

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter will discuss the interview findings with reference to the research question, and previous studies, comparisons between the responses of the research question, implications, limitations and recommendations of the study.

Discussions of Research Findings

The objective of this study is to investigate the academic writing needs of the ESP students at Kasetsart University, and to survey their opinions and suggestions for improvement in their skills. The results obtained from the interviews are the basis for addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the needs of MA students at Kasetsart University regarding academic writing?
2. What are their opinions and suggestions concerning their instruction in academic writing?

The Needs of MA Students at Kasetsart University Regarding Academic Writing

In this present study, all participants are enrolled in the ESP program, either in the first or second year. The majority group of participants was female and the majority age group was 23 to 25 years. More than half of participants had studied English for over 16 years, with the average grade of B+; however, their extent of background in the use of English was self-described as fair. Nearly all participants had neither attended

extra writing classes nor extra academic writing classes, both before and during enrollment in the ESP program at Kasetsart University.

The findings of the study indicate that the perceived needs of the participants in both ESP4 and ESP5 are the English academic writing skills necessary to complete their thesis. This may be due to the fact that the thesis was the core requirement for a Masters Degree. For the second-year students (ESP4), the academic writing needs for their career are of secondary importance. This was probably due to the fact that they are near completion of their thesis and are certain to graduate. Their attention was more attuned, therefore, on the requirements of the employment market that they will soon enter. Writing needs for preparation of academic articles was third in order of importance. This may be due to the fact that they anticipate employment in academia (or are currently employed), so writing academic articles will benefit their career. For first-year students (ESP5), their secondary need was further study. This may be due to the fact that a few semesters remain before completion of their Masters Degree, and some students may be contemplating or planning to pursue a Doctorate Degree upon graduation. The need of third-most importance was academic writing skills for their career. This may be due to the fact that they perceive academic writing to be beneficial in their field of work. Furthermore, they may believe that others will perceive them to be more professional. These findings correspond to Negretti (2001) that graduate students desired improved academic writing skills in order to complete their degree program on schedule; i.e., according to the schedule established by the graduate school of the academic institution.

The most important need in academic writing for students in the second year of study was completion of writing assignments, essays or reports. The study participants stated that there are numerous assignments, essays or reports to be completed to fulfill course requirements. Moreover, writing academically was preferable during examinations. The aspect of secondary importance to the second-year students was

vocabulary. This may be due to the fact that the requirement for vocabulary in academia was more demanding than for normal, non-academic writing. Grammar and promotion tests were the aspects of third-most importance to second-year students. Students stated that writing academic English was significantly more difficult compared to normal writing, because of the complexity of the grammar. Promotion tests were considered to be an aspect of need, and therefore of parallel importance to career needs.

Both first- and second-year students identified assignments, essays or reports as the major aspect of needs in academic writing. This may be due to the fact that they anticipate many assignments, essays or reports to be completed in order to fulfill current and future course requirements. The second and third aspects of needs for first-year students are vocabulary and grammar. Justification given by first-year students was the same as that given by second-year students. This was similar to the findings of Negretti (*ibid*) and Wang and Bakken (2003), that aspects of needs in academic writing of most importance to graduate students is the ability to competently complete projects, reports or articles, and grammar.

The level of knowledge in academic writing for both ESP student groups was moderate. They stated that they gained knowledge from previous education and employment experiences. Moreover, since they enrolled in the ESP program, they learned various types of academic writing so they were confident in their knowledge. Second-year students as a group had a low level of self-confidence in writing academic English. Given that English was not the native language for all participants, there are numerous major and minor factors that may contribute to low self-confidence. For example, there are differences between the Thai and English languages itself, as well as social and cultural differences. Furthermore, there are differences between nations in their students' experiences in writing. This study indicates that while an average university student had a low-to-average confidence level in writing academic English,

this study group exhibits a high level of confidence due to their level of reading and past study of English.

