Presenting a Research Proposal: The Examiners’ Expectations

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Abstract

The teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) values the cultivation of students’ academic literacy in order to prepare the students for their academic tasks. Therefore, it is indispensable to study one of their academic tasks to have a clearer picture of the academic literacy which the students need to possess but they may not be aware of. With regard to this, an exploratory study that foregrounds one of the academic tasks in the management field, which is the proposal presentation session, was conducted. The objectives of this study are to examine the aspects that are emphasized in a proposal presentation session of a postgraduate management student as well as to investigate purposes of the presentation. Data collected through observation and unstructured interview were analyzed qualitatively. Interestingly, findings indicate that language plays a salient role in expressing the content of the proposal. A few themes were derived, which are language competence, academic skills, lack of awareness on proposal presentation, and the emphasis on the written proposal instead of the proposal presentation.

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1. Introduction and Background

The teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) sets its objectives in developing and enhancing students’ academic literacy so that they can be more prepared in carrying out the academic tasks assigned to them and effectively express their content knowledge [6]. Academic literacy connotes “…the ability to read and write the various texts assigned in college,” ([13] p. 4). In their effort to foster students’ academic literacy or cater to

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students’ academic needs [5], the language instructor needs to be aware of, familiar and even informed with the students’ field of study. In this way, the instructor can easily situate the language input within the relevant content and assist the students to improve their linguistic repertoire to express the content knowledge. This is vital in particular when the field places a great emphasis on the students’ ability to communicate constructs and knowledge.

Management field, for example, as opposed to engineering and sciences, values oral and writing skills in demonstrating content knowledge [10][16]. In other words, management students need to be competent in the language so that they can use the “means” effectively in conveying their knowledge when performing the academic tasks. As one of the students of the management field, the first author explains that the academic tasks assigned tend to be ill-structured and even after completing the tasks given, they are not aware of the aspects that they need to improve on because they did not receive any feedback from the lecturers [3]. A reason accounts for this is that the tasks serve as ways for the lecturer to assess the students’ knowledge. However, if the students practice the task without knowing the aspects that are being evaluated, more often than not, the students may not be able to perform. This, coupled with the absence of feedback from the lecturer, makes the task less meaningful and thus, they may not be able to fully benefit from the task. Another element the author is very much aware of is that language and content are equally essential in enabling the students to excel academically in the field because most of the top-notch students are English-educated and unable to speak in their own mother tongue.

Nonetheless, as the layperson to the management field, the second author holds a contrary view and contended that the knowledge of content overshadows the language competence in order to successfully perform the academic tasks in the management field. Without having concrete knowledge of the field, even the highly English proficient students may find the academic tasks daunting and intimidating. For example, a highly proficient layperson would be completely lost if he or she is asked to produce a business report. The disparity of views warrants the researchers to perform a study on one of the academic tasks in the hope to identify the content and language needs of management students.

Oral presentation, for example, is one of the academic tasks that have to be carried out repeatedly by the management students throughout their academic years. In view of this, the researchers performed a study on one of the oral presentation tasks of the management students. To be specific, there are a few research questions that motivate the present study, which are as listed below:-

a) What are the aspects highlighted during proposal presentation?

b) What are the purposes of a proposal presentation session?
2. The Study

This exploratory study describes the experience of a management and a non-management student during a management proposal presentation. The sampling adopted for the present study is convenience sampling, where the participant is a friend of the main author. The participant is a Master’s student of a public tertiary institution, majoring in Management. She is currently in her second semester and it takes three semesters to complete her Master’s study. According to her, it is compulsory for her to complete her proposal writing and obtained her supervisor’s approval before she can proceed to presenting her proposal. The proposal defense is a must and after presenting, she can continue by collecting and analyzing data and proceed to her Chapter Four and Chapter Five, which are Findings and Discussion, and Conclusion and Recommendation of the Study respectively. She is focusing on the finance sector. Her presentation took an hour and a half with the presence of two examiners and a chairperson. Her supervisor was absent during the presentation due to her work commitments and her presence is in fact, optional.

With regard to the data collection methods, observation was performed when the participant presented her proposal. Fieldnotes were taken during the entire session. Subsequently, after the proposal presentation, conversational interview was conducted in order to gain more insights regarding the proposal presentation. In terms of data analysis, the observation and the interview data were analyzed qualitatively.

3. Findings

A few themes emerged, which are: a) language competence; b) academic skills; c) the emphasis on written proposal in lieu of the oral presentation; and d) lacking of awareness in proposal presentation’s needs. Every theme is discussed in the following subsections.

