

## **Academic reading difficulties encountered by international graduate students in a Malaysian university**

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This study examines how international graduate students in a Malaysian public university perceive and overcome academic reading difficulties. The target population included all graduate students from Yemen, an Arab country, studying at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Data were collected using questionnaires, focus group interviews, and journal writing. While quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, qualitative data were analysed through content analysis. The results show that most of the academic reading difficulties faced by international graduate students were five: taking brief and relevant notes, using their own words in note taking, working out meaning of difficult words, identifying supporting ideas/examples, and managing their time for completion of reading academic materials. To overcome academic reading difficulties, international graduate students used strategies such as enrolling in some intensive English language courses, attending workshops organised in the University, attending colloquiums organised in their schools, getting help from other graduate students, and reading books on English for academic purposes.

### **Introduction**

The command of English reading strategies and skills for graduate students is an essential concern as postgraduates are especially dependent on reading and writing skills to succeed in their higher studies. Poor readers do not realise the importance of effective reading strategies and they lack the ability to monitor reading activities (Cubukcu, 2008). Although it may be claimed that all international students in any context face academic difficulties (Choi, 2006; Kuo, 2011; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Mahfoodh, 2014), there is a need for studies that go beyond this generalisation, through examining these specific academic difficulties. Focusing on the evaluation of international graduate students' learning experiences in their MA and MEd degree programs in Malaysia, Kaur and Sidhu (2009) found that graduate students' problems were related mostly to academic adjustment. Later, this claim was supported by Yusoff (2012, p. 355) who stated that "Although the number of international students on campuses continues to increase; only a limited number of recently published studies have examined this topic in Malaysia".

It is important here to indicate that the term academic difficulties is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of difficulties that can be related to academic literacy, language skills, learning practices specific to host university settings, and learning unfamiliar academic conventions (Young & Schartner, 2014). However, academic difficulties reported in various studies are not the same for all international students, because some of these academic difficulties can be discipline specific. For example, TESOL postgraduate international students have academic difficulties related to aspects of teacher preparation

(Phakiti & Li, 2011), which differ from difficulties encountered by international students taking other courses or in other fields of study in host universities.

Thus, the main purpose of this study is to investigate how a group of international students in a Malaysian public university overcome academic reading difficulties. Generally speaking, the findings of this study can increase awareness concerning international students' learning experiences in Malaysian public universities. This study also contributes to research focusing on international students in the Asia-Pacific region, which has not been given adequate attention in research and publications. This, in turn, can contribute to policy and decision-making processes which should be taken to help international students in Malaysian universities overcome their academic difficulties. Additionally, this study has its own contributions as it is one of the very few studies that have examined academic reading difficulties faced by international graduate students in Malaysia.

Most international students in Malaysian universities are from the Middle Eastern and Arab countries (Pandian, Baboo & Mahfoodh, 2014). The top source Arab countries of international students' enrolment in Malaysia are Yemen, Iraq and Libya (Yusoff, 2012; Kassim, 2013). Although students from these countries share the same first language which is Arabic and they belong to the Islamic culture, they are culturally and educationally diverse. They are educationally diverse because the system of education and its policies differ from one Arab country to another. Culturally, these students are diverse because it has been argued that within Arab countries in Asia and Africa, there are numerous sub-cultures and religious and ethnic minorities (Hammad et al., 1999). International students pursuing their higher studies in Malaysian universities have to use English in their academic activities. So, they use English for doing presentations, writing assignments, writing proposals, and writing their theses. Also, the materials the students read and refer to are all in English language. Although Bahasa Malaysia is used in Malaysian universities, international students have to use English as the medium of academic communication. Malaysian universities have adopted English language in several postgraduate and undergraduate programs to attract more international students from the Middle East, Africa, Asian countries, and from other parts of the world.

