Engaging Postgraduate Students in Preparing Research Proposals

Melibatkan Pelajar Pascasiswazah dalam Menyediakan Cadangan Penyelidikan

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ABSTRACT

Both foreign and local postgraduate candidates of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. These students face several problems especially in writing the research proposals. Hence, to facilitate the process of writing a proposal, they are required to enrol in Research Methodology, a course that is made compulsory for all postgraduate students. This article presents a report on an action research that investigates the research skills of English as a Second Language postgraduates and their research journey while undergoing the Research Methodology course. Data was collected from their weekly journal entries and the interviews conducted on them. This data is also supported with the feedback by the Research Methodology course instructors during the proposal defense sessions. The findings suggest that although the students seemed enthusiastic when writing their proposals, they were not ready when faced with questions about research problems and approaches. It is found that these students did not read extensively to identify the gaps in their research and this hence, resulted in them facing difficulties to write a clear statement of the problem. This also led to poor formulation of their research questions. The findings will be beneficial for instructors and potential supervisors who aim to be better at teaching and supervising potential postgraduate students.

Keywords: Research methodology; research skills; research proposals; supervision; postgraduates

ABSTRAK

Pelajar pascasiswazah tempatan dan luar negara yang menuntut di Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia datang dari pelbagai latar belakang dan pengalaman. Sebahagian besar daripada mereka menghadapi pelbagai masalah dalam menulis cadangan penyelidikan. Justeru, untuk memudahkan mereka dalam proses menulis cadangan penyelidikan, kesemua pelajar pascasiszawah di Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia diwajibkan mengikuti kursus Metodologi Penyelidikan. Makalah ini membentangkan laporan mengenai kemahiran pelajar pascasiswazah program Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua dan perjalanan penyelidikan mereka semasa mengikuti kursus Metodologi Penyelidikan. Data dikumpul dari catatan jurnal mingguan mereka dan sesi temu bual yang dijalankan. Data ini turut disokong oleh maklum balas dari tenaga pengajar kursus Metodologi Penyelidikan sebaik sahaja pelajar selesai mempertahankan cadangan penyelidikan mereka secara lisan. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa walaupun pada zahirnya para pelajar nampak bersemangat untuk menulis cadangan penyelidikan mereka, namun mereka masih belum bersedia untuk menulis, lebih-lebih lagi apabila berhadapan dengan soalan-soalan tentang permasalahan kajian dan pendekatan kajian. Hal ini terjadi disebabkan oleh pembacaan pelajar yang tidak cukup meluas untuk mereka mengenal pasti kelompangan dalam penyelidikan mereka. Ini menyebabkan mereka menghadapi masalah untuk menulis permasalahan kajian dengan jelas serta membina persoalan kajian yang baik. Hasil kajian ini akan dapat dimanfaatkan oleh tenaga pengajar dan penyelia dalam usaha mereka meningkatkan prestasi pengajaran dan penyeliaan di peringkat pascasiswazah.

Kata kunci: Metodologi penyelidikan; kemahiran menyelidik; cadangan penyelidikan; penyeliaan; pascasiswazah

INTRODUCTION

Signing up for a doctoral program is seen as attaining research experience, knowledge and skills, irrespective where the program is run. Currently, the number of students enrolling in doctoral programmes at institutions of higher education in Malaysia is on the rise for both Arts and Sciences. Typically, students joining doctoral programmes in Malaysia are assigned to a supervisory committee who facilitate and guide them throughout their journey to produce theses based on their research.

As supervisors, it is not wrong to expect several qualities from the prospective candidates. Most importantly, students who register for doctoral programmes should have their respective research topics ready as they register and be well informed in the area of their proposed research. In addition, they should have basic presentation skills, be equipped with knowledge on research ethics and be committed and responsible for their own research.