3.1. Language competence

Interestingly, there were quite a number of instances where the examiners emphasized on the significance of language, particularly the grammar aspect. In doing so, one of the examiners, Dr. R commented on the proposal by saying that there aren’t “without a page that is not circled by me,” and that grammatical mistakes “...get examiners bored enough.” The annoyance regarding the grammatical mistakes is so great that the same examiner required the student to “…ask someone to proofread your proposal.” Besides, the examiners also commented on word choice and sentence structure which the examiner expressed that the inability to choose the right word “…makes the paragraph confusing,” and some sentences were poorly constructed that made it difficult “…to understand the meaning”. Ironically, the examiners overlooked the fact that the title of the proposal is linguistically inaccurate (the title is “Ownership structures affect on accounting profitability and market performance: the consumer product sector in Bursa Malaysia”). An apostrophe should be placed after structures and affect should be replaced by effect.

Overall, observational data reveal that the focus on the language was brought up repeatedly during the entire session, which is rather surprising because the examiners are the content instructors instead of the language instructors. The findings suggest that language plays a salient role in the proposal presentation. From this, it is apparent that the examiners expected that the management student has to be competent in the language.
3.2. Academic skills

Academic skills comprise academic writing skills and knowledge of content. When commenting on academic writing, Dr. R commented that the student has to “…quote your sources,” because she pointed out that some paragraphs in the proposal do not include any citation. She suggested that the student “…can refer to encyclopedia.” Another examiner, Dr. H expressed concerns in the omission of data collection procedure in the Methodology chapter as he stated that the student has to “mention and explain the process of collecting data.” He viewed that writing, albeit tedious, is crucial as he advised the student that “Writing is continuous. Every page has to be written 20 to 30 times… Writing is like that. It’s a boring process. You must be patient. We’re not like engineering. We have to elaborate and discuss our points.” Additionally, the examiners also inquired about the disparity of the student’s conceptual framework and theoretical framework, to which the student was unable to provide clarification on. These reflect that the examiners expected the student to be able to display good academic writing skill.

Apart from that, the mastery of content is equally important. For instance, both examiners expressed their dissatisfaction towards the student’s “Justification of the Study” section as they commented that they “…cannot see the link.” Dr. R illuminated that the student wrote that her study benefits the manager, but she did not try to link it to her study by providing concrete explanations. In responding to the students’ weak responses, the examiners frowned and said nothing. Furthermore, the issue of sample size was brought up by the examiners, to which the student answered that there is only a type of ownership per company. Nonetheless, the interview data shows that according to the supervisor, there can be more than one type of ownership within a company. These imply that the examiners expected the student to possess knowledge of the proposal topic.

3.3. The emphasis on written proposal instead of the oral presentation skills

According to the observation, once the question and answer session (Q&A) started, instead of looking at the presentation slides, the examiners shifted their focus on the written proposal as they flipped through the pages of the proposal. As aforementioned, the examiners tended to comment on the written language and content of the written proposal. The student’s oral presentation skills such as body language, clarity of speech, volume, pace, and the like [7][12], on the other hand, were not commented on during the entire session. It can be observed that the student’s presentation skills were not top notch because she tended to read from the slides and she rarely provided explanations. Although once in a while, one of the examiners pointed at the slides, they returned their focus on the written proposal. It is evident that the examiners highlighted on the written proposal in lieu of the presentation skills.

3.4. Lacking of awareness in proposal presentation’s needs

After the presentation, the participant was asked of her overall perception of the presentation. She sighed and said she “…never thought that this (the proposal presentation) can be that tough,” as she related and compared her experience of working on her final year project. The final year project is equivalent to a thesis which each student is required to produce in order to be awarded with their first degree. As aforementioned, the first author explains that the evaluation on the students’ work is not made explicit so the students still find the task puzzling even after completing it. In relating this experience with the present study, the proposal presenter was not informed of the criteria of evaluation as she presented her final year project. This is why that experience does not help much in her postgraduate proposal presentation. At the end of it, the examiners requested that the participant to present her proposal once again in a month’s time instead of allowing her to proceed with the data collection process.
4. Discussion

Findings of the present study are discussed in a few aspects, which are the real purposes of the oral presentation, the reasons for the emphasis on language and academic skills during oral presentation, and the importance of language and academic writing skills to the management field.

4.1. The real purposes of oral presentation

In addressing the first research question, the findings imply that there are a few purposes of oral presentation. One of the purposes is that proposal presentation serves as revealing the content of the written proposal. From the findings, it is mentioned that comments were mostly on the written proposal, which are in terms of written language and content. Also, the examiners mentioned nothing on the oral presentation skills although many studies value the importance of oral skills and focus on developing those skills among students [2][3][4][9][15]. In the present study, the observation indicates that the focus is on the written proposal rather than the presentation itself because it is evident that the student made her best effort in conveying the content of the written proposal. This is why the content of the written proposal is being paid attention to, rather than the means of conveying the written proposal. Hence, proposal presentation connotes the presentation of the written proposal.

