cek turnitin 12

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Comprehension of Academic Communication Among Indonesian Students at a Public University in Malaysia

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Introduction

Growing numbers of tertiary students now undertake their education in a country other than in their home country. Malaysia is one of the destinations for international students. Based on the current data, 136,293 international students from over 150 countries joined Malaysian higher education (Memon et al., 2020). Most international students came from Southeast Asia, Middle Asia, Middle Eastern countries, African countries, and a few from Europe. Malaysian universities use both English and Malay as their medium Language. However, English is used more widely when involving international students, depending on the nature and needs of their studies. Using English as a primary language is therefore important because English is considered a universal lingua franca. "English is the centerpiece of the global knowledge system. It has become the lingua franca par excellence and continues to embed that dominance in a self-reinforcement process" (Crystal, 2012). Based on the above context, this study will gauge students' comprehension of academic communication. The study aims to help Malaysian academics to better understand the issues faced by Indonesian students in comprehending academic communication.

Literature Review

International students face a number of challenges while studying in Malaysia, and the issue of academic communication is one of the most discussed. Huntley (1993) and Kuo (2011) state that international students frequently have difficulties following lectures, taking notes, engaging in class discussions, and understanding teachers. In English, they also struggle with academic language when researching the material and conceptual constructs (Beaven et al., 1998; Lin, 1997). These issues inevitably represent the perception of academic communication by students (Hakim & Saputra, 2018).

Indonesian students are one of Malaysian universities' largest international student communities. 5,823 Indonesian students attended public or private universities in Malaysia (Khairina et al., 2020). This is among Malaysia's largest international student populations. Indonesian students often face adjustments

when studying overseas, especially in communication. The factors affecting students' understanding of academic communication are speed, intonation, and accent of the lecturer's speech when explaining the material. These differ from their home context, so students sometimes struggle with understanding the topic. In Indonesia, English is considered a foreign language, because of the use of many regional languages used as colloquial languages. As a result, English is rarely used for daily communication or only used in academic or work environments. Therefore, it is important to explore measures to overcome these issues, so students can improve their understanding via academic communication.

English is not a dominant language in Indonesia. Indonesia has many native languages that are used as colloquial languages. As a result, English is rarely used for communication. Thus, many Indonesian students have problems interacting in a new setting lacking in vocabulary, pronunciation, idiomatic usage, fluent conversation, and listening. With both a new culture and a new academic environment, students may find that the adjustment to a new context is fairly difficult. Natsir (2018) conducted a study on the adjustment of Indonesian students in Malaysia. They collected data using an in-depth interview which was administered to 4 male and 4 female Indonesian students. Their study revealed that most issues faced by Indonesian students studying abroad in non-native English countries were language related problems. Research has also shown discrepancies in teaching methods also influences academic communication. Novera (2004) used an open-ended questionnaire to address 25 Indonesian students' adjustment experiences to an Australian university. Specifically, she studied the academic social and cultural experiences of students in several Australian universities during their study time abroad. The study revealed that the students challenge in academic spoken English and academic learning intersected with differences in teaching approaches so as to affect their educational progress.

In Indonesian schools, the emphasis is on English grammar, that is to say, on reading and writing skills primarily due to competency assessments in Indonesian schools. According to Regulation number 19 in 2005, the assessment of students' competence in reading and writing may be seen in the English National Examination. This explains why schools and teachers focus on national examinations. A study conducted by Sawir (2005) showed some East Asian and Southeast Asian nations are accustomed to a more passive-learning style. The strong focus on grammar coincides with a didactic pedagogy, strengthening the teacher-centered learning form and resulting in little interest in developing students as active speakers of English. Furthermore, Musthafa (2015) states that English is seldom used in the classroom as teachers tend to prefer the use of Indonesian language and as Voicu (2012) points out, heavy reliance on the native language may hinder foreign language acquisition and use in accessing scientific knowledge.

Results

The study used a quantitative design questionnaire (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) consisting of two sections, which were demographic information and research questions. Demographic information was gathered from Indonesian students, in various fields, attending a public university in Malaysia. The study participants were 20 randomly selected respondents and the questionnaire consisted of eleven questions answered via a Likert scale. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms and touched on students understanding academic communication, gaps in teaching approaches, and strategies that can help students overcome the issue of academic understanding.