All these are important because the foundation of a good research or dissertation is rooted in the research topic chosen and the research skills employed by the candidate. However, one of the major weaknesses that most postgraduate students face is the challenge of choosing relevant research topics before embarking on their research. For instance, in a study on doctoral students of literature, it was found that the selection of research topics seemed to be a major problem among research students due to the widening scope of literature today (Ruzy Suliza et al. 2011). I'Anson and Smith (2004) reported that university students faced problems in determining their research topics at the initial stages, thus causing many obstacles for them along the process of writing their thesis. A study by Armstrong (2013) involving a pool of students from the United Kingdom showed that 7 out of 10 respondents had problems selecting a feasible research topic which can then be developed to a logical conceptual framework. The same researcher added that students come in with a topic that is too broad for a research and hence ended up wasting time on narrowing it down. This is in line with Todd, Smith and Bannister (2006) who found that narrowing down a topic was as a major problem among students embarking on their dissertation. Most students failed to comprehend the importance of selecting a relevant topic due to several reasons. There are cases of students who even changed the topic they had earlier selected half way through writing their dissertation.

Apart from choosing a relevant research topic, the act of identifying the gaps in previous research by scholars will be a way of assisting research students in developing their statement of the problem. According to Carey et al. (2012), when a research gap is identified, it is easier to move on to deeper into the particular research fields. This requires an extensive amount of reading in order to embark on a research. A common reason behind students' inability to proceed on a research is the lack of reading especially reading earlier literature relevant to their research. Similarly, Li and Seale (2007) reported that early problems faced by students include the difficulty of knowing where to start their research.

According to Ruzy Suliza et al. (2011), although today's students are open to unlimited reading sources, they still face the challenge in determining the significance of these materials to their own research. Students are not able to identify reading materials that would aid them through the research process, and this eventually makes sourcing for relevant literature challenging for them.

Rosli and Subahan (2011) found no significant differences between local and foreign doctoral students when it comes to research preparedness skills. However, the findings have to be interpreted carefully, because the study was conducted purely based on the students' self-perceptions. In addition, the study only looked at the research outcomes, not encompassing other outcomes, such as the knowledge base of the field of studies and the culture of doing research. In investigating the major problems encountered by 15 students joining the fifth-semester in English at the State Institute for Islamic Studies Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Yusuf (2013) identified three major problematic areas faced by them in writing their research proposals: introduction, literature review and methodology. The study also identified several causes behind these problems including their language, the limited time, attitude of students to refer to books on methodology and their knowledge of research methods.

The context in which the findings and the literature discussed in the earlier studies is somewhat similar to the context of the current study where students pursue a doctoral degree in English Language Studies (ELS) at the Faculty of

Social Sciences and Humanities. These students come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and therefore, it is natural that they face different issues and challenges in their path of completing research proposals prior to their proposal defence. To facilitate the process of writing a proposal, these students are required to take Research Methodology which is a compulsory course for all postgraduate students.

In relation to the context of the present study, Pramela, Khazriyati and Norizan (2014) reported that the ELS postgraduate students find it a challenge to arrive at a suitable topic for research because of the following reasons, namely, an overwhelming source of literature and a widening scope of literature today. They also face the challenge in determining the relevance of these reading materials to their own research. Students are not able to identify reading materials that would aid them through the research process which makes sourcing for relevant literature a challenge to them. They also lack the necessary knowledge to write clear research objectives and research questions. This problem arises from their inability to come up with a good statement of the problem, particularly because they do not read enough prior to writing their research proposals. The inability to derive a clear statement of a certain research problem can result in frustration on the students' end (Zuber-Skerritt & Knight 2010; Mapolisa 2013) and this appears to be a common scenario among postgraduate students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several previous researchers have offered various definitions of the concept of monitoring or supervising. Yet, such definitions share many things in common, thus centring on this concept as a process in which an expert attempts to acquaint a novice or mentee with the values, customs, resources and knowledge of the organization by role modelling, teaching, guiding, assisting and inspiring the mentee to be an independent and professional researcher (Campbell 2011). Supervising or monitoring development of new practitioners is important as evidenced by its virtue of its high status in the accreditation process of several professions. Specifically, in higher education, supervision has been establishing itself as a critical key element in the success and completion of research projects (Lizzio, Stokes & Wilson 2005; Samara 2006).