Another purpose of the proposal presentation is to assess the students’ knowledge and familiarity on the topic of the proposal. As elaborated in the findings, the examiners posed some questions and many comments regarding the content knowledge to which some of them the students failed to provide appropriate response that resulted in the examiners’ dissatisfaction towards the presentation and the written proposal. Thus, due to this the student was requested to re-present her proposal. It can be seen that the questions posed were mostly for clarification of the topic. For example, as mentioned above, the examiners inquired about the sample size and conceptual framework of the proposal as they were not clearly elaborated and linked. However, the student seemed unaware of the purposes of the presentation and thus, unable to meet the expectations of the examiners as they had asked her to present her proposal again.

4.2. Reasons for highlighting language and academic skills in proposal presentation

The findings suggest that language has been highlighted by the examiners throughout the presentation. This is because language serves as an important medium that affects the content. When the medium is poorly structured, the content will be poorly constructed as well. This may confuse the examiners as they read and assess the proposal. Sometimes, too much of the language errors may also distract the examiners or the readers, from focusing on content because they cannot help but keep noticing the flaws in the language used. Therefore, language competence should be displayed in order to present the content effectively. Bracken and Oughton [1] performed a study on the use of language in interdisciplinary research and the findings suggest that the mastery of language creates a strong foundation in effectively expressing content knowledge in the academic setting.

Moreover, it was found that the student’s unfamiliarity on the topic makes it difficult for her to present the proposal. In this case, the student was unable to provide appropriate answers when asked and this created an impression that the student had not mastered the topic or very much unfamiliar with it. Hence, this forced the examiners to provide another opportunity for the student to present her proposal as well as rewrite it with clarity. The likelihood is high that the task (in this case, the proposal presentation) becomes more complicated and daunting in the eyes of the student. On the contrary, if the student has a good understanding of the subject, even with further probing, she herself would not be confused in the first place and make best effort to elaborate. Hence, it is apparent that good academic writing skills serves as an important lubricant in effectively expressing the content in written form and the deficiency of academic skills reflects poor quality academic written work. This corroborates with Uncle’s [14] research where he posits that there is a need for the students to be competent
in terms of academic skills in order to situate their study within the academic field. Furthermore, the examiners decided to highlight language and academic skills is because language and academic writing are vital to the management field. This will be further discussed in the section that follows.

4.3. The importance of language and academic skills to the management field

The vitality of language and academic skills can be justified with a few points: a) descriptive nature of the tasks assigned, b) management as a rapidly evolving field, and c) complex nature of literature review. Firstly, it is the descriptive nature of the tasks assigned that contribute to the importance of language and academic skills. According to the first author, who is a management student, she finds that they are usually assigned with tasks such as case studies, presentations, proposal writing, and report writing. All these tasks require the students to utilize their linguistic repertoire and academic skills in order to perform the tasks because the lecturers tend to dwell on linguistic flaws.

Besides, management field is a rapidly evolving field with myriads of studies that emerged from time to time where the students need to update their content knowledge and this is particularly important when it comes to performing research. The knowledge of the most recent studies enables the student to situate her study within the management research. For instance, Miles and Snow [11] conduct a study on relating organization theory and supply chain management in the context of management. They hold on to the notion that further studies are necessary to be carried out because supply chain management can contribute to more efficient and effective operation in industries. In other words, apart from acknowledging the importance of the management concept, with the mention of further research, they also make it a point that research needs to be recent in order to be valid and convincing. Their sentiment is shared by Johnson and Whang [8]. Instead of performing a research, they choose to review the recent works that explore the effect of e-business on supply chain management. Their action indicates that they are aware of the changing trend of the management research and their review provides more information on the recent management research’s trend. That is, they indirectly justify that the management field is indeed a rapid evolving field. Lastly, it is the complex nature of literature review that makes it all the more important for the student to master language and academic skills. Literature review, according to the first author, aims at providing readers with the rationale of the study, previous studies that are both relevant and non-relevant to the study and justifying the variables and research question that the study draws upon. The student not only has to include all that, she also has to cohesively and coherently organize and construct the argument in order to make it reasonable and convincing.

5. Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, the present study implies that proposal presentations reveal the importance of language competence and academic skills. These are expected to be possessed and properly displayed by students during proposal presentations. Deprivation of those skills would handicap the students in the academic task of proposal writing. This exploratory study serves as a cornerstone to future studies that delve into the language and academic skills needed so that the EAP instructors can take these into account while constructing the EAP lesson for the management students. In this way, the students would be able to effectively perform academic tasks of the management field.
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