employed in which individuals were intentionally selected to get deep and thick descriptions of the central phenomenon of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Determination of some selection criteria is an important step in choosing participants in purposeful sampling. According to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen (1993, p. 82), purposeful sampling can increase the opportunity “to identify emerging themes” embedded in context. For the selection of participants in the focus group interviews, we employed two criteria. First, the participants in the focus group interviews were selected according to their willingness to participate, and second, to obtain diversity of study fields.

### **Data collection**

The quantitative data questionnaire was adapted from Hyland (1997) and Evans and Green (2007). The questionnaire included two sections. The first section sought information on the background of the respondents, and the second comprised ten items on students’ perceptions of academic oral communication difficulties. All items in the second section of the questionnaire constituted one dimension. In our study, the ten items achieved Cronbach’s alpha of 0.87. For validation of the questionnaire, we asked four researchers in fields of applied linguistics and second language research to comment on the content validity of the questionnaire and its use to examine academic oral communication difficulties. These experts agreed that the items in the questionnaire can effectively capture the topic under investigation.

We collected qualitative data employing focus group interviews with 30 postgraduate students (six focus groups with five students in each) and journal writing by 21 students. For journal writing, students were given some instructions on how to complete their journals. They were asked to focus on their difficulties related to the use of English orally in academic activities, such as oral presentations. In addition, they were asked to report the strategies they used to cope with these difficulties.

We reached the respondents through attending one of the meetings of the Yemeni Students Union in the University. All Yemeni students in the context of the study met regularly to discuss issues related to their studies and life in the University. Furthermore, all these students had a Yahoo Group which they used to communicate almost daily. When all Yemeni students gathered for one of their meetings in the University, one of the researchers took this opportunity, approached the students, and administered the questionnaires.

## Data analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics in *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 22. Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis in which data were transcribed and coded thematically. Descriptive statistics offered information that helped us to explain and interpret respondents' answers and to determine patterns and trends in the data (Creswell, 2005). For inferential statistics, Spearman correlation analysis was used to test the association between international students' academic oral communication difficulties and their prior learning experience. Spearman's rank-order correlation was deemed appropriate because the variables were not measured on an interval scale (Hinton, McMurray & Brownlow, 2014). Spearman's  $\rho$  helped us to measure the strength of the association between variables.

In analysing the qualitative data, common themes were identified through constant comparative analysis in which the data were coded into emergent themes (Patton, 1990). To enhance the analysis, data were constantly revisited and analysed until no new themes emerged. The results of the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data were mixed and triangulated to answer the research questions because triangulation is considered to be one of the features of good research designs and it leads to better evidence when reporting the results (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The triangulation occurred at both data collection and data analysis stages. During data collection, we obtained information on students' academic oral communication difficulties from three sources: questionnaire, focus group interviews, and journals written by the students. Information on the strategies the students employed to overcome their academic oral communication difficulties were obtained from two sources: focus group interviews and journals. At data analysis stage, we analysed the questionnaire and used the transcripts of focus group interviews and journals written by the students to support the quantitative findings.

## Results

### Yemeni postgraduate students' difficulties in academic oral communication

#### *Quantitative results*

Table 1 presents the results of the questionnaire that focused on international students' academic oral communication difficulties. The result for each item is reported based on their order in the questionnaire. As shown in Table 1, 61% considered 'using visual aids' easy or very easy. 'Speaking from notes' was considered difficult or very difficult by 40%. The skill of 'asking questions' was considered very easy or easy by 61%. 'Participating actively in discussions' was shown to be neither difficult nor easy by 39%, though found difficult by 31.5%. 'Presenting information or ideas orally' was considered difficult by 36%, though perceived as neither easy nor difficult by 33%. With reference to item 6 that focused on 'answering questions', 40% regarded it neither difficult nor easy. 'Communicating ideas confidently' was considered difficult or very difficult by 52%. 'Speaking clearly with good and acceptable pronunciation' was another aspect of difficulty for the respondents because 61% felt that it was difficult or very difficult. 'Communicating fluently' was considered as one of the most difficult aspects because 61%

perceived it as difficult or very difficult. Finally, 62% considered 'speaking accurately' as difficult or very difficult.