Past researchers have reported various problems or difficulties faced by postgraduates in research methodology in various domains including social sciences. Such difficulties should be addressed from their initial stage of their research process. According to Murtonen and Lehtinen (2005), learning research methodology can be complex since the domain itself is complex and it encompasses various sub-domains. The same researchers attributed this partly to how students conceptualize their research and how they view themselves as learners as well as their supervisors' practices. In addition, Di Pierro (2007) reported that even doctoral students often struggle in silence with problems and challenges in developing research proposals and writing literature reviews. While they have advisers or supervisors to guide and mentor them during the research process, they frequently show uncertainty about the research process. Similarly, Anderson and Shore (2008) found that students tended to show some feeling of frustration with the faculty and the program because of the difficulties they faced in writing their research.

A few researchers have attempted to identify problems and challenges faced by students in research proposals with an emphasis on the issues pertinent to the methodology. As reported by Leedy and Ormrod (2005), novice researchers often get confused between research design and research methods. They also find it challenging to choose a research design that suits their research and fail to justify their selection (Marlyna 2007). Moreover, the methodological aspects of research proposals often tend to be very vague and not carefully designed, and students are unable to apply their knowledge acquired from books on methodology to their actual research designs and methods in their proposals (Pietersen 2014).

Some researchers have also introduced various strategies as means of enhancing supervision practices and at the same time assisting postgraduates to overcome such mentioned various challenging problems particularly at the initial stage of their research process. Among these are discussions on students' problems and their roles and expectations from their supervisees, and providing them with guidelines on thesis writing including standards and written regulations. Knight and Zuber-Skerritt (1986) argued that the traditional

model of postgraduate research supervision needs to be enhanced and supplemented with courses on monitoring their conducts especially at the initial stage of the journey. The authors suggested that these courses should guide them in formulating research problems, selecting the correct methods and writing their theses. By so doing, postgraduates can be aware of the epistemological and philosophical assumptions underlying the production of knowledge in conducting research. According to Yarnal and Neff (2007), daily interaction with postgraduate students and mentoring play a role in fostering students' enthusiasm for research and promoting collaborative research in the future. Postgraduate students need to be mentored on how to plan, to get the outline clear, and to proceed step by step prior to writing the thesis (Kamler & Thomson 2014). Yusuf (2013) also emphasized the importance of postgraduate students' practice on how to write good research proposals, their knowledge of the components that constitute the research proposals and sufficient time allocated for teaching students how to write good research proposals. As suggested by Wisker (2012), good supervision engages both the supervisor and the supervisee in an active learning conversation or dialogue where they are provided with valuable research-informed suggestions about supervision practices. However, daily mentoring can be more time consuming and tiring (Kuo 2011).

There are also a few empirical studies on the implementation of research-related programs to help students to overcome various problems and challenges faced by them in research including research proposals. Besides supervision, there should also be other postgraduate courses that could be run such as courses on research proposals and methods. This is because learning how to do research at the beginning stage is important. In the same vein, it was reported that conducting research programs and supervisory dialogues through collaborative action research, in some cases, assisted students to overcome various problems they faced in their quest in learning how to conduct research at PhD level (Wisker et al. 2003). Falconer and Holcomb (2008) found that, based on 17 students' experiences on a summer research program, mentor-mentee interaction was vital and valuable for the participants to articulate their problems and find out ways to overcoming them.

