

Academic Listening Practices among International Graduate Students in English as Medium of Instruction Context: Difficulties and Corrective Measures

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ABSTRACT

Academic listening practices in English language are challenging for international students in Malaysia. This is because English is not their first and second language. The influx of international students, especially at graduate level in Malaysian tertiary institutions, has encouraged researchers to look for ways to ensure a smooth academic journey for them. Therefore, this research focuses on the difficulties faced by international graduate students in their academic listening practices and the measures utilised to overcome their difficulties. The qualitative findings are based on focus group interviews among 70 international graduate students in taught Master's programmes in a public university. The findings revealed that the difficulties faced are mainly attributed to the fact that English is not their native language and also that English is not the lecturers' socio-linguistic background. These findings would be an academic platform to ensure that the difficulties faced by the students can be gradually reduced by the students themselves, academicians and the university's administrators through the application of stringent measures.

Keywords: Academic Listening Practices, Difficulties, International Graduate Students, Master's Programme, Overcoming Measures

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, non-English-speaking countries, where English is the second language, such as Malaysia, Singapore and South Africa have been increasingly attracting foreign students (Reinties et al., 2012; Crewe, 2004). As stated by Norshisham et al. (2008) and the Ministry of Higher Education (2010),

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a significant number of international graduate students are from the Middle Eastern countries. They make up one of the largest number of students in Malaysia. Coming from countries that consider English as a foreign language, the influence of the students' native language on their academic background affects how they negotiate academic discourse at graduate level. Simultaneously, in the countries mentioned by Crewe (2004) and Reinties et al. (2012), a wide gap exists in research focusing on academic literacy practices, especially international graduate students' academic listening practices in the context of English as a second language (Wahi et al., 2012). Therefore, research pertaining to international graduate students' academic listening practices in Malaysia in the context of English as a second language and as the medium of instruction for taught Master's programmes is a new and unexplored field that should be examined thoroughly to improve the academic positioning of the students and attract more international students into a conducive academic learning environment.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Mastery of English language is crucial for knowledge acquisition and class participation in new academic literacies practices at graduate level in Malaysia, especially for international graduate students who come from English as a foreign language (EFL) environment. In the context of academic listening practices in English, these students would definitely face obstacles as they

would be exposed to listening to Malaysian lecturers and the academic community of multi-ethnic origin that offer a diversity of pronunciation, slang and accent in spoken English. In the context of this research in a Malaysian university, stakes are also high in the taught Master's programmes. The taught Master's programmes require students to attend lectures, participate in tutorials and negotiate various academic literacy activities in English language. As highlighted by Kaur (2000), the actual learning process in the coursework Master's programmes in the university is sustained through classroom lectures, tutorials, seminars, individual project work, industrial or business placement, problem solving classes, group projects, research dissertation or discussion groups that involve academic listening practices apart from other academic literacy practices such as academic writing, reading and speaking.

Crosswhite (1996) states that whenever learners participate in any communicative exchange (speaking, reading, writing or listening), they "*affirm these competences to use a particular language in a particular way and so affirm the appropriateness of particular discourses and all that belongs with them*" (p.190). Furthermore, successful engagement with particular academic discourse can be particularly stressful for non-native speakers of English who may try to reconcile contradictory desires to adjust to and resist new ways of practising academic literacy at graduate level in a foreign education institution.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The exposure to academic literacies at school and undergraduate level among international graduate students who are non-native speakers of English in their native countries have been mainly through the use of their first language. Lack of English language exposure has an adverse impact on the academic literacy challenges when the students embark on their graduate study in Malaysia. At the same time, most recent Malaysian based researches focused heavily on examining the academic writing practices of international graduate students (Kaur & Shakila, 2007; Hisham, 2008; Koo, 2009; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Al-Zubaidi and Rechards, 2010; Mahmud et al., 2010; Nambiar & Ibrahim, 2011; Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011a; Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011b). As Braine (2002, p.63) puts it 'a fundamental shortcoming of most studies of socially situated academic literacy is their focus on writing tasks alone' and also the relationship between writing practices and learning and the written assignments product (Wahi et al., 2012). It is of a general understanding that processes, instructions and assessments of second language listening are less well understood and researched than the other three conventional skills which are reading, writing and speaking (Rowley-Jolivet, 2002; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Vandergrift, 2006; Vandergrift, 2007) to the extent that research has focused primarily on written genres (writing and reading). Duff (2010) also indicated that oral academic discourse socialisation is not given equal emphasis

in studies of academic discourse that give prominence to writing and reading.