Table 1: Students' perceptions of academic oral communication difficulties (N=92)

No.	Aspect of difficulty	VE (%)	E (%)	N (%)	D (%)	VD (%)	Mean
1	Using visual aids	21.74	39.13	28.26	10.87	0	2.28
2	Speaking from notes	2.17	28.26	29.35	30.44	9.78	3.17
3	Asking questions	30.44	30.44	25	14.13	0	2.22
4	Participating actively in discussions	2.17	25	39.13	31.52	2.17	3.07
5	Presenting information/ideas	2.17	22.83	32.61	35.87	6.52	3.22
6	Answering questions	7.61	21.74	40.22	27.17	3.26	2.97
7	Communicating ideas confidently	3.26	15.22	29.35	45.65	6.52	3.37
8	Speaking clearly (pronunciation)	3.26	10.87	25	52.17	8.7	3.52
9	Communicating ideas fluently	1.09	11.96	26.09	52.17	8.7	3.55
10	Speaking accurately (grammar)	1.09	9.78	27.17	51.09	10.87	3.61

VE = Very easy, E = Easy, N = Neutral, D = Difficult, VD = Very difficult

The major academic oral communication difficulties encountered by the students are speaking accurately, communicating ideas fluently, speaking with clear pronunciation, and communicating ideas confidently (Table 2). Other aspects were not considered difficult as perceived by the students. Answering questions orally, using visual aids, and asking questions orally were indicated as easy (Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of items on difficulties in academic oral communication (N=92)

No.	Aspect of difficulty	Mean	Std. dev.
1	Speaking accurately (grammar)	3.61	.85
2	Communicating ideas fluently	3.55	.86
3	Speaking clearly (pronunciation)	3.52	.92
4	Communicating ideas confidently	3.37	.93
5	Presenting information/ideas	3.22	.95
6	Speaking from notes	3.17	1.02
7	Participating actively in discussions	3.07	.86
8	Answering questions orally	2.97	.97
9	Using visual aids	2.28	.93
10	Asking questions	2.22	1.04

### *Qualitative results*

The quantitative results reported so far in this section are supported by the analysis of the data obtained from focus group interviews and journals written by 21 students. As illustrated in Excerpts 1 and 2 below, students reported that academic oral communication difficulties included speaking from notes, communicating ideas fluently, participating actively in discussions, and presenting information clearly.

Excerpt 1 My spoken English was not good enough to make me carry out good conversation with English speaking people. My friends always advise me that the proper speaking skills need intensive practices and conversation with others but I have a real difficulty in accurate pronunciation of the words. Moreover, I consume a lot of time to express the ideas while I am speaking. (Journal Writing 3, Abkar)

Excerpt 2 Regarding speaking skills, my pronunciation was not good when I came. But through time I tried to improve that... I think because we do not have courses to focus on speaking made us not good in this. I feel weak in speaking may be because I always mix with my countrymen friends and we speak our native language all of the time. (Journal Writing 11, Nadeem)

Furthermore, a majority of the participants expressed some problems in carrying out oral participation successfully. They attributed these academic oral communication difficulties to two factors. First, students reported that they were not used to giving oral participation in their previous programs. Second, they were not required to do oral participation in their previous programs, nor was it a part of the assessment of their performance. Rather, some of the students reported that assessment of their performance in some courses in their previous programs was based on only a mid-semester test and a final examination. Moreover, in their previous programs the students reported that they were directed to maintain a quiet atmosphere and listen to their lecturers in classrooms. In other words, the students reported that they were not exposed to various oral academic activities and did not have the experience of doing oral discussions in classrooms before they joined the university in Malaysia (Excerpts 3, 4 and 5).

Excerpt 3 Inability to participate in workshops and conferences is a problem for me because I need this skill to know how ideas are presented and given to the respondents. Delivering information to them... Although I have conducted few presentations in this university, I still feel that my speaking skills are poor. Using of proper and suitable words and good coherence tools are really necessarily to be developed. (Journal Writing 21, Moneer)

Excerpt 4 Presenting information in front of others is a problem for me. I need to know how to give presentations to others without many sentences on my slides. But I am learning step by step through attending conferences and colloquium here. Also I have been told that the communication with others in English would eventually improve my speaking skills. (Journal Writing 11, Nadeem)

Excerpt 5 Researcher: Do you think postgraduate students have difficulties in speaking when presenting in classrooms or conferences?

