APPLYING A DESIGN-BASED APPROACH TO DESIGNING, DEVELOPING AND EVALUATING ESL ACADEMIC WRITING MATERIALS FOR MALAYSIAN UNDERGRADUATES

NANCY CHIUH @ NOEMI

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FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH
2019

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH
2019

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is my own except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

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DEGREE	:	**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE)**
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Dr Lee Kean Wah for his invaluable guidance, advice and patience throughout my research and thesis writing.

My special thanks also to Dr Ursula Wingate for her guidance throughout my research attachment in King's College London as a 'PhD visiting student'. The research attachment has contributed significantly to my research.

My sincere thanks go to my examiners, Associate Professor Dr Suyansah Swanto, Associate Professor Dr Tan Choon Keong and Professor Jayakaran Mukundan for their insightful comments and encouragement.

I am also indebted to the lecturers and students of Diploma in Public Administration in UiTM Sabah for their full cooperation and participation in this study.

I would also like to thank Brian Tomlinson and the team for giving me an opportunity to share my research and interact with fellow enthusiasts in materials design and development at the MATSDA conference in Liverpool, England.

I appreciate the support received from the staff in the Faculty of Psychology and Education, Postgraduate Centre Universiti Malaysia Sabah and the staff in the administration department in Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah.

I am also grateful to the Malaysian Ministry of Education for funding my PhD degree.

It gives me great pleasure in acknowledging the support and help of Dr Jocelyn Lee of UiTM Sabah for being my 'critical friend' in this research.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Dr Crispina Gregory, Dr Agnes Jidwin and all my friends in UiTM Sabah who have gone through this journey for their words of encouragement and moral support.

I am also so grateful to my friend, Winnie Justine, and all my friends in the Academy of Language Studies in UiTM Sabah for their constant encouragement and prayers.

I would especially like to thank my amazing family for their support and prayers throughout my PhD journey. I undoubtedly could not have done this without them. I love you all so much.

Last but not least, I could not find the words to express my gratitude to God Almighty for giving me the strength, knowledge, ability and opportunity to undertake this research. Without His blessings, this achievement would not have been possible.

Nancy Chiuh @ Noemi
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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies stressed the importance of conducting a needs analysis to better identify the real needs of the subjects which eventually lead to more focused courses. When the real needs of the learners are identified, more focused courses can be designed to meet these needs and the learners are able to benefit fully from these courses. Several studies also found that there was a mismatch or discrepancy between the needs of the learners and the courses offered. Hence, a preliminary review of the English language courses (ELC) and PAD (Public Administration Diploma) courses in UiTM Sabah was conducted for the purpose of discovering whether there is a mismatch between the writing skills required in the PAD courses and the writing skills offered in ELC, thereby identifying problems or gaps. Through this preliminary document analysis, it was found that there was a mismatch between the existing English courses and the specific writing needs of the Diploma in Public Administration (DPA) students in UiTM Sabah. Therefore, there was a need for a solution to the problem or gap and 'design-based research' (DBR) with the integration of needs analysis were conducted in this study. The study, first of all, identified the specific academic writing needs of the DPA students. Based on the findings in the needs analysis stage, academic writing materials were designed and developed, via design-based research, to respond to the DPA students' area of greatest needs in academic writing. The final part of the study was the evaluation of the usefulness of the writing materials and workshops. Multiple sources and methods were utilised in the present study to better identify the academic writing needs of the DPA first-year students in UiTM Sabah. This study involved various data sources which comprised students, subject instructors, experienced materials developer and documents. Data was also collected through various methods, namely questionnaires, focus groups, key informant group interviews, observations and document analysis. The analysis in the needs analysis stage revealed that the students needed much help in various academic writing skills which were not available in the English courses offered to them in UiTM. The subject instructors and students found the writing workshops and materials designed and developed in this study useful and were able to meet the students' needs with regard to academic writing. This study has shown that by employing multiple sources (e.g. learners, instructors and documents) and methods (e.g. questionnaires, interviews, observations and document analysis) in conducting needs analysis, the real needs of the learners could be identified. This was made possible through the triangulation of sources and methods. This study has also proven that a collaborative partnership between the researcher, students, subject instructors and experienced materials developer plays a vital part in the process of developing teaching and learning materials. Hence, this collaborative partnership needs to be taken into account in the process of designing and developing the academic writing materials.