Along with the noticeable increase of international students in Malaysia, the need to conduct research on their academic difficulties, experiences, and sociocultural adaptation has been widely emphasised by several researchers in the Malaysian context (e.g. Kaur & Abdul Manan, 2008; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Yusoff, 2012; Singh, Pandian & Singh, 2015; Mahfoodh, 2014; Pandian et al., 2014; Trahar, 2014; Shafaei, Nejati, Quazi & von der Heidt, 2015). International students in Malaysia have been the focus of these studies which have revealed that language and culture are two of the major barriers for international students' adjustment and achievement. Regarding this, Yusoff and Chelliah (2010) pointed out that international students' adjustment to a new culture is considered to be challenging and stressful. Consequently, academic demands and the challenges of adjustment to the new culture can put international students in Malaysia at a greater risk. However, there is a lack of specific research that deals with academic reading difficulties faced by international graduate students.

## Literature review

A growing number of studies have investigated how students from different linguistic, educational and cultural backgrounds experience, survive, and succeed in overseas contexts, especially English speaking countries. Studies that have addressed academic experiences of international students from various perspectives in various contexts have concluded that language and culture are two of the major barriers to international students' successful adaptation.

In a USA context, Lin and Yi (1997) examined Asian international students' problems and found that many often needed extra time for reading. The authors also pointed out that international students' poor English contributed significantly to their academic problems because it stood as a barrier to success within their academic environment. Recently, in the USA context, Sandekian, Weddington, Birnbaum and Keen (2015) found that Saudi female students' inadequate level of English proficiency was a challenge in completing their graduate work. Using a qualitative case study, Hirano (2015) explored the experiences of refugee students with academic reading in a USA college. Hirano collected data using interviews, observations and written documents, and found that refugee students encountered various difficulties with academic reading. One difficulty the students faced could be attributed to the nature of reading activities at college level. Another difficulty was the amount of reading the students had to do at college, which was not expected by the students, compared to the reading tasks they had at high schools in their countries of origin. Furthermore, the students had also some difficulties that were related to English, which was not their first language. Insufficient educational background was also one of the difficulties that affected students' reading comprehension. Hirano examined also the strategies used by the refugee students to cope with academic reading challenges. One strategy was reading selectively using the study guides and *PowerPoint* slides given by their lecturers. In addition to this, to cope with academic reading challenges, students tried to enhance their academic reading experiences through finding moments and places to do reading, rereading after lectures, getting support from peers and tutors, seeking help from professors, and using dictionaries.

Employing a mixed-methods design, Young and Schartner (2014) investigated international students' adjustment at a UK university and found that at the beginning of their studies they encountered various academic adjustment difficulties which could be attributed to their unfamiliarity with conventions of the host university. Although Young and Schartner did not focus exclusively on academic reading, they revealed that students faced academic reading difficulties. In a recent study in the UK, Kuzborska (2015) examined international students' perspectives that guided their academic reading practices. The author found that academic reading difficulties encountered by international students could not be attributed to their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary or a reader's cognition; rather these difficulties were associated with their abilities to interact socially with other members in their academic community.

In an Australian context, Novera (2004) revealed that the difficulties international students faced while using English language were significant barriers to learning, and an important factor in their cultural and educational adjustment. Phakiti and Li (2011) examined general academic difficulties, academic reading, and writing difficulties among Asian graduate students undertaking a Master's degree in TESOL in an Australian university. The authors found that students' academic difficulties were associated with the management of reading and writing tasks. They also pointed out that there were strong associations among general academic difficulties, academic reading, and writing difficulties.

In New Zealand, Zhang and Brunton (2007) explored Chinese students' experiences and reported that language abilities directly influenced their educational and social opportunities to have quality relationships with host nationals. In another study on international students in New Zealand, Campbell and Li (2008) revealed that language difficulties were great barriers for Asian students when engaged in various academic activities such as communicating effectively with lecturers and other students, listening to lectures, following instructions, understanding assessment criteria and procedures, completing assignments, and doing exams and tests.