- Abkar: I think yes... Some difficulties ... When they talk... I mean when presenting.
- Researcher: What do you think, Husni? Would you like to say something?
- Husni: Right ... I agree.
- Researcher: You mean it is difficult to present academically?
- Husni: Yeah.
- Mohammed: Not always ... maybe for first times in classrooms and in conferences and seminars.
- Basem: Yeah ... In this university, English is used for activities like writing and speaking ....just we need time to adjust ourselves to the requirements I mean these academic requirements.
- Researcher: Abdullah, do you have anything to say about this?
- Abdullah: I agree with my friends. We had problems in doing presentations... but I want to add that in discussions we also have problems because we have no enough words to use. (FG3)

Presenting information and ideas appeared to be a large concern for the participants, as they did not become familiar with presenting information orally for assessment purposes in their previous programs. Most felt that presenting information orally was difficult, especially at the beginning of their postgraduate programs, owing to their limited vocabulary and concerns about grammatical mistakes (see Excerpt 6 below). Consequently, these postgraduate students revealed that their inadequate vocabulary affected their performance in oral skills.

Excerpt 6 The difficulties of academic speaking I faced as follows: limited vocabularies, the quality of the language was considered unscientific and grammatical errors. (Journal Writing 9, Nader)

Participants reported that their difficulties in academic oral communication could be attributed to their educational background, which lacked a focus on doing oral academic presentations and other activities that involved academic oral communication. They did not receive any teaching or training in their previous programs on how to do oral presentations (Excerpts 7 and 8).

Excerpt 7 In my field, I feel that we need to use sophisticated words and expression in order to explain the virtual thoughts. (Journal Writing 6, Abdo)

Excerpt 8 Researcher: What are the activities in which you face problems when using English orally?

- Sameer: Challenges we face are in connection with the how to present oral academic topics.
- Talal: Our problem is related to how present information in front other students and lectures.
- Researcher: Ismaeel!
- Ismaeel: When we have conferences and colloquium or seminars we need to use English to speak but we do not have enough words
- Researcher: Any one wants to add something.
- Taha: All these problems are because in our previous studies we did not have this practice.
- Researcher: Can you explain this?
- Taha: Yes, our teachers in BA and M.Sc did not ask us to do presentation to use speaking skills. (FG6)

To sum up, the analysis of both the questionnaire and the qualitative data showed that Yemeni postgraduate students pursuing their higher studies in Malaysia encounter various difficulties in academic oral communication. These difficulties are related to the use of English oral skills in academic activities, and they range from speaking accurately to communicating ideas in a confident way.

### **Correlation between students' academic oral communication difficulties and their prior learning experience**

The study also examined the correlation between areas of difficulties in oral communication and students' prior learning experiences. Spearman correlation analysis in SPSS version 22 was employed (Table 3). There was no association between students' prior learning experience and two aspects of difficulty in academic oral communication: using visual aids ( $r_s(df) = -.025, p = .811$ ), and asking questions ( $r_s(df) = -.043, p = .682$ ). This suggests that an increase in the number of years of prior academic experience yields neither a decrease or an increase in students' ability in using visual aids or asking questions.

However, Spearman rank correlation analyses revealed a strong negative relationship between students' prior learning experience and each aspect of other academic oral communication difficulties, namely speaking from notes ( $r_s(df) = -.453, p = .000$ ), participating actively in discussions ( $r_s(df) = -.396, p = .000$ ), presenting information/ideas ( $r_s(df) = -.405, p = .000$ ), answering questions ( $r_s(df) = -.303, p = .003$ ), communicating ideas confidently ( $r_s(df) = -.332, p = .001$ ), speaking clearly (pronunciation) ( $r_s(df) = -.487, p = .000$ ), communicating ideas fluently ( $r_s(df) = -.459, p = .000$ ), and speaking accurately (grammar) ( $r_s(df) = -.384, p = .000$ ). Thus, there are some statistically significant correlations between these aspects of academic oral communication difficulties and students' past learning experience.