Keywords: Needs analysis, Materials design, Design-based research

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ABSTRAK

APLIKASI PENDEKATAN "DESIGN-BASED" DI DALAM REKA BENTUK, PEMBANGUNAN DAN PENILAIAN BAHAN PENULISAN AKADEMIK BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI BAHASA KEDUA UNTUK PELAJAR-PELAJAR SISWAZAH MALAYSIA

Terdapat banyak penyelidikan yang memberikan penekanan terhadap kepentingan melaksanakan 'keperluan analisis' (need analysis) untuk mengenalpasti keperluan sebenar pelajar yang seterusnya akan menghasilkan kursus yang lebih fokus. Apabila keperluan sebenar pelajar telah dikenalpasti, kursus yang lebih fokus dapat dibangun untuk memenuhi keperluan pelajar-pelajar dan mereka dapat memperolehi manfaat penuh daripada kursus tersebut. Beberapa penyelidikan juga mendapati tidak keserasian di antara keperluan pelajar dengan kursus yang ditawarkan. Olehitu, satu tinjauan awal telah dilaksanakan ke atas kursus-kursus bahasa Inggeris (ELC) dan PAD (Public Administration Diploma) yang ditawarkan di UiTM Sabah bertujuan untuk melihat jika terdapat ketidakserasian di antara kemahiran menulis yang diperlukan di dalam kursus-kursus PAD dan kemahiran menulis yang ditawarkan oleh kursus-kursus ELC, dan dengan demikian mengenalpasti masalah atau jurang. Melalui analisis dokumen awal ke atas sukatan pelajaran kursus Bahasa Inggeris (ELC) dan PAD tersebut, didapati bahawa terdapat percanggahan di antara kursus Bahasa Inggeris yang sediada dengan keperluan menulis khusus pelajar-pelajar Diploma Pentadbiran Awam (DPA) di UiTM Sabah. Oleh itu, terdapat keperluan untuk mencari penyelesaian kepada masalah tersebut dan 'design-based research' (DBR) dengan penggabungan 'analisis keperluan' dilaksanakan di dalam kajian ini. Kajian, terlebih dahulu, mengenalpasti keperluan spesifik menulis pelajar-pelajar DPA. Berdasarkan dapatan 'analisis keperluan', bahan menulis akademik direka dan dibangun, melalui DBR, mengikut keperluan menulis pelajar-pelajar DPA yang sangat diperlukan. Bahagian terakhir dari kajian ini adalah penilaian kebergunaan bahan menulis yang direka dan dibangun, dan juga kebergunaan bengkel menulis. Pelbagai sumber dan kaedah telah digunakan dalam kajian ini untuk mengenalpasti keperluan menulis ilmiah pelajar-pelajar tahun pertama di UiTM Sabah. Kajian ini melibatkan pelbagai sumber data kaedah kajian. Hasil analisis pada peringkat 'analisis keperluan' menunjukkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar memerlukan bantuan dalam pelbagai ketrampilan penulisan ilmiah yang mana tidak disediakan di dalam kursus Bahasa Inggeris di UiTM. Pensyarah-pensyarah dan pelajar-pelajar menilai bahan dan bengkel menulis yang direka dan dibangun dalam kajian ini dan menjelaskan bahawa bahan dan bengkel menulis tersebut membantu dan mampu memenuhi keperluan menulis pelajar-pelajar. Kajian ini telah menunjukkan dengan menggunakan pelbagai sumber (contohnya pelajar, pendidik dan dokumen) dan pelbagai kaedah di dalam melaksanakan 'analisis keperluan', keperluan sebenar pelajar dapat dikenalpasti. Ini semua dapat dilaksanakan melalui triangulasi sumber dan kaedah. Kajian ini juga telah membuktikan bahawa kolaborasi di antara penyelidik, pelajar-pelajar, pengajar subjek dan pembangun bahan yang berpengalaman memainkan peranan yang penting di dalam proses membangun bahan pengajaran dan pembelajaran. Oleh yang demikian, kolaborasi ini perlu diwujudkan di dalam proses membangun bahan menulis akademik.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELC	-	English Language Course
DAP	-	Diploma in Public Administration
PAD	-	Public Administration Diploma
LSA	-	Learning Situation Analysis
PSA	-	Present Situation Analysis
TSA	-	Target Situation Analysis
TAWM	-	The Academic Writing Materials
UiTM	-	Universiti Teknologi MARA