Studies on international students in the Malaysian context have been very few (see Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010; Singh et al. 2015; Mahfoodh, 2014). Even these published studies have merely focused on general academic and social problems faced by these students. Focusing on international students in two public universities, Kaur and Sidhu (2009) examined graduate students' learning experiences in their MA and MEd degree programs and found that graduate students' major problems were related to pressures of undertaking and coping with the requirements of graduate programs. Although Kaur and Sidhu reported some significant findings, their study did not focus solely on international students but also included Malaysian graduate students. Studying the psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems among international students, Yusoff and Chelliah (2010) found that the factors that affected international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems were English language proficiency, social support, and some personality variables.

Recent related studies on international students in Malaysia also include Singh et al. (2015), Pandian et al. (2014), Mahfoodh (2014), Trahar (2014), and Shafaei et al. (2015). In a recent study, Mahfoodh (2014) examined international undergraduate students' oral academic socialisation and found that language problems were a major difficulty for international undergraduate students in their oral academic activities such as oral presentations and group discussions. Although recent studies such as Singh et al. (2015) and Pandian et al. (2014) have examined issues related to international students in Malaysia, these studies have not examined academic reading difficulties. While Singh et al. (2015) examined how international students overcame their academic listening problems, Pandian et al. (2014) have focused on international students' perceptions of the effect of multiculturalism on the study programs in some Malaysian public universities. However, Trahar (2014) used narrative enquiry to explore academic experiences of international students and revealed that their language abilities were among the major problems they faced. Recently Shafaei et al. (2015) have focused on international students' attitudes

towards acculturation and the effects of these attitudes on students' academic practices and found that international students showed positive commitments to the academic norms in the Malaysian context.

To sum up, most of the studies reviewed here were conducted in Western contexts and findings cannot be generalised to assume that international graduate students in Malaysia have identical problems and experiences. Additionally, studies that have examined international students' academic experiences in Malaysia have concluded that the major obstacles of these students are related to English language and meeting the requirements of the Malaysian educational context which is considered relatively new in overseas studying market. Moreover, none of these studies has focused exclusively on academic reading difficulties faced by international graduate students in Malaysian institutions of higher education.

## **The study**

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the academic reading difficulties faced by international graduate students in a Malaysian public university?
2. What are the strategies used by these students to overcome their academic reading difficulties?

## **Theoretical framework**

This study is supported by the model of academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998, 2000, 2006) and the sociocultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The model of academic literacies, which has been originally developed from the area of 'new literacy studies' (Baynham, 1995), is an attempt to conceptualise students' learning in higher education contexts. Study skills, academic socialisation, and academic literacies have been identified as interrelated in a complex network that may help researchers to understand university students' academic practices, such as reading and writing (Lea & Street, 1998, 2000). The model of academic literacies was considered suitable to be the theoretical framework of this study because reading tasks graduate students engage in and the academic written work they produce are both influenced by the conventions and rules of the university context, or the academic discourse, the students are in. Since this study focused on academic reading difficulties of international students, it is important to highlight how this model is related to academic reading. In fact, the academic literacy model is considered essential for this study because academic literacy is defined as the "ability to read and write the various texts assigned in [university]" (Spack, 1997, p. 3).

The sociocultural theory of learning is also considered essential for this study for the following reasons. First, Zuengler and Miller (2006) emphasised the relevance and the importance of the sociocultural theory of learning in designing and carrying out studies in L2 contexts. Second, the university context can be considered suitable for an inquiry on

graduate students' academic difficulties because it offers opportunities for using academic language (such as reading tasks) in different academic and non-academic activities (Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Third, this theory conceptualises learners as social agents in active pursuit of linguistic competence and non-linguistic outcomes (Gao, 2007). Fourth, reading skills used by graduate students in a particular university context are not only seen as individual choices made by the students themselves but are considered to be connected to the practices of particular communities they belong to. Thus, the current study makes use of the sociocultural theory of learning to understand a group of graduate students' experiences, difficulties, and strategies they use to overcome their academic reading difficulties.