Furthermore, English has been used as the medium of instruction for almost all taught Master's programmes in higher education institutions in Malaysia that include international graduate students who are non-native speakers of English (Manjet, 2013). The international graduate students in the taught Master's programmes fulfil the English language requirement of the programme. However, the fulfilment of the English language requirement such as TOEFL or IELTS does not guarantee that these students are able to meet the academic demands of their graduate study. Hafriza et al. (2004), Kaur and Shakila (2007), Hisham (2008), Koo (2009), Sidhu and Kaur (2009), Al-Zubaidi and Rechards (2010), Ibrahim and Nambiar (2011a, 2011b), and Nambiar and Ibrahim (2011) indicate that these students still face difficulties negotiating the new and different academic expectations in their academic listening practices as well as adapting to appropriate academic demands of their academic listening practices.

This particular research study therefore, explores international graduate students' academic listening practices in Malaysia, where English is the second language and is used as the medium of instruction for postgraduate studies (Mahmud et al., 2010; Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Specifically, the study looks into a neglected research area that is the difficulties faced by the international graduate students in their academic listening practices and the measures utilised by them to overcome those difficulties.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As a receptive skill, listening is similar to reading. Academic listening at university level is generally interpreted as listening to lectures and taking down notes. These are the principal genre of instruction (Lee, 2009a). However, Lynch (2011) has expanded these interpretations to include the involvement of students in other communicative events as well. The communicative events that require the effective use of reciprocal listening skills include small group discussions and team projects, tutorials, seminars, meetings with supervisors and many more. Each of these communicative events has demands requiring the students to process and respond to the spoken language.

Listening employs dual explicit sources of information: perceptual and conceptual. Perceptual information, based on auditory input, has two categories. The first category is having knowledge of a piece of language which does not mean that it will be recognised in connected speech; second, input does not represent the intake as the input will be not be successfully decoded unless a high level of second language knowledge and listening proficiency are achieved (Field, 2008). Subsequently, conceptual information is based on the listener's own world and topic knowledge as well as the recall of what has already been said (Field, 2008). There are two main purposes of conceptual information. First, it adds to what has been decoded to enrich the understanding of competent listeners and compensates for gaps in listening for the less proficient listeners. The axiomatic

of perceptual and conceptual information brings to the understanding of a relationship between the quality of information obtained from listening and the extent to which the less proficient listeners have to fall back on their own world knowledge. Therefore, Field (2011) acknowledges that challenges in decoding the speech signal originating from linguistic limitations or lack of listening experience require the second language listeners to draw more on context and co-text.

Rost (2005, p. 503) further elaborates on the listening skill as '*a complex cognitive process comprising three cognitive components (reception, construction, and interpretation) that allows a person to understand spoken language*'. Listening as a spontaneous activity that depends on immediate processing requires the listener to simultaneously decode, comprehend and interpret the incoming message. Rost listed reception and construction as more challenging for second language listeners.

In the context of academic listening, according to Flowerdew (1995), "academic listening has its own distinct characteristics and demands placed upon listeners, as compared with conversational listening." These distinct characteristics can be explained as the type of prior background knowledge required, and the capabilities to differentiate between relevant and non-relevant information, and the application of turn-taking conventions. Other important characteristics involve the ability to concentrate on and understand long stretches of talk without the chance of being engaged

in the facilitating functions of interactive discourse and note-taking. (pp. 11-12)

The most distinctive problem with listening is that it is rarely an observable product as it involves more than just decoding the spoken word. Although the listeners' responses indicate that comprehension is successful through the recognition of words, understanding the meaning the words convey and relating them to some knowledge base, there is no guarantee that the utterances have actually been understood. Zamel (1995) adds that students with multilingual backgrounds understand the information differently when they hear it compared with when they read it in English. Furthermore, university lectures are value-laden discourses in which the lecturers aim to inform, evaluate, review the information brought forward to students' attention (Lee, 2009b). The different aims of lecture impose a heavy load on listeners who may have to interpret detailed and extended monologues.

