

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON DOCTORAL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ENGLISH NEEDS

T-9

Wai Mar Phyoo

University of Szeged, Doctoral School of Education

Keywords: academic writing; academic speaking; doctoral students

This study aimed to assess doctoral students' needs in their English academic speaking and writing abilities as they try to fulfil their doctoral program requirements. English for academic purposes is defined as “an approach to language education based on identifying the specific language features, discourse practices, and communicative skills of target academic groups, and which recognizes the subject-matter needs and expertise of learners” (Hyland, 2018, pp. 383–384). A good command of academic English is a requirement for scholars to be able to understand their respective disciplines and to successfully establish academic careers (Hyland, 2018). Students from non-English speaking backgrounds often struggle to meet academic standards (Bronson, 2004; Brown, 2008; Odena & Burgess, 2017).

An exploratory sequential mixed methods design was adopted for the current study (Creswell, 2012; Mackey & Gass, 2016). As a first phase, thirteen doctoral students from seven different countries (Hungary, China, Indonesia, Laos, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Myanmar) participated in the study. The participants were attending the English program of the Doctoral School of Education of the University of Szeged in the fall of 2021. Five were first-, seven were second-, and one was a third-year PhD student.

Participants completed a written task in a doctoral seminar on research design in English language pedagogy in November 2021. They listed five areas in their English academic speaking and five in their English academic writing abilities they needed to improve. For privacy and ethical reasons, to keep respondents anonymous, all responses were coded.

The database of 129 responses was analyzed qualitatively. Two researchers coded the dataset, and identified emerging themes in two rounds (inter-rater reliabilities were .929 and .836, respectively). Most (69%) participants intended to improve “cohesion and coherence” in their texts; 61.5 % identified enriching “vocabulary” and improving “accuracy” as the areas that they wanted to develop in. 38% mentioned, respectively, that (a) they wished they could “make it easier for the audience to follow” them, or that (b) they needed to “better prepare”, or that (c) they wanted to know how to present ideas well depending on the genre such as “a paper, a review or a study”. Some answers concerned needs external to the construct of academic English. For example, anxiety control, use of software, body language, visualization, and time management related to speaking, and knowledge of research methodology in writing.

Overall, the participants identified areas of English academic speaking and writing abilities they should improve in line with what previous studies had found (Ankawi, 2020; Cennetkuşu, 2017; Ma, 2021). The study bridges a gap in the literature, and will lead to a mixed method study including a survey and interviews with stakeholders.