## **Method**

### **Study design and sampling**

This study employed a mixed methods approach in which both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection were used. Gay and Airasian (2003) refer to this type of research as QUAN-QUAL 'which integrates simultaneous qualitative and quantitative methods with equal weight' (p. 185). With reference to the classification of types of mixed method designs by Creswell, Plano-Clark, Gutmann and Hanson (2003), the type of the current mixed methods study is concurrent triangulation because of three reasons: (1) quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed at the same time, (2) priority was usually equal and given to both forms of data, and (3) data analysis was usually separate and integration occurred at the data interpretation stage.

The setting of this study is Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), a Malaysian public university which is one of the most popular research universities in the country. The target population included all USM graduate students from Yemen, an Arab country. Arabic is the first language and the mother tongue of all these students. All students studied English language formally for six years in their twelve years of education at primary and secondary schools in Yemen. For USM a good level of English proficiency is a prerequisite, with a TOEFL score of minimum 80 or IELTS band 6 required in almost all postgraduate programs that are open to international students (Institute of Postgraduate Studies, 2016). Some postgraduate programs may make it a prerequisite that a student should finish some intensive English language courses before enrolment in the University. However, direct English language support is not given to postgraduate students in the context of this study. The participants were undertaking graduate studies in the fields of sciences. Eighty-two students were males (89.1%) and 10 were females (10.9%).

### **Data collection**

#### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire used in this study was based on Hyland (1997) and Evans and Green (2007). The first part was used to obtain demographic data and the second part included 10 items to get information on students' perceptions of their academic reading difficulties.

In the second part, the respondents were required to rate the academic reading difficulties they faced using a five-point Likert-scale, ranging from 'very easy' to 'very difficult'.

#### *Focus group interviews and journaling*

Focus group interviews and journaling were used to collect qualitative data. The participants had opportunities to talk about their concerns and challenges in their own words. This helped the researchers to understand students' concerns and challenges regarding academic reading difficulties. Focus group interviews also helped the researchers to explore all possibilities regarding graduate students' academic reading and to identify important aspects of information that might not be obtained through other techniques of data collection (refer to Merriam & Simpson 2000). Furthermore, these interviews allowed the researchers to "tap into the experience of others in their own natural language, while utilising their value and belief frameworks" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 155), and provided greater depth in the participants' responses concerning academic reading difficulties and how to overcome them (see Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Six focus group interviews lasting 40 to 50 minutes were held, in which the questions focused on graduate students' academic reading difficulties and the strategies they used to overcome these difficulties. While constructing the questions for the interviews, we referred to Burke and Wyatt-Smith (1996), Hyland (1997), Leki (2003), and Evans and Green (2007). Furthermore, some questions used in the interviews were based on the items given in the questionnaire.

For journal writing, the students who agreed to participate in this research activity were asked to keep journals to record their experiences in academic reading and how they could solve their problems (refer to Hatch, 2002). Some researchers prefer to use journaling as one method of data collection because the participants can compose entries in their leisure time freely (Hatch, 2002). Furthermore, data obtained from journaling can generally provide a direct access into the experiences of the participants. This type of data are not directly processed through a researcher; they come directly from the participants. A researcher has to analyse and interpret data from journals after they are completed by the participants. This is what was followed in this study.

#### *Data analysis*

*SPSS* was used to compile, tabulate, and analyse the quantitative data. The calculation of the frequencies and means of all items were done to gather information on students' academic reading difficulties. A frequency analysis was also conducted to examine the distribution of respondents' demographic profiles. For the analysis of qualitative data, inductive data analysis, as suggested by Patton (1990, p. 390), was implemented in which patterns, themes, and categories of analysis "emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis". The technique that was used in the inductive analysis was content analysis: a "process that involves the simultaneous coding of raw data and construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document's content" (Merriam, 1998, p. 160). Using this technique the researchers coded all qualitative data obtained from focus group interviews and journals to reveal academic reading difficulties of international students and how they overcome these difficulties.

