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Mainland China undergraduate learners' experiences in the Malaysian tertiary context

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Abstract

This paper explores how mainland China undergraduates navigate the academic literacy experiences they encounter in the Malaysian classroom. Data was collected using background and literacy experience interviews, literacy logs and analytical field notes over a period of 14 weeks. The interview transcripts were analyzed to identify instances of literacy difficulties and practices to cope with the difficulties. The literacy logs and field notes were used to inform the transcriptions for accuracy purposes. This paper will provide insights into the difficulties the learners faced and how they overcome these challenges and look at measures lecturers can take to help the learners in their academic socialization practices.

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1. Introduction

The last two decades has witnessed a sharp increase in undergraduate student demographics in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia with many study abroad programmes as a result of student mobility and short term exchange programmes. This 'demographic revolution' (Friedlander 1991) is also visible in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia which has especially seen a rising international student intake for postgraduate study and more recently for undergraduate study. The increasing emphasis on internationalization in higher education has resulted in more students participating in study abroad programmes to broaden their educational and life experiences. These students naturally arrive with preconceived beliefs and expectations about their academic sojourn. This paper is premised on the fact that success in tertiary learning depends on having appropriate and suitable literacy practices as these are the core of academic activity in institutions of learning (Nambiar 2005).

However, it is acknowledged that this is a challenging and complex process for many learners who find this process of academic socialization challenging and complex. Morita (2009) studied the academic socialization experiences of a Japanese student in a Canadian university and found that differences encountered in language, culture and gender impacted academic experience. The new identities he had to deal with and the ensuing roles he had to play limited his participation in academic socialization practices. Duff (2007) worked with Korean students in a Canadian university and found that these students chose to deal with the different discourses and practices of the host institution by connecting with Korean and other Asian students thereby minimizing their opportunity to work

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with native speakers. Zamel and Spack (2004) also found that many students found the transition from their L1 to English difficult when their values and expectations were in conflict with the host country's academic culture. Leibowitz (2005) study on black isiXhosa speaking students in an English medium South African university found that students from minority languages and backgrounds within a country are challenged in their academic socialization. This is because they are uncomfortably aware of the differences in the two worlds – theirs and the institution.

The use of English as a lingua franca in the Southeast Asian region has also propelled students to think they can participate in exchange programmes within the region without much linguistic difficulty (Duff 2010). For many Asian learners who come from countries where English is a foreign language, reading in English is a formidable task especially if they have had minimal exposure to the language in their home countries. In an earlier paper that looked at how Korean undergraduates were coping with their study abroad experience in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Nambiar (2010) found that these students adopted different strategies to help them cope with the new demands of the host institution in their language classes. Coming from environments that emphasized the grammar translation method these students had great difficulty adapting to the new learning environment which necessitated critical thinking and independent thought. How then do students socialize into the new academic culture and learn to become effective and successful participants of the literacy practices of the new environment?

2. The Study

2.1. Context of study

Malaysian students of Malay, Chinese and Indian origin dominate language classrooms in the university and these students share similar academic backgrounds as they have been educated in the L1, Bahasa Melayu and learn English as a second language from Year one in primary or elementary school. Mainland China undergraduates come from varied academic backgrounds and experiences depending on the academic culture of their institution of higher learning in China. English for many of them is a foreign language as their education was in their L1. While the learning of English is seen as important in China there are limited opportunities to practice the language. This is unlike the situation in Malaysia where the use of English is widespread and ample opportunities are available to practice the language.

The literacy practices that were explored in this study were centered on two courses – Academic Reading and Selected Literary Works. For the former the students had to read journal articles, the recommended course textbook and the lecture notes. The latter course involved the students reading poems and short stories. In essence they were required to read and express their understanding of what they had understood from the readings in both an oral and written form - the thrust of academic literacy.

2.2. Aim of study

This study investigates the academic literacy experiences of 2 mainland China undergraduates enrolled in a reading program at UKM to understand what difficulties they face in their new environments and what literacy practices they employed in coping with these difficulties.