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

When students begin their undergraduate studies, they will need to adjust to the demands of the undergraduate studies with regard to academic English at university level. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 37) maintain that "their English tuition up to the tertiary level will generally have been in the area of General English, and is unlikely to have included specific preparation for study at university level." Cline, Bissell, Hafner and Katz (2007: 30) claimed "the focus in high schools has been primarily on college eligibility requirement." They identified a gap in academic skills between high schools and universities.

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This was perhaps one of the reasons that in recent years, there has been wide interest worldwide in needs analysis which investigated the language needs in higher learning institutions (e.g., Barker, 2000; Bosher and Smalkoski, 2002; Chan, 2001; Dehnad, Bagherzadeh, Bigdeli, Hatami and Hosseini, 2010; Huang, 2010; Phakiti and Li, 2011; Rosenfeld, Leung and Oltman, 2001). Barker (2000: 8), for example, in his study on first-year students' perception of writing difficulties, found that the students "come to realise during first semester that they are not adequately prepared for the writing demands required at university." While Pecorari (as cited in Phakiti and Li, 2011) found that Asian ESL students had problems in academic writing; the students "begin their academic writing from 'copying' which implies a lack of training in academic writing and arouses accusations of plagiarism in their writing" (232).

These studies and many other studies on the academic needs of students at universities (e.g., Barker, 2000; Bosher and Smalkoski, 2002; Chan, 2001; Dehnad, et al., 2010; Huang, 2010; Phakiti and Li, 2011) have suggested that it is crucial to identify the needs of the students in or provide them with the necessary courses. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 53) maintained that "any course should be based on an analysis of learner need." Several studies (e.g., Bosher and Smalkoski, 2002; Holliday, 1995; Jasso-Aguilar, 1999; Li So-mui and Mead, 2000) also stressed the importance of conducting a needs analysis to better identify the real needs of the subjects which eventually lead to more focused courses. In fact, "needs analysis is the corner stone of ESP and leads to a very focused course" (Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998: 122). They further maintained that "in theory, needs analysis is a first step carried out before a course so that a course outline, materials and other resources can be in place before teaching begins." Without proper needs analysis, stakeholders, for example institutions and language instructors, may rely on assumptions on the language needs of their learners. These assumed needs may not be the real needs of these students. In addition, students' needs may be different from one learning institution to another, as stated by Jordan (1997) that "the students' needs may differ according to the learning environment...it is clear that an assessment of students' needs is crucial." He further (1997: 22) maintains that "needs analysis should be the starting point for devising syllabuses, courses, materials and the kind of teaching and learning that takes place."