## Results

### Academic reading difficulties

As presented in Table 1, the most difficult academic reading sub-skills for the students in this study are (1) taking brief and relevant notes, (2) using own words in note taking, (3) working out the meanings of difficult words, and (4) identifying supporting ideas/examples. With reference to the skill of taking brief notes, 42.4% of the students viewed it as difficult, 15.2% indicated that it was very difficult, and 26.1% considered this skill as neither easy nor difficult. Regarding the skill of using their own words in note-taking, 35.9% of the respondents found it difficult, 16.3% indicated that it was very difficult, and 29.4% chose 'neutral' to describe their perceptions of the difficulty of this skill. With reference to item 9 which focused on the academic reading skill of working out meaning of difficult words, 39.1% of the respondents felt that it was difficult, and only five students (5.44%) marked this skill as very difficult. However, 35.9% of the students considered working out meaning of difficult words as neither easy nor difficult. While 37% felt that the skill of identifying supporting ideas or examples was neither difficult nor easy for them, 25% viewed it as easy. However, 29.4% felt that it was difficult for them to identify supporting ideas or examples in the reading materials they had to do.

Table 1: Frequencies of aspects of difficulties in academic reading

Aspect of difficulty	Very easy		Easy		Neutral		Difficult		V. difficult	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1 Identifying supporting ideas/examples	6	6.5	23	25	34	37.0	27	29.4	2	2.2
2 Reading carefully to understand a text	9	9.8	42	45.7	26	28.3	0	0	15	16.3
3 Identifying key ideas	6	6.5	37	40.2	35	38.0	13	14.1	1	1.1
4 Understanding organisation of a text	4	4.4	37	40.2	33	35.9	13	14.1	5	5.4
5 Taking brief, relevant notes	3	3.3	12	13.0	24	26.1	39	42.4	14	15.2
6 Using own words in note taking	4	4.4	13	14.1	27	29.4	33	35.9	15	16.3
7 Reading quickly to get overall meaning	7	7.6	26	28.3	30	32.7	27	29.4	2	2.2
8 Reading quickly to find information	8	8.7	31	33.7	26	28.3	23	25	4	4.4
9 Working out meaning of difficult words	2	2.2	16	17.4	33	35.9	36	39.1	5	5.4
10 Understanding specialist vocabulary	8	8.7	31	33.7	31	33.7	18	19.6	4	4.4

Reading quickly to get overall meaning was viewed by most of the students as neither easy nor difficult: 32.7% indicated that this skill was neither easy nor difficult, while 28.3% viewed it as easy. On the other hand, 29.4% felt that it was difficult for them to read quickly to get the overall meaning. Reading carefully to understand the text was viewed as easy by 45.7% and as neither easy nor difficult by 28.3%. However, 15 students (16.3%) considered reading carefully to understand a text as difficult. About 37 students (40.2%) indicated that the skill of identifying key ideas was easy, while 35 of the students (38%) showed that their perception of the difficulty of this skill was neutral. With reference to the students' responses to item 4 which focused on the skill of understanding the organisation of a text, 40.2% of the students perceived it as easy and 35.9% felt that it was neither difficult nor easy. On the other hand, 14.1% considered this skill as difficult. Reading quickly to find information was considered easy by 33.7% and as neutral by 28.3%. In a similar response, 31 of the students (33.7%) felt that the skill of understanding specialist vocabulary was easy and the same number of respondents reflected that it was neither difficult nor easy. However, 18 students (19.6%) felt that it was difficult to understand specialist vocabulary.

Based on the means of the responses given in Table 2, the four top aspects of difficulties in academic reading as perceived by most of the students were taking brief and relevant notes (mean 3.53), using own words in note taking (mean 3.46), working out meaning of difficult words (mean 3.28), and identifying supporting ideas/examples (mean 2.96). The analysis of the qualitative data has also revealed that the graduate students highly estimated the importance of developing academic reading in order to improve both their academic writing and academic speaking skills. Furthermore, they showed that they faced some difficulties in developing their academic reading skills.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of items on academic reading difficulties