Table 3: Correlation coefficients (Spearman's  $r_{ho}$ ) between areas of difficulties in academic oral communication and students' prior learning experience (N=92)

No.	Academic oral communication difficulties	Students' prior learning experiences	
		Correl. coeff., $r_s$	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Using visual aids	-.025	.811
2	Speaking from notes	-.453*	.000
3	Asking questions	-.043	.682
4	Participating actively in discussions	-.396*	.000
5	Presenting information/ideas	-.405*	.000
6	Answering questions	-.303*	.003
7	Communicating ideas confidently	-.332*	.001
8	Speaking clearly (pronunciation)	-.487*	.000
9	Communicating ideas fluently	-.459*	.000
10	Speaking accurately (grammar)	-.384*	.000

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

### International students' strategies of overcoming difficulties in academic oral communication

The focus of Research Question 3 is investigating the strategies employed by Yemeni postgraduate students to overcome academic oral communication difficulties. This investigation involved analysis of data collected using focus group interviews and journals. Participants reported that they could overcome academic oral communication difficulties through participation in conferences, seminars, and colloquiums organised in the University. Excerpt 9 below reveals that the students joined some intensive English courses conducted by the Languages Centre in the University in order to overcome academic oral communication difficulties. Although the intensive English course was designed to prepare students for academic life, the participants in this study revealed that such English language proficiency courses did not provide them with all they needed for oral academic tasks and practices.

- Excerpt 9    Researcher: So, as you have just indicated that international students have several academic difficulties related to languages skills and some other academic aspects. How can you overcome these problems? I mean what do you do to solve, maybe not all problems, some of them?
- Talal:       The courses I took before I started my study helped to develop my language skills.
- Researcher: Which courses?
- Talal:       In the language centre here in this university.
- Researcher: They helped you in improving your oral academic skills?
- Talal:       Yes.
- Researcher: What about others who took these course? How do you find these courses?

Sameer: Not very much helpful because they did not focus on academic presentations... but I can say they improved little bit my writing, reading and speaking.  
(FG6)

This section has so far reported the strategies Yemeni postgraduate students employed to overcome difficulties they faced in academic oral communication. However, there is also a need to understand how the students employed these strategies. In other words, understanding the processes they adopted in order to overcome difficulties in academic oral communication is necessary. Focus group interviews with the students and journals written by the students helped us to determine these processes. As illustrated in Excerpts 10 and 11, they revealed that participating in various academic activities can be a good for overcoming academic oral communication difficulties. Additionally, the students revealed that practising English orally helped them also to overcome difficulties in academic oral communication. Excerpts 12 and 13 reveal that being involved in listening to senior students doing oral presentations can help new postgraduate students to learn and develop academic oral communication skills.

- Excerpt 10 Researcher: We would like to focus on overcoming academic difficulties. How do you try to solve your problems you face when you are using English in speaking?
- Waleed: My supervisor asked me to participate in seminars and workshops to develop my skills in oral activities.
- Researcher: How did participation in these activities such as conferences help students?
- Ammar: I listened to how people and other students who were here for some years presenting their *PowerPoint* slides in conferences. After that I tried to do like them in presenting, speaking and talking.
- Researcher: Good. What about you??
- Saleh: Yes, I think when we attend conferences and seminars we can practice speaking English in a good way. With practice we can develop skills of speaking and oral skills.
- Researcher: Some of the students mentioned that the intensive English courses helped them to develop speaking skills. What do you think?
- Mamdooh: I agree with this because in these courses we learn how to present. Teachers in these courses asked us to do some presentation. (FG5)

Excerpt 11 I find that being active and hardworking in attending conferences and seminars can help me to develop many language skills such as writing, reading and speaking. The students always say that using English in speaking is difficult and most students prefer to practice this by listening to people speaking English and to practice

(Journal Writing 18, Yahya).