Studies on needs analyses and academic difficulties in higher institutions of learning have implications for the present study; it aimed at investigating the academic writing needs of first-year students of Diploma in Public Administration (DPA) students in Sabah MARA University of Technology (UiTM Sabah). The DPA program and PAD (Public Administration Diploma) courses were selected because these program and courses require students to do numerous writing tasks compared to other programmes and courses offered in UiTM Sabah. The identified needs of these students then formed the basis of designing academic writing materials which aimed to meet the real academic writing needs of the DPA students. Design-based research (DBR) methodology was utilised in designing context-sensitive and culturally appropriate materials for language learning. It is

crucial to design context-sensitive and culturally appropriate materials for language learning, utilising the DBR approach towards needs analysis and materials development. These materials which took into account the specific needs of the DPA students and their PAD courses could be used to supplement the existing English courses offered to this particular group of students in UiTM.

1.2 Problem Statement

Being an English-medium university in Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) poses challenges to both its students and instructors, as a good command of English is essential. Students need to possess a certain level of English proficiency in order to excel in their studies in UiTM. In its attempt to equip its undergraduate students with the academic language skills, UiTM has introduced credit-bearing English language courses. These courses are offered to students of pre-diploma, diploma, pre-degree and degree programmes. In 2012, the English curriculum in UiTM was revised and took effect in June 2013. New English language courses (ELC), namely ELC120 (Integrated Language Skills: Listening) and ELC150 (Integrated Language Skills: Reading) were offered to first-year diploma students, first and second semesters respectively, across the various disciplines in UiTM. ELC120 course is "designed to build the listening, speaking and reading skills necessary to help students perform effectively and competently in the social and academic contexts" and ELC150 is "designed to equip students with the reading skills necessary to help them improve their comprehension of written English in order to compete successfully in an academic program and to be confident and independent readers" (Academy of Language Studies, 2013). To be exact, ELC120 is an integration of four language skills, but the emphasis is on listening, while ELC150 emphasises on reading. These courses are compulsory for all first-year diploma students in UiTM. They consist of face-to-face and non-face-to-face activities. Face-to-face activities are conducted through lectures in class while non-face-to-face activities are online practices prepared by the Academy of Language Studies in the main UiTM campus. In both ELC120 and ELC150 courses, students are required to complete vocabulary and grammar online assignments. These assignments supplement the face-to-face lectures in class and are awarded marks. They contain multiple choice questions where students need to choose the best

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answer to fill in the blanks in sentences provided. The course content and the online practices are generic and take a behaviourist approach to learning. This approach to learning operates on a principle of "stimulus-response." The focus of this approach is on objectively observable behaviours and disregards any independent activities of the mind. A possible rationale for offering general English courses instead of ESP courses is the proficiency levels of learners; this "may sets limits on the level of specificity of a course" (Barnard and Zemach in Tomlinson, 2003a: 307).

First-year Diploma in Public Administration (DPA) students are among first-year students who had to enrol on these two English language courses (ELC). Apart from these two ELC courses, DPA students had to take several other courses in their programme. Most of the courses in the Diploma in Public Administration involve writing. In PAD 120/130 (Introduction to Political Science) and 180/214 (Introduction to Public Personnel Administration) courses, for example, students are required to do group assignments and presentations. The written assignments require the students to write short answers and essays. It is crucial then for the students to be equipped with the writing skills they need to enable them to complete their written assignments satisfactorily. Were the specific needs of the students taken into account when the English language courses were designed and developed? Can these two English language courses equip the first-year DPA students with regard to writing in their programme? Can one generic course meet the specific needs of UiTM diploma students from various disciplines? There was a need then to investigate further the real or actual needs with regard to the writing of the first-year DPA students. Next, subject-specific writing materials were designed and developed to meet these needs of the first-year DPA students. DBR seemed to fit perfectly well as the underlying methodology of the study.

Several studies (e.g., Adzmi, Bidin, Ibrahim and Jusoff, 2009; Nik, Sani, Kamaruzaman, Osman and Bakar, 2009; Wan Chik and Hasbollah, 2010) have reported the writing problems in higher institutions in Malaysia. Osman and Bakar (2009) in their investigation on the problems in writing an academic paper of medical students Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), found the students had problem in the writing and language aspects. Based on their findings in the study, they