No.	Aspects of difficulty	Mean	Std. dev.
1	Taking brief, relevant notes	3.53	1.01
2	Using own words in note taking	3.46	1.06
3	Working out meaning of difficult words	3.28	0.89
4	Identifying supporting ideas/examples	2.96	0.95
5	Reading quickly to get overall meaning	2.90	0.98
6	Reading quickly to find information	2.83	1.04
7	Understanding specialist vocabulary	2.77	1.0
8	Understanding organisation of a text	2.76	0.94
9	Identifying key ideas	2.63	0.85
10	Reading carefully to understand a text	2.51	0.88

The analysis of the transcripts of the focus group interviews and journals identified five areas of academic reading difficulties: length of time it takes to complete required readings, getting information they needed in reasonable time, taking brief notes while reading, connecting what they read to their previous knowledge, and using their own words in note taking.

The participants in the focus groups and journals also pointed out that the large amount of time consumed in reading research articles, book chapters, and books in order to prepare content for their theses. The students revealed that they had to refer to many research articles and book chapters while writing their theses. This was further explained by the graduate students when they indicated that they had to read journal articles and book chapters more than one time to find the information they were looking for. Furthermore, they felt that they had to read more than one time to be able to understand the content of journal articles and other reading materials so that they could improve the quality of their research. Consuming their time in reading, consequently, affected the way they adopted to manage their time, as reflected by the samples of extracts below.

In reading papers and articles I think we can have the difficulty of taking too much time in reading. Maybe because we are not trained on how to use academic reading. I have been advised by friends to read more and more with the help of electronic dictionary to learn more vocabulary and practice the proper academic reading. In the beginning, I realised that I spent too much time and effort in order to understand some parts of the paper. Thereafter, I have slight improvement in reading but I still feel it really difficult (Journal 18, Yahya)

Academic reading is big problem and the time students give to reading research articles or publication is long time. In the meantime, there is variability in styles of the authors in writing, so we can find some papers easy to understand while others are rather difficult. For me, I find it always difficult to read and digest the ideas in standard time which leading to consuming a lot of time in reading and understanding just few pages. So I think we should read fast to save time (Journal 4, Basel)

Interestingly, one student reported no substantial difficulty in reading with the help of online resources, yet admitted to consuming more time to understand the literature review as shown below.

I have no big difficulties in reading especially when it comes from online sources since Google has immediate translation. But maybe we also need hard copy dictionaries all time to translate new words. A result of this was that we take time to read for literature review (Journal 6, Abdo).

Another academic reading difficulty the students in this study reported was connecting what they read to their knowledge about a particular topic. The students revealed that they read different research articles and book chapters but they faced some difficulties in finding connections between what they were reading and their prior knowledge in their first language. This is shown in the extract given below.

When I started my study here, my knowledge about the field was not sufficient and updated because after I finished university I worked for some years. So I could not say that my past knowledge helped me in connecting with new things I was reading here. Furthermore, my first degree in Yemen was taught in the Arabic language while I have started studying here in English. Although knowledge is the same, the barrier of the language created heavy burden for me. (Journal 8, Badr).

As shown in the extract below, another graduate student expressed the same explanation that differences in languages, mother tongue and English as medium for instruction were the reasons behind the lack of full understanding of the content in his field.

Our problem was mainly from our background studies which were all in Arabic. It is so difficult to find you need to change all the names of things into English and still fully understand and connect. (Journal 21, Moneer)

Some of the students reported that they faced great difficulties while reading academic papers published in high impact factor journals. The students attributed this problem to their low proficiency in English language and to their educational background in which they were not exposed to a good quantity of published journal articles and books. Furthermore, this could be due to the fact that the students were from various fields of "hard" sciences (engineering, health, and physics). In their previous education studies, it was not usual for the students to read heavily-loaded science papers. Below is a representative extract from focus group 5.