Cammish (1997) and Lynch (2011) indicated that listening is a complicated process in a second language context. Lynch (2011) highlights that the speaker, text or context such as novel expressions, rate of speech, accent, unfamiliar content and cultural references are the external factors that influence complications in a second language. To undergo the process in a foreign language is a difficult task for the international students. However, in King's (1994) earlier study, listening was identified as not presenting great demands on the students. One of the assumptions derived

from this finding is that the popularity of the use of PowerPoint in lectures has transformed the nature of listening and note taking. Listeners' dependence on the spoken dimension of lecture input was reduced with the use of PowerPoint. At the same time, it gave the lecturers greater flexibility in presenting their lectures (King, 1994).

Related Studies on Academic Listening Practices of International Graduate Students

Mason's study (1995) among 26 international graduate students on lecture comprehension strategies in an English medium environment found that lecture comprehension involved a range of levels; processing the lecturer's manner of speaking, accommodating a new educational system and adjusting to unfamiliar lecture formats. Furthermore, a study by Reid et al. (1998) on tertiary literacies identified that international students face problems with comprehension and note taking in lectures. In 1999, Ramsay et al. found that international students at an Australian university had difficulties understanding lectures in terms of vocabulary and speed and with tutors who spoke too fast or who gave too little input. In addition, a lecturer's attributes such as mumbling, talking fast, not providing visuals and using inaccessible vocabulary or slang increased international students' difficulties with listening (Ferris, 1998). In addition, the students' confusion was increased when lecturers did not use the appropriate devices to signal changes in topic or focus. Students with low level of

English fluency were overwhelmed with the difficulty of using high standard of English to understand lecturers, tutors and complete written work.

Furthermore, Johnson (2008) in his qualitative study reported that most of the international students in New Zealand in their first year of study understood only 20–30 % of what they had heard in lectures. They often understood the language at the level of the meaning of each word but not the extended discourse. Unfortunately, most of the students did not take steps to overcome this problem as they were reluctant to approach their lecturers for clarification. Those who have been studying for some years estimated that they understood between 70–90% of what their lecturers said. Most often, new students are assumed to be fully accommodated and apprenticed within their new communities and will also have sufficient exposure to the target academic discourse practices they are expected to employ in their daily academic communication practices (Haneda, 2006; Duff, 2007). This suggests that linguistic competence develops as participation in the academic discourse increases.

Yet, in other research concerning second language students, self-reports indicate that the students have difficulty in understanding lectures due to their professors' rapid speech and accents; use of colloquialisms, unfamiliar cultural, political or historical allusions, unknown vocabulary and use of humour (Senyshyn et al., 2000; Mendelsohn, 2002; Holmes, 2004). Their inability to recognise the vocabulary in spoken

form also hampered students' listening ability (Vandergrift, 2006; Field, 2008). Hence, lack of fluency in English not only affects graduate students' understanding of academic content but also has spin-off effects in other aspects of their lives. In Nayak and Venkatraman's (2010) study, it was revealed that Indian international graduate students in an Australian university encountered difficulties focusing on unfamiliar accent of some of the foreign lecturers teaching there. As a result, they required more time adjusting to the accent as well as in understanding the requirements in writing and presenting their assessments critically. This result reveals a need for the training of academic staff to improve their delivery skills and as mentioned by Carroll (2005b), lecturers should be more attentive to the comprehension level of students.

In other studies conducted by Leki (2001), Morita (2004), Gourlay (2006) and Brown (2008), it was discovered that second language listeners found it challenging comprehending the lectures due to the speed with which the lecturers speak and a lack of control over the speaker. According to Leki (2001) and Morita (2004), this challenge is further aggravated among international students at university level when there is a need for them to comprehend and later produce their work.