Scholars and researchers such as Garcia and Nelson (2003) and Lajom and Magno (2010) have called for the need to design or construct courses and models on research methodology to enable students especially those at postgraduate levels to acquire the necessary knowledge as well as practical skills in research proposal writing. This need is derived from scholars' and researchers' awareness of the fact that textbooks on research methodology alone will not adequately prepare students especially those novice researchers to face and solve complex issues involved in their research proposals. Winn (1995) have called for integrating real data in postgraduate courses so that they can link between the theoretical perspectives of their studies to their research though such implementation can be expensive and time-consuming. In this vein, only a few previous studies reported findings from the implementation of projects in courses related to research such as research methodology courses and supervisees' views and perspectives or reflections on their experience. For instance, according to the study by Winn (1995), teaching research methods to students majoring in social sciences poses several challenges including the difficulty in engaging them in the course interestingly and developing efficient means of enabling them to connect what they learn to their research. Therefore, the researcher, by involving the students in a project-based teaching related to the course, reported that the students valued the experience and the benefits of research methodology through this project-based teaching more than it is reported in the previous literature review (Winn 1995). However, they still pointed out at problems including providing some of them with the opportunity to follow the research process from the initial stage of proposal writing.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The Research Methodology course is designed to equip students with theories and practices of research in the area of English Language Studies (ELS). The course is aimed at enabling students to write relevant current literature review, to employ proper data collection and sampling techniques, and to utilize qualitative and quantitative methods in their research.

Students are required to attend weekly lectures and tutorials (14 hours of lectures and 28 hours of tutorials) for this course per semester. By the end of the 14th week into the course, students are expected

to prepare drafts of the first three important sections of their PhD thesis: Introduction, Literature Review and Methodology. The process of writing these drafts, although is student-centred, is dependent on the tutors; the students are given extensive coaching on the writing of their proposals. There are regular consultations during the tutorial time and unlimited consultations with their respective lecturers-cum-tutors outside the class hours, either face-to-face or via online. Besides this, students are put in group discussions to vet each other's proposal drafts. The final product for this course is a 20-page research proposal as well as a mock proposal defence. The recommended text for this course is *Research design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* by Cresswell (2003). In addition to reading this text, students are given additional reading material and handouts on tasks to understand the principles of research better.

A generic proposal structure to be submitted by the students at the end of the semester to the Research Methodology instructors should include the following components:

Introduction
- Title page: naming the proposed research title, the students' and the supervisor's names
- Research Context: discussing the bigger "research problem" area and mentioning research related to the area.
- Research problem statement: stating why this is still a problem that needs to be researched further; highlighting limitations or weaknesses of past studies and identifying what is necessary to address these limitations. This leads to the research questions.
- Research aim and objectives: Presenting the research aim, following the research problem statement in a logical form.
Review of Literature
- Literature Review: Undertaking a literature review of the most relevant journal articles and other forms of academic publications.
- Research Framework: Mapping the relevant theories to discuss the research.
Methodology
- Methodology: describing the research design, sample, data collection procedures, the instruments used and how data will be analysed
- References:15 to 20 relevant references
- Appendices: relevant appendices

Based on the all three instructors' observations, for the past semesters during which the Research Methodology course had been taught to postgraduates, most of the students tended to write their statement of the problem without citing past studies that connected to their proposed research. This is despite the tutorial sessions in Research Methodology classes, personal consultations and coaching from their supervisors and tutors that the students had.

Due to several weaknesses observed during the doctoral proposal defence sessions, which are typically held in the students' second or third semester, this action research intended to plan an intervention for the Research Methodology course by developing a set of strategies in producing a proper and manageable plan for the writing up of the proposal.

METHODOLOGY

The sample in the current study comprised ten ELS Malaysian and foreign doctoral students who were at the initial stage of the research process at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. All of them had completed their Master degree and were registered as full time candidates. Three of them were international students who are academicians or researchers at their respective institutions whereas the other six were non-academicians. However, all of them had already experienced writing at least one project paper during their Master studies.