Interviewer: Do you face any difficulties in academic reading tasks?  
 Ammar: Yes, reading papers in journals with impact factor is a real difficulty for many students doing research.  
 Mamdooh: Yeah... again because of lack of experience in this, we had a lot of difficulties.  
 Waleed: It is a difficulty and our time is taken while we are reading these papers.  
 Interviewer: In what way is it difficult for you?  
 Waleed: We read more than one time and we translate into Arabic to understand and so on. (Focus group 5)

### **Students' strategies for overcoming academic reading difficulties**

The analysis of qualitative data revealed that most of the students reported that they joined some intensive English language courses conducted by the Language Centre in USM in order to improve their English proficiency in general. They admitted that some of those intensive courses helped them to improve basic skills in writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Although the intensive English program was designed to prepare students for academic life in the University (Intensive English Program, 2015), the students in this study pointed out that the courses they attended did not fully provide them with what they needed for their postgraduate studies.

Other strategies the graduate students in this study followed to overcome their academic reading difficulties included attending workshops organised by USM, attending colloquiums organised by their respective schools, and reading books that included instructions on how to improve academic reading. Although some of the students revealed that not all workshops organised by USM were given specifically on reading, they acknowledged that these workshops gave them some key points to develop their academic reading skills.

They further indicated that forming friendships with senior postgraduate students helped them to overcome their academic difficulties. The following excerpts taken from focus group interviews and journals entries are given to support our findings presented in this section. As shown in these representative extracts, the students revealed some of the strategies they employed to overcome academic reading problems.

In my field, I feel that we need to use sophisticated words and expressions in order to explain the virtual thoughts. Every time I start writing small paragraphs I will spend too much time in reading, extracting and understanding prior to expressing my own thoughts. (Journal 6, Abdo).

Interviewer: Hello, everybody. Thank you for coming to this discussion. As we know that graduate students may face academic reading difficulties. We would like to focus our discussion on how students try to overcome these difficulties. We start with Khaled. How can these academic reading difficulties be overcome.

Khaled: Well, I think we can solve academic problems ... I mean academic reading through talking with other friends in my school [in the University].

Interviewer: Do you mean talking with others who are doing PhD or Master's same like you?

Khaled: Yes. You are right.

Interviewer: May I know how?

Khaled: When I talk with them about the problems I faced, some could help me in advising me and showed what to do.

Interviewer: I understand now. What about others here? Do you agree with Khaled?

All participants: Yes, I agree with him.

Mahmoud: Yes, I agree. But we can apply other things to solve or overcome our problems.

Interviewer: Good. What are these other things, please?

Mahmoud: Reading books on academic research.

Interviewer: How do they help you to overcome academic reading difficulties?

Mahmoud: We can learn from them because we can know how to solve academic reading problems.

Interviewer: Well. What do you think, Anwar?

Anwar: I agree with my friends. Our academic reading problems can be solved with speaking with friends on how to solve these problems and through reading books on academic reading.

Interviewer: Abdulkhali and Wael! We need to hear from you on how to overcome academic problems.

Abdulghani: I agree with them. But I would like to add that I also had some English courses before my PhD.

Interviewer: Were these courses useful?

Abdulghani: Yes, but they did not train us on how to employ all reading skills.

Wael: For me, reading and experience helped me solve my problems.

Interviewer: Thank you very much for your participation. (Focus group 4)

Referring to the excerpt above from one of the focus group interviews, we can understand that the students revealed some coping strategies they used to overcome their academic

reading difficulties. In the excerpt given above, we underlined some coping strategies used by the students. These strategies include communicating with peers in their departments, attending some English classes in the University such as intensive English courses, and reading books on academic English.

It is significant to mention that the students in this study revealed that one of the factors that contributed to their academic reading difficulties was their educational background, in which there was no major focus on English for academic purposes. The students also added that they had not received any teaching or training on how to deal with large amounts of reading from academic texts. In other words, the students showed that the required amount of reading was beyond what they expected.