Mahmud et al. (2010) reported that students' low English proficiency and their difficulty in understanding local dialects and slangs would hinder academic socialisation processes. Al-Zubaidi and Rechards (2010) reported that the international

graduate students in Malaysia discovered that the instruction given in their classes were fast-paced. This is due to language, communication style, local education system and social and cultural differences. Kaur (2006) and Lee (2010) also highlighted that the educational system in Malaysia presents a different academic culture with variations in the expectations of class participation, evaluation process and English language difficulties. These scholars also found that international students experience academic culture differences as they get used to new values and norms. This review indicates that although all learners in academic settings face disciplinary enculturation issues, the difficulties associated especially with academic literacies can be serious for the international graduate students considering the cultural and linguistic hybridity this diverse student population bring to their encounters with academic literacies in English (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Casanave, 2002; Duff, 2003; Kubota & Lehner, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study is part of a larger scale study that focused on challenges faced by international graduate students in their academic literacy practices. The design is an exploratory study which employed in-depth semi-structured focus group interviews to provide detailed data on the difficulties faced in the academic listening practices and measures employed by international graduate students to overcome them.

Sampling

The sample consisted of 70 full time international graduate students registered in the taught Master's programmes. These respondents were in their second, third or fourth semester and they were from the Arts, Hybrid or Sciences faculties at a selected higher education institution. Purposive sampling was employed in this qualitative study to select all eligible respondents who could provide accurate and reliable information regarding the research problem (Teddlie & Yu, 2007, 2009).

Focus Group Interviews (FGI)

This study employed focus group interviews (FGI) with international graduate students to gather qualitative data. The focus group interview was selected as it is the best instrument to collect data from people who are an important source of information about themselves, their experiences, knowledge, opinion, beliefs, feelings and the issue that affect their lives and they can articulate their thoughts and feelings (Best & Kahn, 2006).

The focus groups had a minimum of three participants and maximum of seven participants. The "rule of thumb" advocated by Bloor et al. (2001) on the number of participants in a focus group interview was observed. At the same time, pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity of the participants. Confidentiality was maintained with the use of a coding scheme developed to code the participants. For example, a participant from a particular faculty who responded in the interview session is coded as 'S2A'. The symbol S represents the

respondent, 2 represents the respondent's number and A represents the faculty's code.

Open ended questions for the focus group interviews were designed based on literature review in the area of the research. Questions were created based on the dimensions of time: past, present and future. Krueger's categories of questions (1998) (Table 1) and Krueger's (1994) (Table 2) focus group data collection flow chart were used as a guide for the present study.

Seventeen interview sessions were administered with the 70 participants. Apart from the interview, each focus group interview session that lasted between 40 minutes to one hour included providing the participants an introduction to the study, the purpose of the focus group interview, the

participation statement sheet and consent form.

Reliability and validity of the interviews were increased by audio-taping the interviews. This was followed by transcribing the interview. Although an interview guide was used to facilitate the interviews, the participants were allowed to discuss issues and concerns pertaining to any aspects of the academic listening difficulties.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved the use of qualitative data analysis software, NVivo version 10. The NVivo 10 is helpful in transferring data easily from one code to another and to memo the data as it is being analysed. The core feature of the qualitative

Table 1
Categories of Questions (Krueger, 1998)

Question Type	Purpose
Opening	Participants get acquainted and feel connected
Introductory	Begins discussion of topic
Transition	Moves smoothly and seamlessly into key questions
Key	Obtains insight on areas of central concern in the study
Ending	Helps researcher determine where to place emphasis and brings closure to the discussion

Table 2
Data collection flow chart of FGI adapted from Krueger (1994)

Data Collection Flow Chart of the FGI	Description
Sequencing of questions	Opening questions, introductory questions, transition questions, key questions, ending questions.
Capturing and handling data	Audio-taping, field journal notes of researcher
Coding of data	Placing codes in the margin of the interview transcript
Member Checking	Emailing the transcript to the FGI respondents for member checking.

data analysis of this research was coding. The researcher organised and analysed data and emerging patterns. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006), data coding was done using thematic analysis which is a qualitative analytic method used for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The themes that captured relevant data from the interview transcripts to answer the research questions and to represent the patterned responses within the data set were created. Table 3 shows the analysis procedures design (Creswell & Clark, 2007) used in this study.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Difficulties in Academic Listening Practices

Four themes emerged in the analysis of difficulties faced in academic listening practices. The themes were comprehending listening, language and culture barriers, lack of use of technology in lecturing and lack of discipline content knowledge.