- Excerpt 12 Abdullah: I agree with my friends. We had problems in doing presentations... but I want to add that in discussions we also have problems because we have no enough words to use.
- Researcher: How can students overcome these difficulties?
- Basem: Basem! Do you want to say something?
- Basem: May be through listening to others or by training.
- Abdullah: Attending workshops in the university can help
- Researcher: Do these workshops focus on oral skills and oral communication?
- Abdullah: I mean when other do presentation and we listen to them we can learn.
- Researcher: Do you mean these difficulties can be overcome when students' progress in their studies?
- Abdullah: Yes.
- Husni: Yes, we can learn how to present or talk by time. (FG3)
- Excerpt 13 Researcher: What do you do to overcome the difficulties and solve challenges you face in academic oral communication?
- Khaled: You know that we learn by practice. So, when I have chance to present or to do discussion in English I try to learn. This takes time but I learn through this.
- Researcher: Yes, Mahmoud!
- Mahmoud: When we have conferences and colloquium or seminar we can practice using English for speaking on issues related to our studies and research.
- Researcher: Any one wants to add something.
- Anwar: Yes, I would like to say that also referring to videos trying to learn how to present can be good for us to solve our problems in speaking. (FG4)

To sum up, participants in the focus group interviews and journals revealed that they worked hard to overcome their difficulties in academic oral communication through being involved in oral activities and practices, and through learning how to do oral presentations clearly and confidently.

## Discussion

This study revealed that the main academic oral communication difficulties of Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university are (1) speaking accurately, (2) communicating ideas fluently, (3) speaking with clear pronunciation, and (4) communicating ideas confidently. Similar to previous studies (e.g. Kim, 2006; Lee, 2009; Tatar, 2005; Yates & Wahid, 2013), our study stresses the importance of academic oral communication skills for international students' success. Similar to the findings of Briguglio (2000) and Cheng et al. (2004), our study also revealed that one of the major academic difficulties of international students is how to effectively express their ideas orally. In addition, the findings of this study concur with those of Barker et al. (1991) who found that international students face difficulties pertaining to adjustment to language demands when they want to express themselves.

With reference to participation in classroom discussion or using oral communication skills in academic presentations, our findings concur with those of Cheng et al. (2004), Yang (2010), and Kim (2006) who found that the task of participation in both whole-class and small-group discussions in which students have to express their thoughts and to present information orally are two of the major academic speaking difficulties for international students. This is because oral presentations are considered to be important in the assessment of students' performance. Similar to Lee (2009), this research reveals that participating actively in discussions is considered to be one of the difficulties for international postgraduates. Students in this study revealed that they had to work very hard to improve their oral skills to keep up with the rest of the class or their counterparts in the same programs. As a result of this, they reported that they spent much of their time in reading and looking up all the new words they came across, to be prepared for oral presentations. We agree with Lee (2009) who highlighted that universities in host countries can do much more to help international students through creating activities for them to participate more effectively in class discussions and other oral academic speaking.

Taking into account that previous studies have not examined the correlation between difficulties in academic oral communication and students' prior learning experiences, this study shows correlation between students' difficulties in academic oral communication and seven aspects of academic oral communication: participating actively in discussions, presenting information/ideas, answering questions, communicating ideas confidently, speaking clearly (pronunciation), communicating ideas fluently, and speaking accurately (grammar).

Yemeni postgraduate students in this study reported that they used some strategies which were merely individual efforts through attending English language courses and participating in conferences, seminars, and workshops. This highlights the important role played by the host university to address this. Thus, international students' efforts to overcome academic oral communication difficulties stem from their perceptions of the importance of developing academic speaking skills. This finding supports the claim made by Tran (2008) that most international students are willing to take active actions for

controlling and managing their academic practice.