TABLE 1
The Questionnaire Results

Question	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I have difficulty speaking in English especially during classroom activities	0.00	0.30	0.30	0.35	0.05
2. I find it difficult to understand speakers who use too many unfamiliar words	0.05	0.30	0.45	0.20	0.00
3. I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words that are not pronounce clearly	0.05	0.90	0.05	0.00	0.00
4. I find it difficult to understand well when speakers speak too fast	0.20	0.45	0.15	0.15	0.05
5. I have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar or varied accent	0.05	0.20	0.60	0.15	0.00
6. In Indonesian schools, there is a common focus on English grammar	0.35	0.55	0.05	0.05	0.00
7. Indonesian teachers mostly dominate talk, and they tend to use Bahasa Indonesia to carry out their English lessons in the classroom	0.25	0.60	0.00	0.10	0.05
8. I tend to use a translation dictionary or related foreign language apps on the smartphone	0.10	0.65	0.15	0.10	0.00
9. Befriend locals and ask them what I do not understand during the lecture activity	0.10	0.60	0.30	0.00	0.00
10. I try to learn English by myself or take an English course	0.40	0.40	0.20	0.00	0.00
11. Watch online English movies to familiarize oneself with the spoken English	0.35	0.50	0.10	0.05	0.00

Students' problems in comprehending academic communication were addressed in questions one through five. The results show 40% felt they do not have difficulty speaking in English, especially during classroom activities. However, the results show students do find unfamiliar words and speaking speed to present some problems, with 35% and 65% agreeing with these statements respectively, see Table 1. The strongest result was related to unclear pronunciation, where 90% found that understanding the meaning of words that are not clearly pronounced presented a problem.

Table 1, specifically questions six and seven, illustrates results related to different teaching approaches used by teachers in Indonesian schools. Ninety percent of respondents agreed that in Indonesian schools, there is a common focus on English grammar, rather than on communicative competence. Additionally, most of the respondents, 85%, also agreed that English teachers mostly dominate talk, and tend to use Indonesian to carry out their English lessons in the classroom.

Potential solutions that can help students to solve the issue surrounding academic comprehension of English were the focus of questions 8 through 11. The results highlight some solutions that can assist students address a lack of academic comprehension. The use of technology, via smartphones and foreign language applications, seeking friendship and assistance from locals and asking them for clarification during the lecture activity, enrolling in an English class, as well as watching online English movies to familiarize oneself with spoken English were all viewed as effective solutions to overcoming a lack of academic comprehension, see Table 1.

Discussion

Students' Problem in Comprehending Academic Communication

The findings of this study aimed to gauge Indonesian students' comprehension in academic communication at a public university in Malaysia. The findings indicate that Indonesian students faced communication comprehension issues, however, based on questionnaire outcomes, they have no speech problems. Most Indonesian students disagree that they have difficulty speaking English, particularly during classroom activities. On the other hand, respondents were neutral, finding it difficult to understand speakers using so many foreign words. This may indicate that respondents may understand the speaker's context despite not understanding the words. Respondents may use meaning, gestures or facial expressions to help them understand what the speaker is saying. Also, respondents cannot understand at all however, but students slowly understand the subject matter.

Question 3, "I find it difficult to understand the meaning of words that are not clearly spoken," has an exceptionally high percentage of agreement, this result revealed that pronunciation affects understanding communication. Similar to the result, Kisno (2011) notes that if we speak the Received Pronunciation, we can make all English speakers understand our English language. On the other hand, intonation is also very influential for understanding communication, many respondents felt it is difficult to understand when speakers speak too quickly. Intonation is how the voice rises and falls when the person talks, and the first language may affect intonation. Without intonation, the expressions and thoughts are more difficult to understand.

Furthermore, accent can be an identifying linguistic feature that indicates the background of the speaker's language. According to Crystal (2012), an accent is the cumulative auditory effect of pronunciation features identifying where a person is from, regionally or socially. Accent refers to a language's variation. As for the fifth research question, aimed at finding respondents who have difficulty understanding speakers with unfamiliar or varied accents. The results show that most respondents were neutral on the statement, meaning that respondents may or may not understand what a speaker is saying because of a discrepancy between the speaker's accent and listeners' background. Furthermore, Malaysian lecturer accents may not be that far from Indonesian lecturers.

Difference of Teaching Approaches

For many respondents, their difficulties in academic communication intersected with differences in teaching approaches so as to affect their educational progress. Based on the results of this study, it can be seen that most of the respondents agreed that English grammar is a common priority in Indonesian schools rather than communicative skills. These results provide evidence that Indonesian students lack learning in English communication, and grammar-based approaches tend to be used in Indonesian schools. Panggabean (2015) also states that although the grammar-based approach has changed into a functional use approach in Indonesian English curriculum since the 1980s, instructors are still teaching English with a grammar-based approach as well as with pronunciation and intonation, although they do not know exactly the correct ones. In other words, this approach makes teachers fail to create a fascinating classroom learning atmosphere. Therefore, many students find learning English burdensome. In formal schools, many students believe that English is the most difficult subject, even more difficult than chemistry, physics, and mathematics.