The Opinions and Suggestions Concerning Instruction in Academic Writing

The results indicate that both groups of students view 'self' as the biggest obstacle to acquiring English academic writing skills, with 'lecturer' second. Familiarization with academic writing was the least problematic. Since academic writing is dependent on individual style, various factors derived from the study findings are noteworthy: 1) their academic writing; 2) their writing style; 3) their experience in writing; 4) the idea and detail for the topic; 5) the behavior of using Thai style in writing; 6) their infrequent use of English; 7) their level of determination; 8) their attitude toward the writing; 9) their knowledge; and 10) their confidence. Writing styles normally vary from person-to-person; e.g. one person may prefer writing in the active voice while another may prefer the passive voice. Their experiences in writing are also variable due to their academic background; e.g., some students had previously completed a degree in a science field. Their writing may be concise but not convincing or mostly starting the sentence with the number. Since the context of academic writing contains several complexities, the students had difficulties communicating them. The behavior in using Thai style of writing was an obstacle for the students. Students cognitive thought processes in Thai are different than in English; thus, English written based on Thai thought constructs are typically confusing for foreigners to read. Limited practicing, which was due, in part, to the length of the school semester, restricts how much the student was able to learn. Their level of interest and determination was largely due to from factors outside the realm of academia. In other words, laziness was a symptom of lack of motivation, but lack of motivation was not the root cause. Rather, it may be psychological or physiological. Responses from the study group indicate that when students practice writing, they usually had no one to edit or proof their documents. Their attitude toward writing affects their academic writing as well. A few

of the students stated that they dislike writing, that no matter how hard they try to prepare a well-written document, the result was never satisfactory. Their knowledge and their confidence are limited by the amount of time spent practicing writing, and the fact that they may be unfamiliar with audience awareness. This was similar to the findings of Wang and Bakken (ibid). Students agree that the difficulties they perceive are predominately within themselves. However, they stated that some of the problems also lie outside themselves; e.g. lecturers sometimes cause them difficulties.

The obstacles associated with lecturers identified by the study group include communication, writing style, nationality and background. The communication between the lecturer and student may not always be sufficiently clear, and the teaching methodology employed by the lecturer may not always be effective for their level of understanding of English. The writing style of lecturers, which was very individualistic, varies depending on skill. The nationality of the lecturer results in differences in academic writing style. American lecturers are different from English and Australian lecturers. The background of lecturers was related to teaching methodology. Students believe that lecturers have extensive experience in writing, but they might not have extensive experience in teaching writing. Moreover, the educational background of the lecturers may be from linguistic science, so they may be biased toward the linguistic genre.

The plan and resolution that was most recommended by second-year students was to practice reading and writing. They stated that practicing helped them comprehend the academic writing style more quickly and effectively than other methods of learning. Some students believe that it was too late to initiate any method to address their immediate needs, due to the fact that they will soon graduate; i.e., they believe any such method requires a long time to show positive results. The data obtained for first-year students was similar. They believe that it takes a long time to attain good academic writing skills. Due to the fact that English is a non-native

language and their past employment was not in academia, they have not had opportunities to develop their academic writing skills. Furthermore, lack in the use of their academic writing skills results in their regression. Nonetheless, more than half of the students stated they would like to improve their academic writing skills. Their most recommended methods to achieve this objective were to practice reading and ascribe to a foreign-based style in writing academic English.

The needs in developing academic writing skills most recommended by second-year students were enrolling in appropriate writing courses and self study (principally practicing writing). Second-year students were aware of their academic writing needs; thus, many understand the importance of enrolling in a writing course. They benefit from opportunities to practice writing and from the instruction, guidance and critical feedback from qualified instructors. Other students, however, stated that the most effective method for improving their writing skills was to practice writing by themselves and in accordance with styles they were able to learn from textbooks. For first-year students, the preferred method to improve their academic writing was through self-study, using academic articles, journals or textbooks as guides; however, they also recommend periodic consultation with an academic instructor

Students with academic writing needs require tools to help them developed their writing skills. Second-year students stated that native environment was a motivating factor in language development; thus the native academic environment of a university was beneficial in developing their academic writing skills. Attending English writing courses or seminars were useful tools for second-year students; however, this was in contrast to the responses received from first-year students. First-year students prefer to use the Internet and dictionary as tools in developing English academic writing skills. They stated that tools like the Internet and dictionary were effective resources readily available after completion of instructional courses. Some of the students, however, prefer a social learning environment, where they were able to obtain guidance and

critical feedback from academic instructors. They stated that all documents obtained from the Internet do not adhere to establish standards for English academic writing; thus they prefer to consult with academic instructors. The data indicates second-year students require less tools than first-year students. This may be due to the fact that first-year students had more course work remaining in their degree program (including their thesis), and therefore were in need of more tools to help them.