Comprehending Listening

Accent plays an important role in comprehending listening. Nearly half of the respondents, particularly those from

Table 3
Data Analysis Procedures' Design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007)

Qualitative Procedures	General Procedures in Data Analysis
1. Organising documents and visual data	Preparing data for analysis
2. Verbatim transcribing of interview (Merriam, 1988) text from the FGI. (audio-taped data)	
3. Checking transcription accuracy (e.g. member checking) which functioned to enhance the reliability and validity of the data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008).	
4. Preparing the data for computer analysis (Nvivo 10)	
1. Reading through data	Exploring data
2. Writing memos	
3. Developing qualitative codebook to organise data	
1. Coding data	Analysing data
2. Assigning labels to codes	
3. Grouping codes into themes (or categories)	
4. Interrelating themes (or categories) or abstracting to smaller set of themes	
5. Using qualitative software programs (NVivo 10)	
1. Representing findings in discussions of themes or categories	Representing data analysis
1. Using the researcher, respondents and reviewers' standards	Validating data
2. Employing validation strategies (member checking and peer review)	

[Note: Qualitative codebook is a statement of the codes for a database (Creswell & Clark, 2007). It was generated during research and depends on the codes that emerged during an analysis. It helped to organise data (adopted from Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell & Clark, 2007)].

Thailand, Nigeria and the Middle East, cited difficulty in comprehending the accent of the lecturers and students, especially lecturers of Indian and Chinese origins and other Malaysian students. The lecturers were reported to speak fast and with a localised slang. Therefore, the students could not cope with the fast spoken pace of the lecturers. Furthermore, spoken English language by Malay lecturers was found to be more incomprehensible compared with lecturers of Chinese and Indian origin. This was due to their accent. As an example, S10G specified that her difficulty with listening was caused by the different pronunciation styles of the lecturers. In another case, S18G's previous exposure of listening to American and British accented lectures found listening to the local lecturers especially those with Chinese accent, a hindrance. In general, the use of 'lah' in Manglish (Malaysian English) added further confusion to the students.

The disadvantage in the academic listening practices such as not being able to identify the answers according to the requirements of the questions, results in the students being unable to interact with their lecturers in the teaching and learning environment. Furthermore, as cited by S8C, some additional time is required for the purpose of understanding and responding to a remark given orally. The respondents also faced difficulty in comprehending the accent in conversational activities with local students. This difficulty in listening also impaired their ability to interact for academic and social purposes with the local students.

"everything different to start your study here. ?? culture different, everything different here when I came here. For example lecturers, from Chinese the accent different because the lecturer my country was USA and UK, so when I start is US is maybe hard for me," [S18G]

"when I come to Malaysia I think Malaysia English is very difficult to understand, all I will look at speaker mouth, I will guess what he or she say and then I will answer the question and second is speed, if the speaker speak very fast I can't follow his..." [S3C]

"Listening is the most terrible part for me, almost in many I can't follow people what they say (in English)" [S3G]

When these international students felt unmotivated and shameful of being made fun of by their fellow students due to their weaknesses in academic listening practices, they refused to participate actively in the teaching and learning process. For example, the respondents do not take the initiative to be involved in the question and answer sessions during lectures due to their inability to comprehend the lecture and views of their fellow local students. In addition, this is also due to the accent of the lecturers and the students themselves.

I want to say that I could not understand the accent or speaking

of Chinese student and Chinese lecturer when you go to presentation, Chinese student present always I could not find even one word at the end, but he lecturer shake head, say completely understand what the Chinese guys say in the board but lecturer shake his hand and say okay, okay and at the end of presentation, he ask us any question and we look at him, sorry we couldn't understand what he say that we want to ask any question." [S11G]

"Because they pronounced in different....way. Different way. For example one day our lecturer talk about bridge, Penang bridge in our language we pronounced bridge but in their language they pronounced "brich". We couldn't understand. We couldn't understand and they make us funny. We know the meaning but because of different style we cannot understand very well." [S2E]

Language and Culture Barriers

Local lecturers were also found to be not accommodative of their international students' language backgrounds. The tendency of lecturers to code-switch between English and Malay language during lectures further created comprehension difficulty among the respondents. As English language is a second language to the lecturers and they themselves are not proficient in the language, they are definitely unable to

deliver their lectures well. This is in addition to the difficulty faced by the respondents in their academic listening practices. Besides, the lecturers seemed to have ignored the presence of international students in their lectures and delivered the lectures in Malay language. Furthermore, difficulties with listening heightened when the respondents were presented with different versions of information both in the oral and written form.