This action research employed a qualitative design. During the first phase of the research (Weeks 1 and 2), interviews were conducted individually with the students to ascertain the background of the students in terms of their research experience and skills. In this phase (Week 3), the students were also requested to record their weekly reflections of their research journey till the completion of the proposal writing in their diaries. The second phase (Week 3 -14) of the study involves an observation on the students' proposal presentations. The observation also involved a careful recording of the comments and suggestions by the course instructors, who acted as the sessions' Research Methodology examiners. The third phase (Week 15 -17 which is after the course) of this study comprised follow-up interviews on the students in order to seek further clarification on their experiences in their process of

writing their research proposals. Subsequently, all interviews were analyzed and coded for emerging themes as discussed in the section below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents 1) the findings from the interviews and students' reflections gathered during the first phase; 2) the comments and suggestions obtained during the second phase, and 3) the students' reflection on their research experience during the final phase. The sample extracts from the data presented below are accompanied with pseudonyms: S1-S10 refer to postgraduates 1 to 10, and I1-I3 refer to instructors 1 to 3.

PHASE 1: INTERVIEWS AND STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Most of the students (six out of ten) who enrolled in the Research Methodology course did not have a proper research topic; some (two students) admitted that they were unsure of the topic, while another two students claimed that they had difficulty in selecting their topics. All ten students also shared a lack of knowledge in writing the statement of the problem. They usually write the statement of the problem without citing previous studies.

During the interview, when asked if they were able to convince their reader or examiner, all of the students admitted that they had difficulty convincing their readers because of their poor writing skills and their lack of knowledge of the content.

PHASE 2: COURSE INSTRUCTORS' OBSERVATION OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS DURING PROPOSAL PRESENTATION

The comments and feedback received from the research methodology instructors who examined the students' proposal presentation and the findings were analysed according to the presentation outlines: Title, Research Problem, Research Questions, Research Framework, and Research Instrument.

Title

By end of the semester, fixing the title of the proposal was not a problem to all these students. There were not many comments on the titles of the research when the students presented them, except

for the selection of terms that the students chose in the title. This can be illustrated by the following (Please note that the students' responses are not edited):

> Ok, good try but your title is too big, sexism. You know that's a word that you have to be very careful when you use it. Perhaps you are looking at "elements of gender" (I3).

In the above feedback, the choice of the term used was not the only comments by Instructor 3 but suggestions were also given.

Statement of The Problem

The main issue regarding writing the statement of the problem that was raised by the instructors was the lack of understanding on concretizing the problem statement. The instructors also brought up the issue of the lack of relation between the statement of problem and the research questions.

> Alright…uh…statement of the problem, I hope they're not sweeping statements. You just say things without citing some studies. You know, you say it as though there is no research so far in that area (I3).

Instructor 3 tries to highlight the weaknesses in the problem statement. Very often the students fail to link the problems to actual studies done. This again may indicate the lack in reading.

Research Questions

The formulation of research questions appears to be a problem to these postgraduate students. Several comments were given by the instructors regarding the way the research questions were written and the order of presenting the research questions. There were also research questions that did not meet the research objectives of the study. The instructor commented that the students appeared to be confused in formulating the research questions. This is because the questions looked more like the implications of the study.

You have to rephrase question number 1. Research question 2 -'what are the alternatives or substitutions that can be used to reduce the sexism element in Malaysian English textbook? Is this a Research question? (I2).
Uh…are they occurrences? Is the first question, 'yes' 'no' (type of question)? Was this very clearly pointed out to you? So, what kind of gender elements are displayed in the textbook

is a qualitative question? Then you want to categorize the kind of gender elements according to your framework, and second one is definitely an implication after doing the study. With the findings, you may be able to answer. It's not a research question (I1).

When I look at your research question and your purpose of the study, you are looking at impact. The use of the word 'impact' tells us that you need to have a pre and post. You have to look before forum is being introduced and after forum is being introduced. Are you trying to do that? (I2).

You are asking about the impact. Normally, you don't have the first research question itself asking for a big thing like impact. You start off with something simpler and then you go into more, uh, deeper or bigger areas (I2).

