



Case Study

How to overcome challenges related to English and academic writing skills when studying abroad

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Abstract: Nowadays, pursuing postgraduate study abroad after completing a Medical Doctor (MD) degree in their home country is common among Vietnamese doctors. There are several challenges in studying overseas that international students need to overcome to ensure a favorable outcome of their learning journey. The presenting paper mainly discussed about the challenges related to English and academic writing skills and aimed to provide some tips for studying effectively in developed countries. Based on his own experiences as a postgraduate international student in Australia, the author found that a successful learning journey could be facilitated by (1) feeling free to ask, (2) making friends with the locals and other international students, (3) exploring the local life, (4) learning and using a reference management software, and (5) attending all free academic skills workshops and consultations provided by the university.

Keywords: study abroad, graduate study, international students.

1. BACKGROUND

Nowadays, going abroad to undertake postgraduate trainings in developed countries after completing a Medical Doctor (MD) degree in their home country is common among Vietnamese doctors. To prepare for this journey, Vietnamese doctors can easily find essential information on how to find a good university, how to study effectively overseas, and how to live in the foreign country of their choice from several reliable sources. For example, they can explore the official website of their targeted university. Vietnamese doctors can also “FaceTime” with their friends who live in their targeted country to see how real life is going. Yet looking back to more than 10 years ago, studying overseas was somehow not that popular and related information was quite scarce. In this context, I was one of the Vietnamese doctors going to Australia to undertake a postgraduate training. The presenting paper mainly discussed about the challenges related to English and academic writing skills and aimed to provide some tips for studying effectively in developed countries with Australia as an example. The term “postgraduate training” was used in this paper to imply Master and PhD training which is not related to laboratory work.

2. CASE PRESENTATION

Language difficulties and challenges related to academic writing skills

I went to Australia to undertake a master’s degree at the University of Sydney right after completing my MD degree from the University of Medicine and Pharmacy at Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam [1]. It should be noted that I had not been abroad for studying purposes before. Like other colleagues, to prepare for my adventure, I worked really hard on English and got a good International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score. Although I had no problem in communicating with the locals, I totally did not understand what the lecturers said in class. I realized that achieving a good IELTS score does not guarantee a smooth conversation with the locals due to the differences in using English and diverse accents between countries. A student who can communicate well with the locals may not be able to understand a speech or a lecture due to the differences between general and academic English. Especially, undertaking postgraduate trainings in medicine abroad requires advanced knowledge of health/medical terminology which is not considered in IELTS. The communication

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difficulties at school had made me lost my confidence. I still remember that I was not willing to respond to a question about the clinical symptoms of a H5N1 influenza infected case in a virology class which I knew the answer. I could not ask for any clarifications or explanations during the lectures. I was afraid of people laughing at me.

Studying overseas right after completing a MD degree can be considered as an advantage to explore the new knowledge at a master level. This is because my theory-based medical knowledge was still very fresh and considerably updated. Yet I never got high marks in assignments in the first semester due to my English writing problems and failure in adherence to reference styles guidance. Written grammar in English is definitely different to that in Vietnamese [2]. Academic writing at postgraduate levels is far more different between the two styles. Similar to English communication issues, a high IELTS score does not guarantee a competent written English at university. Moreover, universities in Australia seriously request students to provide references when using the work of other people in any format. Correct referencing requires both correct in-text citations and a correct reference list which are in accordance with the requested style such as Harvard, American Psychological Association (APA) or Vancouver style [1]. Failure to do this properly may constitute plagiarism [3]. Developing a correct referencing manually is a real challenge since each style has different criteria in presenting the information. I lost my marks in assignments because I did not know how to fully follow those criteria when manually developing the referencing. As a result, my in-text citations and/or referencing list was considered incorrect.

3. SOLUTIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

What were my solutions to overcome these obstacles?

Feeling free to ask

I let the lecturers know my concerns regarding the lectures. Now, being an academic in Australia, I understand that lecturers have the responsibility to listen to the students and address students' concerns and questions seriously. If the lecturers do not have enough time to talk in class, they will be pleased to discuss with the student via email or arrange an in-person meeting at their office or help the student find an appropriate tutor. The lecturers can also suggest some available academic skills and/or English workshops for students [4, 5]. Discussing with the lecturers and attending similar workshops greatly helped me improve my English skills and understand new medical terminology when I undertook my master's course. Indeed, international students are expected to reach the required English level for the postgraduate training. Yet the lecturers understand that students are from both native and non-native English

speaking countries. Therefore they will take head and address their students' academic issues.