"Some course, ... that's mix it they forget you are international student or maybe all the lecturer speak in Bahasa sometimes" [S3D]

"Everything is okay all the lecturer were very cooperative except one she was talking Malay most of the time, talk in Malay which cannot understand." [S4H]

S4H: We make a group study with some Malaysia colleague, we didn't tell the lecturer anything, because we were afraid that she will angry with us. So we just made a group study before the last, last exam, final exam. That's why we manage to pass.

Researcher: In your opinion, since the lecturer taught in Bahasa Malaysia or Malay language, was the lecturer aware that you are an International student and you have no understanding on Bahasa?

S4H, S5H and S6H: Yes. [S4H, S5H and S6H]

“The definition they said in their words when they are going to read it and you cannot understand what is written you cannot get the meaning from the.. academic writing. I mean this is the difference that you see in the lecturers I mean they... I mean they themselves they have two kind of explaining, one, once it is written and once... Oral. The other one is oral.” [S3D]

Lack of Use of Technology in Lecturing

The respondents' dilemma in academic listening practices further increased as the lecturers were not technology-savvy. Three respondents from School G stated that their request to the lecturers to use e-learning portals for teaching activities was denied. A technology channel that could be employed to overcome the difficulties in academic listening practice is through the uploading of lecture materials for students' reference in various e-learning portals. Unfortunately, the lecturers lacked technological expertise in using the e-learning portals.

“the lecturer should know that some of the student don't understand what he or she say exactly. ...because I remember in the previous semester we ask from our lecturer please put your, because his accent was awful and we ask please put your slide and your notes in the e learning before you came to class and is

better for us to read this is slide, this note give to class and come to class we try to understand but he told say no but he no I cannot I put the slide after finishing my lecture it is really bad, surely bad because lecture can improve this weakness” [S11G]

The lecturers' dependency on the use of Power Point slides further increased the difficulties students faced. Lecturers were found to browse quickly the Power Point slides while speaking at a fast pace. Furthermore, five respondents from School E stated that their lecturers lacked presentation skills in delivering their lectures. These setbacks affected the students' comprehension of lectures.

Lack of Discipline Content Knowledge

The challenges in understanding the Malay lecturers' accent became worse when lecturers applied professional words or discipline-specific vocabulary in their oral communications. Some respondents related two reasons for the difficulties in comprehending the lectures. First, there is lack of discipline content knowledge to understand the meaning of the words used during lectures. Second, lecturers' accent caused the understanding of the specific terms more difficult. Therefore, lack of content and lack of listening proficiency are interferences that affect their level of understanding and comprehension.

“Actually the main difficulty I had seen during the first semester

until now, that when our lecturer explain about the topics our subjects, I cannot understand couldn't understand exactly the main idea. Not because, just his accent, and also the subject itself. I don't have any background about this subject...” [S1H]

OVERCOMING THE DIFFICULTIES IN ACADEMIC LISTENING PRACTICES

Three themes emerged in the analysis of the measures applied in overcoming the difficulties in academic listening practices. The themes are enculturation in graduate study environment, expectations of lecturers and the role of students.

Enculturation in Graduate Study Environment

More than half of the respondents also indicated that prolonged exposure to the graduate study environment was crucial to the success of comprehending information successfully. They added that the gradual process of comprehension took about one to two semesters. The initial semester in their graduate programme is crucial for them to accommodate and get adjusted to the accents and pronunciation of local lecturers and other graduate students.

Expectations of Lecturers

Majority of the respondents also stated that their lecturers have an important role to play in helping them overcome their difficulties

in their academic listening practices. Lecturers have to ensure that they speak with clear pronunciation and that the localised language elements in standard spoken English are reduced. Furthermore, the lecturers are expected to equip themselves with the latest technological advancement in delivering lectures to ensure that students do not only have to depend on their ability to listen in the lecture halls. Students also hoped that the lecturers were able to speak at a slower pace to allow them to take down notes and understand the lecture at all times.