Data obtained from both first- and second-year students indicates that academic instructors were the most helpful resource in the area of people or organizations that support academic writing. They stated that academic instructors in the ESP program interact with them most closely and therefore were the most qualified to assess the needs of students. Moreover, the ESP faculty typically teaches several courses; thus, they were able to gage the progress in their students' academic writing skills throughout their degree program.

The opinions and suggestions for academic writing from both first- and second-year students focus on four aspects of learning: duration, lecturer, self and textbooks. Students recommended that instruction in academic writing occur through creation of a pre-sessional course. Since academic writing was the core skill in the ESP program, students should also practice as much as possible within and outside their academic program. They also stated that students come from different backgrounds and with different knowledge and styles of writing. The pre-sessional course would assist students in adjusting themselves to the demands and requirements of academic writing before they formally begin their degree program. Furthermore, it would provide them with greater understanding of the ESP program. Lectures should give emphasis to the importance of communication within an academic environment. Both first- and second-year students stated that they lack a clear understanding in the methodology for academic writing. They need to understand this process. This was similar to the findings

of Negretti (ibid), that the objective for graduate students in academic writing was “writing as a process”.

Both first- and second-year students stated that the teaching style of the academic instructor is an important factor in their understanding of academic writing. They emphasized the importance of sample writing styles and their applications, and that previously academic instructors provided information unrelated to their field, resulting in confusion. An example cited by one student stated that teacher gave an example using a quantitative style while requesting students to write using a qualitative style. Students stated that past English instructors used a general standard for writing, while the standards for MA/ESP students were specific, i.e. the use of academic standards. The data suggests that academic instructors should be more cognizant of the importance of tools that help students developed their academic writing skills. Tools have potential to benefit students both inside and outside the classroom.

Both first- and second-year students stated that ‘self’ was needed to improve their academic writing skills, as well as various external factors. The students stated that everything should start within the ‘self’ because it was the only aspect of learning that the student can control. Textbooks used in academic writing courses vary widely. Academic instructors should focus on a narrow range of textbooks (e.g., one or two that were especially well written) that were a useful resource to students in developing their academic writing skills. This will avoid instances where a textbook key was different from the academic instructor, resulting in confusion by the students.

Implication, Recommendation, Limitations of the Study

Implications of the Study

The present needs analysis study investigated the academic writing needs of MA students in the ESP program at Kasetsart University. The need analysis enabled the researcher to justify assumptions and recommendations that might be useful for designing an academic writing course in the pre-sessional period to be responsive to the needs of the MA/ESP students. The findings could be generalized to the previous group of MA/ESP students suggest needs of following groups, and provide useful information for similar programs. Also, it could be used as resource information together with the academic writing needs for MA/ESP students in further research. Essential data useful for this program was determined. The suggestions drawn from the analysis of data was applicable to the design and implementation of academic curriculum, and to the preparation of textbooks in response to academic writing needs for MA/ESP students. Furthermore, the results of this research study will be a useful resource to designers and faculty of the English for Specific Purposes Program, to develop teaching and learning materials that match the specific needs of MA/ESP students.

Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended that academic English courses be offered to MA/ESP students, either as a core requirement to their degree program or as elective courses. A majority of the study group stated that this kind of program was essential. A pre-sessional course in academic writing was also recommended, providing in-coming students with a basic understanding of the ESP program. The course should focus on writing instruction and application in the related areas of the program, with emphasis on course work and thesis preparation. The content in an academic writing course should be relevant to the specific needs of the MA/ESP students. Learner needs should be considered in the process of planning the content of a program. Furthermore, the course should be offered in the first semester of the degree

program or as a pre-session course. Students would be greatest served by dual instruction by native teachers in Thai and English.

Recommendations for Further Studies

The topic of this study was conducted based on the needs of students for one specific language skill – English academic writing. Further research should consider other types of language skills to investigate the needs of MA/ESP students in all common language skills; e.g., listening, speaking and reading. This recommendation was consistent with the findings of Brumfit, 1984. Moreover, this study focuses only on the ESP program, which mainly uses English. However, the other degree programs at Kasetsart University also require academic writing skills for completion of course requirements and thesis. Future research should encompass: 1) the use of additional language skills; 2) investigate the needs of more academic programs and 3) combine elements of 1) and 2).