Making friends with the locals and international students

In my opinion, international Vietnamese students tend to make friends with students from the same country rather than the locals including the Australian-Vietnamese students. This is absolutely a good practice. Given they have the same culture and language, international Vietnamese students can easily communicate with and support each other. Yet this cannot help in improving the English skills as they tend to use Vietnamese in group communications. Even if they use English in group communications, their English slowly improves as Vietnamese people usually have the same accent and acquire the same grammatical mistakes and typos. Indeed, there is a negative impact of few opportunities to use the language outside the classroom on learning English among international students in Australia [6]. In addition to this, using Vietnamese in group communications may adversely lead to self-isolation. I made friends with non-Vietnamese students to improve my English, to support each other in understanding the lectures, and to share knowledge about medicine, culture and life. My English was strongly improved when working with the locals and other international students in several activities such as tutorials, journal club, and group presentation. I also realized that understanding a new culture or even a few simple words in other languages definitely enriched my overseas experiences.

Exploring the local life

I undertook my master's course under sponsorship of the Australia Awards (e.g. Endeavour Scholarship). The advantage of this is that I did not have any financial pressure during my stay in Australia. However, the disadvantage is that I was not allowed to fail in any subject according to the scholarship policy at that time. This was actually a real pressure even though no-one wants to fail when studying overseas. To ensure my expected study outcome, I studied harder than other colleagues. Attending Fisher library (e.g. one of the largest libraries of the University of Sydney) every day after the lectures for self-learning was my choice. Unfortunately, apart from studying, I did not manage my time very well to explore the local life. After my first year in Australia, all I knew about this country was just the Sydney Central Business District (CBD) and Kiama (a coastal town south of Sydney). This resulted in my bad mood, homesickness and limited knowledge and experience about Australia. To me, Sydney was boring and had nothing except the famous Opera House and Harbour Bridge. I would have never come to know the true beauty of Australia until several years later when I completed my PhD and had the opportunity to fully explore Australia. Like making friends with non-Vietnamese students, exploring

the local life through travelling or finding a part-time job not only improved my English, but also enriched my overseas experiences through interaction with the locals. It is well documented that having cultural knowledge and living in an English speaking language environment facilitate the success in learning English language [6]. Yet, to balance this, time management skill is a must.

Learning and using a reference management software

There is several reference management software that can help to manage references. As advised by my course convenor, I learnt to use EndNote to search, organize, write, publish and share the references [7]. Available EndNote output styles can also be modified in accordance with the preferred style [7]. There was no problem for me to learn to use EndNote as it is user-friendly. Yet it is completely important to understand the requested style to enter sufficient data to EndNote.

Attending all academic skills workshops and consultations

Universities in Australia always offer a wide range of free academic skills workshops that support students' learning. For example, the Learning Centre at UNSW Australia offers referencing, plagiarism, writing skills, critical thinking, reading and note-taking workshops [4]. Students can also ask for a reference management software instruction or request a consultation on a specific learning issue such as searching online databases at the library. I found that these workshops specifically designed for postgraduate students greatly helped me improve my writing skills.

4. OUTCOMES

Through the above-mentioned activities, I improved my knowledge regarding the local accent, academic English, and health/medical terminology which in turn enhanced my English listening, reading, speaking and writing skills. Attending academic skills workshops such as referencing, plagiarism and reference management software instruction helped me understand the importance of acknowledging the sources of information that I use and develop a correct referencing. These improvements strongly facilitated my successful learning journey in Australia.

Being an academic at UNSW Australia provides me a unique chance to have a look at all my issues through the

lens of a lecturer. This also helps me understand that lecturers always want to improve students' learning experience at university. Yet students need to actively explore all available supports and speak out when needed to ensure that lecturers know their issues to offer appropriate help. It is noticed that the paper was based on the author's own experience, and thus might not be able to apply to everyone. Yet the information discussed in this paper is general tips which will strongly assist in achieving a fruitful outcome when studying overseas.

LEARNING POINTS

A successful learning journey could be facilitated by

- Feeling free to ask
- Making friends with the locals and other international students
- Exploring the local life
- Learning and using a reference management software
- Attending all free academic skills workshops and consultations provided by the university.

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