“Frankly I told her can you speak a bit slowly so we can understand, we can follow then she said okay, she was really very nice maybe she take for 2,3 lectures slow in a good way after that she go back to her....” [S1D]

Second, more than half of the respondents also indicated that lecturers should be more sensitive towards the difficulties faced by the students in comprehending English language spoken with various accents in the multicultural academic community at the university. The respondents recommended that lecturers should not only be reading from their PowerPoint slides but should also explaining rigorously to allow students to understand the lecture topics. Furthermore, S2G stated that lectures should not be a one-way mode of communication. Lecturers should also take the initiative to make the lecture interactive through the participation of students.

This would allow the students to build a good student-lecturer relationship and improve their understanding of listening.

“I think lecturers can play more role. Because I think they are closer to the students so that they should improve on the rate interaction with the students. It shouldn't be like, all the time the lecturer will be standing talking and just talking while the students may not understand, or may not even comprehend what he is saying. But when he talks interactively with the students that will be like more of a discussion so that he will understand the student and the student will also understand him. Because in interaction, you open --- Because if you stay, it's not as if everyone understands because you don't feel like seeing what is in your mind. But when you improve the interactions, I think its going to help better.” [S2G]

The same group of respondents also suggested that the university must ensure the lecturers are given speech training to overcome the problems faced by the students in understanding the variation in local lecturers' accents.

“I think some lecturers are don't have enough ability to do some lecture but they have enough knowledge in fields but they can explain good may be because of

language, for example Chinese lecturer can't speak good English and about (deleted name of institution), I think (deleted name of institution) do some session for lecturer to tell them this matter is useful to improve the speech to improve this level of education for student also for university is important I think.” [S12G]

Role of Students

Immersing oneself in the target environment would help students overcome the challenges faced in academic listening practices. Majority of the respondents also indicated that they immersed themselves in the local environment, read the lecture topic in their first language before attending the lecture and lastly, did a lot of listening in English to overcome the difficulties of comprehending lecturers' accents. Prolonged contact with local community also helped the students overcome difficulties faced in the academic listening practices. S2A cited that paying more attention and concentrating on the speech is helpful to overcome the challenges faced in listening.

In addition, patience is also an important factor to help students to overcome the difficulties they face in academic listening practices. Three respondents explained that it is their responsibility to request the speaker to continuously repeat the speech until they understood what is spoken. Respondents such as S4D who is an African national, also took the initiative to improve

English language proficiency by attending English language classes before enrolling in the Master's programme.

S4D: From 2008 I'm here so I can understand and the...

Researcher: 2008? Your first degree is at Africa, your master is here, you started what year?

S4D: 2010.

Researcher: Before this what are you doing? S4D: Study English because when I came here I don't know English. [S4D]

The assistance rendered by classmates is also one way to overcome the challenges faced in listening. S4E stated that approaching other classmates to explain a speaker's speech would help the students to overcome the difficulties in their listening. Furthermore, as mentioned by three other respondents, listening to international students who are more proficient in English language and speaking with classmates outside the classroom would be of great help to the students to improve their English language proficiency.

Audio recording the lectures also helped the respondents to overcome their difficulties in their academic listening practices. Three respondents stated that they used audio recorder to record the lectures in the class. This measure helped in aiding the understanding of the lecturers' accent. By repeatedly listening to the audio recordings,

one's understanding of the lecture would be further enhanced and English language proficiency would improve. In addition, reading the PowerPoint slides' handout repeatedly would also assist in decreasing the difficulties faced in academic listening. S5D, S10G and S14G explained that continuous reading of reference books is more helpful to overcome the setbacks of listening challenges.

The effort to explore internet resources such as Google to download the videos of lectures with similar content from other universities such as Cambridge and Oxford also helped in the students' academic listening practices. By listening and watching the videos of lectures with similar content, students were able to understand the lectures conducted by their lecturers. YouTube was also highlighted by S11G as an alternative media resource to listen to lectures of similar content. In addition, listening to English channel programmes or BBC helped to improve their listening ability while watching downloaded movies and listening to the dialogues also helped to improve their English language proficiency.