## Discussion and conclusions

This study has revealed that the academic reading difficulties faced by international graduate students in a Malaysian public university were taking brief and relevant notes, using their own words in note taking, working out meaning of difficult words, identifying supporting ideas/examples, and managing their time for completion of reading academic materials. Connecting what graduate students read with their previous knowledge in their fields was also found to be a major concern of these students. Most of these academic reading difficulties faced by international graduate students can be attributed to low proficiency in English, the amount of vocabulary they have, and to the slow rate of their reading. To overcome these academic reading difficulties, international graduate students in this study have reported using the following strategies:

1. Enrolling in some intensive English language courses
2. Participating in workshops conducted by the University
3. Taking active participation in colloquiums organised by their respective schools
4. Reading books on how to improve academic reading
5. Seeking help from peers

Although previous studies have not examined the specific academic reading difficulties faced by international students, some of the findings reported in this study are similar to the findings of Barker et al. (1991), Brown and Holloway (2008), Kim (2011), Phakiti et al. (2013), and Sandekian et al. (2015) who have emphasised that language difficulties are considered to be important for international students. Similar to the findings of Kim (2006), this study has revealed that international graduate students are very concerned about using their English skills in note-taking. Similar to what has been reported by studies on international students in Malaysia (e.g., Kaur & Abdul Manan, 2008; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Yusoff, 2012; Singh et al., 2015; Mahfoodh, 2014; Pandian et al., 2014; Trahar, 2014; Shafaei et al., 2015), this study confirms that language is a major barrier to improvement and learning for international students in Malaysia. Similar to findings by Phakiti et al. (2013), this study has pointed out that international students' lack of required proficiency in English can be one of the main sources of difficulties for them because it can have a negative effect on their achievement and academic adjustment.

Similar to Hirano (2015), the academic reading difficulties reported by the participants in our study were related to the amount of reading, educational background, and language issues. Furthermore, some findings from our study agree with those of Hirano (2015) because our study showed that international students used some coping strategies to overcome academic reading difficulties. These coping strategies stem from the importance of interacting with others such as peers and lecturers in the discourse community.

Thus, the experiences of international graduate students in Malaysia can be more productive and less stressful if institutions of higher education take into account the unique academic adjustment difficulties faced by these students. There must be improved understanding of the perceived beliefs brought by international students about academic behaviours and conduct (Shafaei et al., 2015). In addition, differences in the international students' conceptualisations of learning and graduate education can be considered as deficiencies for which more academic support should be provided. Investigating the differences that international students bring to the University can inform authorities on how to best provide suitable assistance to future students. Furthermore, since international students may depend on other students, either local or international, on overcoming their academic difficulties, there is a need for programs to enrich this connectedness, through the provision of favourable conditions that may boost the engagement among international students and other students, both local and international.

### **Contribution of the study**

The findings of this study make two main contributions to knowledge in the field of adjustment and adaptation of international students, especially in the Asian region. First, a focus on academic challenges encountered by a group of international students from an Arab country in a Malaysian public university seems to be an issue that has been neglected in previous literature. Second, this study revealed some strategies that were employed by the students to cope with the academic reading difficulties they faced in their postgraduate studies. Focusing on these strategies, institutions of higher education in Malaysia can develop remedy programs to help international students to overcome their academic reading difficulties. Consequently, institutions of higher education in Malaysia can improve their postgraduate programs to attract more international students.

### **Recommendations for future research**

This study has focused on one group of international students in one Malaysian public university. So, future studies may focus on all international students in some Malaysian public universities to find out more about their experiences. Both academic and sociocultural difficulties of international students across a number of Malaysian public universities can be issues that need immediate attention.

Since the international students in this study revealed that they encountered a range of academic reading difficulties, future researchers may need to focus on the non-language academic difficulties to complement the findings of this study. In addition, further studies

can employ a qualitative approach to focus on understanding specific academic difficulties, such as academic difficulties in writing theses and research papers.

This study also shows that academic reading difficulties faced by international students can differ from one discipline to another. Taking this into account, we recommend exploratory studies to deal with specific academic difficulties that are discipline-specific. For example, comparisons of academic difficulties faced by international students in fields such as applied sciences and social sciences may yield important findings. Another suggestion is an investigation of lecturers and supervisors' perceptions of their international students' academic difficulties, comparing their perceptions with those of the students so as to provide a holistic perspective.

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