Data collection in conjunction with this study was conducted based predominately on an interview. Future research should consider other types of data-gathering methods which may be more effective in defining and understanding the needs of the targeted group. . Other methods should be employed based on the nature of the data needed; e.g., observation and case studies. The researcher should clarify any misunderstanding in the interpretation of the questions, and any concerns which were unforeseen during the observation and case studies. Data gathering should be conducted before the start of an academic program, and a follow-up study conducted after the study group graduates. The researcher will then be able to conduct a comparative analysis to determine changes in the students' academic skills, perceptions of their abilities and the means to address their needs, and effectiveness of the academic program in responding to these needs.

This study was conducted using only one skill in the ESP program, while there were other important skills required by MA/ESP students. Thus, it was recommended that a parallel study be conducted in other academic programs to investigate the needs and opinions of academic writing of MA/ESP students.

Robinson (1991) states that needs analysts should be hesitant in gathering information from various sources, due to the multiplicity and diversity of the views on fundamentals for an ESP course. Therefore, further studies should be administered to ESP teachers in order to determine their perceived needs for MA/ESP students and check whether the students' needs and the perceived needs of ESP teachers were parallel. Berwick (1989: 55) views perceived needs as those that the educators make judgments about in other people's experience, while felt needs were viewed as the ones that the learners had. Richards (1990) examined this issue from the point of curriculum development. He states that the data to be collected from learners, teachers, administrators, and employers in the planning process will help to identify general and specific language needs and content of a language program. In addition, it will provide data to review and evaluate the existing program.

Limitations of the Study

This study was based upon the use of mainly one instrument – an interview. Observation and case studies could not be used due to time constraints. However, the essays were used in this study to support and give a clearer picture of the MA/ESP students' needs. Consequently, the choice of responses was unavoidably limited to the responses of the participants. However, the interviews allowed participants to respond to the questions and provide opinions and suggestions.

Categories that emerged from the interview might not resemble those in ready-made questionnaire, and this makes it look different from need analysis studies based on

quantitative methods. However, this need analysis study was designed using all dimension of the framework which could be considered rigorous enough to be one kind of need analysis approach.

Also, this study was conducted using only one language skill –academic writing. The other three skills (listening, speaking, and reading) were beyond the scope of this study, due to the additional complexity and time requirements. However, use of a semi-structure interview allowed the researcher to obtain detailed answers that encompassed all aspects of academic writing.

Regarding the limitation of time and funding for the research, the present study was completed in one Masters Degree program. This research could have easily been expanded in scope, range and size. The number of people interviewed for this study was quite small. However, the sample size was based upon a simplified formula by Yamane (1973) for proportions used to calculate a finite population. The researcher used a confidence level of 95%, which is a standard for most research studies.

Conclusion of the Thesis

The present study was conducted to answer research questions regarding the academic writing needs for MA/ESP students at Kasetsart University. The data were collected by means of an interview and analyzed qualitatively.

This study determined that both groups of MA/ESP students share specific needs and objectives in academic writing in English. The needs to perform were academic-related tasks such as preparation of a thesis, assignments, essays and reports. Students need to master specific types of writing skills in order to satisfy the degree requirements of the ESP program. Therefore, many areas need to be investigated to balance EAP and general English language proficiency for students, in order to ensure

maximum effectiveness in expanding their knowledge of general writing to academic writing.

Considering the opinions and suggestions of MA/ESP students toward their degree program indicates that ‘self’ was the greatest obstacle in acquiring the necessary academic writing skills, and the solution was to practice writing. Students stated that a pre-sessional academic writing course and access to ESP faculty would help them develop their academic writing. Apart from equipping the students with the right skills, the findings also support the need for courses that will help motivate students to develop their academic writing skills according to their needs.

The findings of this study provide a useful resource for curriculum development and material design for an academic writing course for MA/ESP students. The skills developed in this course would allow students to better satisfy the demands for academic writing within their degree program. The study findings also provide useful information for course designers and ESP teachers, to introduce, revise, or develop effective and efficient English academic writing courses and materials for the students.