"return back to the internet and google it, and download the video from other universities so that can I understand the English accent from Cambridge university, Oxford university. So we can understand and after that I will make a review to the lecture and so can I understood"
[S1H]

DISCUSSION

Academic listening practice is a challenging academic communicative event. The findings of this study showed that listening and comprehending multiple accents involved in academic listening practices are challenging. According to Odlin (1989, pp. 77–80) and Ringbom (1987, pp.113–114), the “*difficulties faced in the academic listening practice are influenced by the language distance between their first language and second language or third language*”.

The language distance influences the amount of transfer that can take place between languages. For example, Arabic speakers take a longer time to acquire English vocabulary because the transfer from third languages seems to depend very much on relative language distance. This situation makes learning English language difficult for students, especially low level proficiency students. Literature has also confirmed that input does not represent intake because input will not be successfully decoded unless a high level of second language knowledge and listening proficiency have been achieved (Field, 2008). Furthermore, university lectures impose heavy load on listeners as they have to interpret detailed and extended monologues. This is due to the value laden discourses in which the lecturers aim to inform, evaluate and review the information brought forward to students’ attention (Lee, 2009a, 2009b).

The findings are also parallel to studies conducted by Manjet, Pandian and Kaur (2015) and Prescott and Hellsten (2005)

indicating accents of other languages may produce comprehension difficulties between international students and lecturers. Manjet et al.’s (2015) quantitative study examined the academic listening difficulties students faced in understanding their classmates’ accents and identifying differing views/ ideas. Students also faced challenges in understanding lecturers’ accents. Johnson (2008) reported that although international students often understood the language at the level of the meaning of each word during listening, they were not able understand the extended discourse.

Furthermore, the students indicated reluctance to approach their lecturers directly for clarification. However, in this study, the respondents took initiative to consult the lecturers for clarification or for added information after the lectures.

Consequently, to overcome the challenges in their academic listening practices, many students indicated that listening to non-academic programmes such as music and watching movies helped a lot. In the context of recording the lecture for later review or borrowing other students’ lecture notes for reference, it was found to be unpopular.

Students preferred to obtain lecture hand-outs and copies of the PowerPoint slides from the lecturers either before or after the lecture. The nature of listening and note taking in lectures has been influenced by the popularity of the use of PowerPoint. King’s (1994) earlier research indicated that the use of PowerPoint has reduced listeners’ dependence on the spoken dimension

of lecture input and brought in greater flexibility for the lecturers.

This study recommends that lecturers should play a more active role in helping international students overcome the challenges they face in academic listening practices. The lecturers should focus on improving their English language proficiency and teaching pedagogy of the academic fraternity. At the administrative level, the university should take the responsibility to identify language related weaknesses among the lecturers at an early stage of their career development as educators and to provide them opportunities to improve their English language proficiency through in-house language courses. Carroll (2005a, 2005b) stated that communication skills in transmitting knowledge are crucial for positive student learning experience. This will indirectly contribute to successful academic listening among the students. Therefore, it is suggested that lecturers should be trained in the art of teaching and provided in-house training to improve their communication skills, feedback mechanisms and clarity in their course delivery.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the difficulties international graduate students faced in their academic listening practices. The interview findings indicated that the students' low level of English language proficiency affected their listening comprehension. The difficulties in academic listening were further aggravated by the lecturers'

Malaysian English pronunciation and accent that was dissimilar to their personal language experience. The qualitative data also indicated that the measures used by the students to overcome their difficulties and their feedback to their lecturers helped in improving their academic listening practices. This research has highlighted that higher learning institutions, before accepting international students, must have a clear instructional and learning plan that is able to sustain the multifaceted nature of the linguistic and cultural background of the students for successful academic listening practices.

However, this study's limitations such as a relatively small sample size of 70 respondents might not provide sufficient support for any conclusive findings that may be generalisable to the international graduate students' population in similar taught Master's programmes in other higher education institutions in Malaysia. However, data from this study will be beneficial for various stakeholders to improve the academic learning environment of the international students. At the same time, it also serves as a scaffold for a more extensive research into academic listening practices which currently is an under-researched area among other academic skills such as writing, reading and speaking.

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