To me, you have to refine your first research question, and the order of your research questions, and you talking about 'do they actually engage'. 'Do they actually engage'? You cannot really say 'do they actually engage', they are engaged, right? So 'to what extend are they engaged'. That is a better way of framing your questions. So, to what extent do they engage in terms of the discussion? In terms of the 'quality' how are you going to mark all these discussion? Are there any criteria you're setting? (I3).

Research Framework

It was observed that a majority of the students were not able to conceptualise their research framework and contextualise it to their own research. This is evident in the comments given by the instructors.

It's ok, you can adapt. But the way you fit this in to the framework …do you know, what are the elements in the framework that you want to use. For example, you do not have to measure everything? Probably you can just take 4 aspects, 3 aspects, for example anxiety plus 2 others and see, and try to have a questionnaire with enough questions to measure those elements (I1).

…… the framework will guide you in terms of what questions you want to ask. Your framework will guide you. So…Then, everything is linked. Framework is linked to methodology. Methodology and framework linked to research questions. Everything nicely hooked. Your framework cannot be just a token framework, you know (I1).

You can use previous study that has shown that people who accept technology tend to produce results. You… keep on telling us that you want to look at motivation. So it should be there, right? So the way I see it, it's not sufficient for you to use only 1 theory. You have to add in the writing process Murray. At least 3 theories should be in. *Nathan* theory is not a theory. *Nathan refers* to a previous study. *Chen* is not a theory. *Leow* is not a theory …(I2).

Research Instrument

The instructors also raised issues on the suitability of the instruments proposed by the candidates. The instruments that some of the students proposed did not match the objectives of their research and the instruments that some other students proposed

had no links to the theories used. Their research design did not suit the choice of instruments. To illustrate, one student who proposed a qualitative research but had a 5 Likert scale questionnaire as his research instrument.

So, now, when you measure readiness, what is your scale of measuring readiness? How to measure whether they are highly ready or their readiness is low? (I2).

Yes. And also how you frame the questions or statements are important. They could be positive. They could be negative questions, too (I3).

You look at all your questions again. To be able to make it easier for interpretation, change all to positive. For example, 'I do not seek advice when I want to teach English'; 'I seek advice when I want to teach English'. Ok? If they say high, so then you just interpret. If the min score is high, the anxiety level is high as well. Then it's easier for you (I2).

Try to embed those elements in the research questions and also in your interview questions to see whether the effectiveness, when you change the training to mentoring, would it be of help? When you change mentoring to a coaching system, would that be of help? (I2).

It's an open-ended survey, but will be analyzed qualitatively? (I2) Ok. So meaning that analysis will be done, uh, qualitatively. So I think that is ok. But when you use the word 'survey', that is, uh, give the impression that you're going to do quantitative (I2).

PHASE 3: STUDENT REFLECTIONS AFTER THE COURSE

The reflective diary entries that were collected from the students after the course and our interview with the students revealed that the students had initially chosen research topics based on their personal interest. However, after reading relevant literature on the topic they had selected and due to time constrain they had to change topics a little. Some students also reported that they were advised by their supervisors to change the topic of their research.

Some of them had the notion that they can replicate past studies quite easily; but when they were not able to find suitable instruments to adopt or adapt, they had to completely change research topics. However, they regarded the comments they received from the instructors during proposal presentation as valuable.

Excerpts From The Reflective Diary Entries

At the beginning of the course, I was quite lost in my understanding of the research methods. I did not quite understand what the lecturer was talking about, some unfamiliar research terms in particular. I did not delve deeply into these research terms when I did my master's degree perhaps (S10).

First of all I would like to state that during my undergraduate study there were no written tasks or assignments required. That is why I did not know much about writing a research (S2).