Both CALP and the sociocultural theory contributed to the design of this study. CALP as a theory of second language acquisition (Cummins, 1980) was useful for this study. In fact, the findings of this study confirm that postgraduate students need academic English to perform effectively in various academic speaking activities such as oral presentations. This study made use of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) to understand academic speaking difficulties of postgraduate students and the strategies they used to overcome these difficulties. This theory is considered essential for this study for several reasons. First, several researchers have relied on this theory to study challenges facing international students (Skyrme, 2007; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). For example, Zuengler and Miller (2006) emphasised the relevance and the importance of sociocultural contexts for conducting research studies in L2 contexts. Second, university contexts can be considered suitable for research on postgraduate students' academic difficulties and experiences of academic literacy in English, because university contexts offer opportunities for students to use academic language in different activities, and to learn from others. Regarding this, Zuengler and Miller (2006) argued that university contexts should be considered fundamental for such learning. Third, this theory conceptualises learners as social agents in active pursuit of linguistic competence and non-linguistic outcomes (Gao, 2007). Subsequently, academic oral communication skills used by postgraduate students in a particular university context are connected to the practices of particular communities to which postgraduate students belong. So, the findings of this study are supported by the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), because when international students start their academic life in host universities which are like new communities of practice, they face a different sociocultural environment. Subsequently, they seek new cultural and linguistic sources of support to adapt to this new environment.

The third theory that was employed in this study concerns academic literacies. This concept refers to a set of practices in which the focus is on ways in which students in universities learn to participate and make meaning within an academic context (Lea, 2004). According to McWilliams and Allan (2014), academic literacies can include "familiarity with academic conventions such as referencing, use of formal register and the ability to manipulate a range of academic genre" (p. 1). Thus, the findings of our study are supported by this theory because the study confirmed that when international students employ some strategies to cope with their academic speaking difficulties, they pass through a normal development stage which is a transitional period in which the students attempt to make meanings within their academic context.

This study has some limitations. The participants were Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university. Although the findings can be generalised to other Yemeni postgraduate students in other Malaysian universities, it may not be possible to generalise the findings to other international postgraduates in all Malaysian universities. Samples in future studies could encompass all international students in all Malaysian public universities. This study examined academic speaking difficulties from the perspectives of a particular group of postgraduates through questionnaires, journal writing, and focus group interviews. Thus, future studies may include lecturers/staff members in the sample to seek

their perceptions and views regarding the experiences of international students. International postgraduates in Malaysia, especially those doing PhDs in research-based programs, are involved in various academic activities which depend on students' command of English language skills and demand much effort from students. Such complex and interrelated issues need further investigations to understand how these students overcome their academic difficulties. Since this study examined the relationship between aspects of academic oral communication difficulties and students' prior learning experience, further research may focus on the association between these difficulties and other variables such as students' disciplines, because difficulties may differ from one field of research to another. Another topic to explore in international students' academic speaking is sociocultural factors and how they can affect students' development and achievement.

## **Conclusions and implications**

This mixed-methods research examined three important issues concerning the experience of Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia: (1) difficulties in academic oral communication, (2) correlation between these difficulties and students' prior learning experience, and (3) strategies and processes for overcoming these difficulties. The study reported a wide range of difficulties in academic oral communication which these postgraduates encountered, and also revealed strong negative correlations between various aspects of academic speaking and students' prior learning experiences. Although the participants were Yemeni postgraduate students, the findings can help in understanding difficulties in academic oral communication for other postgraduate students who share similar educational backgrounds.

Our study has contributed to understanding international postgraduate students' difficulties in academic oral communication. In addition, the findings can probably provide feedback to authorities in Malaysian universities concerning the strategies international students employ to overcome their academic difficulties and to achieve their academic goals. The findings can also provide useful recommendations for orientation programs that target new students before travelling to Malaysia and maybe advising them while they are studying. Understanding international students' academic speaking difficulties can help administrators highlight positive aspects of international students' experiences in their recruitment materials (Trice & Yoo, 2007). The findings of this study have implications for a national strategy in Malaysia to attract more international students, especially from Arab and Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, it is hoped that the implications of this study can benefit future international students who choose Malaysia to be the place for their new academic experiences. Instructors, lecturers, and supervisors of postgraduates across disciplinary areas are likely to benefit from issues related to international students' academic oral communication difficulties and strategies they use to overcome these difficulties. Since this study revealed that there are correlations between students' academic speaking difficulties and their prior academic experiences, authorities in Malaysian universities may need to help international students in their first year to develop strategies to overcome these difficulties.

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