Additionally, as shown by the findings most of the respondents also agreed that Indonesian teachers mostly dominate talk and prefer to use Indonesian to teach English lessons in the classroom. This result shows that Indonesian teachers tend to use teacher-centric classes to teach English lessons. In addition, teacher-centered instruction is deeply embedded in Indonesian schools; this type of instruction has become part of Indonesian school culture (Azra, 2002; Bjork, 2005; Buchori, 2000). As a result, students become passive, making students less involved in classroom learning and teaching. Wolk (2010) also

states that teacher-centered class instruction is undemocratic, as it fails to take into account the learning dynamics of students and ignores the contributions of students in the classroom. Additionally, teacher's use of Indonesia also needs to be limited, as using it too much can cause problems in teaching and learning. Atkinson (1987) states that when first language is used more than necessary, it can cause dependence on linguistic transfer, failure to observe target language equivalence, oversimplification in translation, and reluctance to speak English even when it is possible. The use of English in class must therefore be further optimized, as better English skills can only be achieved by exposing students to a significant amount of English input (Pan, 2010).

Solutions that Can Help Students to Solve the Issue of Academic Comprehension

To eliminate the problems faced by Indonesian students in academic communication, four main methods are employed, using a translation dictionary, befriending locals, learning English by oneself or taking an English course, and watching online English movies.

Question 1 which is "I tend to use a smartphone translation dictionary or related foreign language apps," was heavily agreed with. The findings suggest respondents view technology as a learning tool to help them solve academic problems. Such technology provides dictionary entries often containing vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, synonyms, and usage information. Thus, the use of such dictionaries is an acknowledged strategy to understand words in context and use them correctly in speech. On the other hand, most respondents agreed to be friendly with locals because students can ask them questions about what you don't understand, e.g., during the lecture activity or about assignments, by having friends to talk to. Additionally, it's not difficult for Indonesian students to be friends with locals because the culture is quite similar and as a result Indonesian students don't face significant problems.

The results show that most Indonesian students agreed with learning English by themselves or taking an English course. Students can learn English anywhere, and this can easily and efficiently develop English skills. For example, students download modules, audio lessons, or English learning applications so they can learn breaks in their free time. Furthermore, taking an English course often has advantages such as being taught by experts and having interlocutors to improve their faith in speaking English. This will help them interact actively.

Respondents also agreed that watching English movies online to familiarize themselves with spoken English was useful. Similar to the findings, many researchers claimed there are several advantages inherent in using English films to develop language skills (Ismaili, 2013; Khoshniyat & Dowlatabadi, 2014; Li & Wang, 2015; Qiu, 2017). The benefits include increasing student motivation, improving students' and communication skills and increasing their cultural knowledge, thus enabling a more authentic language learning experience. Li and Wang (2015) also conducted a study on the impact of using English movies to enhance Chinese college learners' English oral skills. They used English films as part of English courses, after exposing English films to respondents, the researchers engaged in oral or written activities to summarize the film plots. The findings revealed improved oral skills for students. Watching English films is one of the effective ways to solve academic communication problems.

Conclusion

This study examined the perception of academic communication at a public university in Malaysia among Indonesian students. The study found that in academic communication, Indonesian students faced problems with comprehension. The influence of the first language creates comprehension problems for Indonesian students because English is seldom used for everyday communication. The mother tongue and cultural characteristics, therefore, remain dominant. A new culture and a new learning climate are very hard to quickly assimilate. As a consequence, during the lecture activity, learners become slow to understand the subject matter. It is difficult for respondents to grasp foreign words, grammar, intonation,

and accent from the speakers. Differences in teaching approaches also affect their understanding of academic communication. Furthermore, students can use several methods to solve this problem, such as using a translation dictionary, befriending local students, learn English by themselves or through taking an English course, and watching English movies online. Future studies may discuss comprehension of academic communication among Indonesian students. Another recommendation for future studies is to explore Indonesian students' academic communication concerns through many Malaysian public universities. The third recommendation for Indonesian students, such as taking preparatory courses, must train themselves before studying abroad. Additionally, preparatory courses that prepare Indonesian students in Malaysian academic institutions enable them to actively use English in the classroom, engage in discussion, and improve communication skills.

Acknowledgements

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cek turnitin 12