2.3. The Method

Using a qualitative approach that spanned 14 weeks data was obtained from interviews, literacy logs, and analytical field notes. A total of five interviews were conducted with the first interview to help create a literacy profile while the subsequent interviews focused on the students' literacy logs. The students were asked to talk about the tasks they encountered, any difficulties they faced and how they overcame these difficulties. The students (henceforth S1 & S2) were asked to keep a reflective literacy log in which they recorded their literacy encounters throughout the semester and these were used to elicit questions for the interviews. The logs were used to also raise

awareness among the students on the current literacy practices and evaluate these against their own practices. The researcher's field notes were also used to identify issues and questions that could be dealt with during the interviews.

2.4. Data Analysis

The recorded one hour long interviews were transcribed and examined closely for difficulties in literacy practices. These were highlighted and marks made in the margin of the transcripts to quantify the numbers of instances when the learners found a particular practice difficult. At the same time the literacy practices they engaged in to cope with the difficulties were noted. The literacy logs and field notes were used to inform the transcriptions for accuracy purposes.

3. Findings

3.1. Literacy Profile of learners

Both students (S1 and S2) are very proficient in Mandarin, their L1 and fairly proficient in English. They received their primary, middle and high school education in China and came to Malaysia to pursue a Bachelor of Education in the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL). English was taught formally when they were in upper middle school around the age of 12 but they acknowledge that in China today English is learnt "as a subject from the primary school". Much of the focus on English was on grammar and oral communication. Their teachers were native speakers of English and S2 describes "their English as awesome" The schools produced their own textbooks with the help of native speakers who usually taught English in the schools. . The syllabus was very grammar centric and this was the focus of the exams as well.

S2 claims in his school they had 45 minute English classes daily and sometimes they would have more than one class if a subject teacher failed to turn up. Language learning was the priority so any free period was divided between the Mandarin and English subject teachers. While the focus of learning English was oral competency in schools the students are quick to point out that "English in China is a foreign language" and "we don't use English to communicate with friends" Interestingly while they learnt English orally they did not really practice it and this was largely due to the fact that Mandarin was more commonly spoken and because they did not want to stick out by speaking in a foreign language. "You speak English instead of Mandarin somebody may think you are afraid" There was this stigma associated with speaking in English.

While they are aware of the importance of English they only see it as a means to an end. S2 talks about a special school for English learning in China. "This school has people who come from English speaking countries. I mean this kind of people may come to China to travel or something, they will stay here for awhile so they are looking for a part time job so they working here to teach the Chinese people." S2 knew he was coming to study in UKM so this motivated him to go for extra classes. He went to this special school and did oral skills and reading courses. In the oral skills course students were given topics to discuss in groups under the guidance of a teacher who helped structure their sentences and provide help with vocabulary. In the reading course they were required to read short articles and identify the main points in them. S1 did not go for any extra classes although she found English very difficult. She says 'In China we learn English just as the subject, however when we come here we learn English as a tool. A tool, a language tool to learn other subjects.'

Both learners only spoke Mandarin at home and admitted their parents did not speak English at all. According to S2 there was no need to speak in English because everyone understood Mandarin so they could speak to each other and still get their message across. He cited himself as an example of someone in UKM who only spoke English when he needed to and only with people who could not speak Mandarin. S2 also admits to having mainly Mandarin books at home and the few English books he has are in the form of short stories, novels and magazines. Although there are foreign language bookstores he says the books are very expensive. S1 on the other hand does have books in

English but does not enjoy reading them “because it is not easy to understand the real meaning in the novel” She has novels by Jane Austen and finds reading literary texts so difficult.

3.2. Difficulties encountered in academic reading

Both learners indicated almost similar difficulties with the academic literacy practices they encountered. Reading was undoubtedly viewed as taxing and overwhelming in the beginning. The marked difference between the practice in China where they were guided by the teacher and in Malaysia where they were left to read and understand texts independently overwhelmed the learners. In both courses they were taking they were assigned different texts or short stories to read and then they had to discuss in groups what they had understood from the texts before they presented their understanding in the form of oral presentations or written work. Coming from a grammar translation environment they struggled to cope with the reading tasks thrust upon them. The task of reading to comprehend itself was such a chore for them and they sometimes took a few hours to process a text. When they also had to present their understanding of the text they found it too burdensome.