When I look back and reflect on the gradual development of my proposal I feel that it is one's comprehensive reading couple with experts' opinion can help improve the proposal bit by bit. Now I am sure that a student may initially face a lot of setback in writing the proposal and may even go the extreme of feeling like withdrawing himself from the programme (S4).

Naturally, through guidance, some of the students were able to identify specifically the kinds of problems they encountered and how they could overcome the problem. The interview with the students revealed the following:

I believe if I can write a good background of the study, the statement of the problem will easier to handle. I tend to write sweeping statements (S5).

However, there are those who still thought that 14 weeks of guidance through the Research Methodology is not enough. They expected the instructors to closely guide them and provide them with certain structures so that they can write an acceptable statement of the problem. For example,

We need more guidance to write the statement of the problem - a structured approach for this must be given to us (S4).

There are also students who still faced problems in differentiating between qualitative and quantitative research questions.

I am not sure whether my research question is correct for a qualitative study (S2).

Candidates worry whether the sample proposed in the study will continue in the research until data is obtained. This is especially true with the international students. Although they have proposed to collect data from a certain target group, achieving this process many not be a reality as the laws in those respective countries do not warrant them to collect data. These foreign students end up continuing their research, collecting data from the local students (Malaysians) and they miss the actual impact of their study.

The students also expressed the lack of support received from their peers when they make attempts to collaborate with them during class time. In terms of the group support during class time they failed to receive constructive comments from their peers. On the other hand, they looked forward to receiving feedback from their instructors.

We do not receive peer support. Even if we get into a discussion our peers are lost themselves (S7).
Group discussions were beneficial as we received feedback from our lecturer too (S3).

Feedback from Student 3 suggests that group work does not seem to benefit them as they depended on their lecturers' feedback despite working in groups. Students were of the opinion that their peers were also struggling with their own research area and are unable to contribute.

Although initially students found presenting their work during tutorial a burden, they claimed to have benefitted from this exercise as the later realised that it was an avenue for them to further improve their work and understand their research area better. For example, below is the excerpt from S1:

Our tutor has asked us to share what had been taught in the lectures and requested us to relate it to our respective research. We also consistently had us present our proposals for further improvement. Presenting it in tutorial had helped us alleviate our level of anxieties (S1).

CONCLUSION

This study proves that the postgraduate research students are dependent on the instructors at several stages of the course. Besides this, they are not proficient in English language. Although none of them admitted this in their interviews or diary entries, their limited proficiency in the English language is evident in the excerpts presented in this manuscript. Apart from that, due to their low level of proficiency in the English language, they were not able to express their thoughts and emotions much in their reflections.

These doctoral students have experienced some serious issues when working on their proposals. Besides the 14-week lecture and group work and presentations in class, the instructors' feedback and comments played a significant role. It is sometimes daunting to see some students who do not take the feedback seriously to improve their proposals prior to presentation. This matter is even more discouraging when students change their topics to completely new areas of research after completing the Research Methodology course. This is even more discouraging when they are not able to identify a research problem that they are passionate about. They are probably not ready to be research students yet.

Hence, an intervention is necessary to ensure that the doctoral students work successfully on their proposals. In this regard, the research methodology course needs to be looked at in terms of the course schedule. Developing a set of strategies to stimulate critical engagement with the review of literature required for the study is necessary. This should be followed by developing a set of strategies to create critical skills in identifying and developing clear research methods for data collection and analysis. At this point, the role of the supervisors is important. The supervisors need to closely monitor the students' progress and work together with the research methodology postgraduate students at the initial stage of the students' PhD journey. While this is important, students should also be aware of the fact that when embarking an academic research, they should not be overly dependent on their supervisors for feedback. They should learn to take charge of their own research and plan their work carefully. This is not just an important exercise in making them responsible and discipline towards their research, but also, as individuals whom their community can rely on once they graduate with their doctoral degrees. On the other hand, developing such critical strategies to help postgraduate students will be futile if Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or any other higher educational institutions do not tighten the selection criteria in accepting postgraduate students.

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