A major difficulty for the learners was the lexicon in the reading textbook and in the poems and short stories. The learners found it difficult to read the book as after reading one or two paragraphs they came across many words they were unfamiliar with. This inability to understand the words also meant they spent a long time on the texts and this made the process long and tiresome. Having to constantly look up meanings of unfamiliar words and having to reread parts of the text were cognitively demanding for these learners as they were reading in English. As S1 claims, “in reading the most challenging is the vocabulary”. For S2 problems with the lexicon together with difficulty with sentence structure, grammar and spelling proved to be a main hurdle. S2 states “We can speak, know the meaning but we cannot spell... vocabulary.. weak to follow” S1 found reading more tedious and the unfamiliar vocabulary and having to read in English made comprehension more cumbersome especially for the literary texts. To quote him “Vocabulary is the most difficult thing for us because the words we know is not enough (to understand the text)”

Both learners in their interviews repeatedly lamented how busy they were and how they had so many tasks to complete and had to work during the weekends and holidays. It is apparent they were taking a long time to read and comprehend the texts and this limitation affected their ability to complete their tasks efficiently. These learners like the Korean learners in an earlier study (Nambiar 2010) also preferred to work with other learners from China as they claimed they could have discussions in Mandarin and this facilitated their understanding of the task. They felt trying to have discussions in English with other Malaysian students took up too much time and effort. In their view as long as they could understand and were able to complete the task the language they used should not be a concern. Duff (2006) also posits the students in her study were quite content to practice their language ability with each other.

3.3. Literacy practices

Both the students found the translator a useful tool to deal with unfamiliar lexicon. S1 for instance uses the translator and writes the meaning in Chinese beside the problematic word to enable her to read without stopping to understand the word in English. S1 also uses the online help to search for meanings, “Most of the time, use the dictionary and some of the time I go searching online. Online explanation is very simple. Use small words, to explain”. S2 states when he needs help with unfamiliar words he also gets help from friends and the teacher as he feels it is not good to rely too much on the dictionary. He claims “... its better don't keep looking words in the dictionary, it will interrupt the process of reading”. In a way they have got a good approach as they recognize the fastest way to comprehend a text is to just continue reading it and by understanding difficult words in a simple form she is able to do just that. S2 admitted he found it easier to ask for help from his Malaysian friends as “they were more qualified (meaning more competent)”. Both Kobayashi (2003) and Morita (2000) found that seeking help from more experienced classmates and peers was conducive to academic socialization.

S1 also had a very interesting literacy practice which she engaged in after reading texts – she made notes based on what she had understood from the text. She saidsometimes you can know the ideas but sometimes you cannot understand or you cannot remember it. You cannot transfer their ideas to yours. But when you write again what you have read, that is the way to learn”. This a good strategy as by putting into her own words her understanding she was able to display her ability to comprehend the text.

The students found that over the course of the semester they were able to read the texts without stumbling over unfamiliar vocabulary as they were able to simply guess meaning in context. One of them even said she was now quite good at reading newspapers online something she never could do in the beginning of the semester. Both learners claimed their vocabulary had expanded with more reading and they were able to understand more words which made their reading more fluent.

4. Conclusion

The findings provide valuable insights into the pedagogical practices in Malaysian classrooms to help international students negotiate their academic socialization practices. By exploring the various facets of their literacy experiences the study has revealed that knowing about the process of socialization helps us to understand these learners better. Instructors must examine their own instructional practices to see if they are accommodating these learners. For instance since the lexicon is a major difficulty measures must be taken to ensure lexicon development is included in the courses.

It is important to be cognizant of the fact that reading is a primary form of academic literacy and learners must have effective instruction in it to enable them to be successful in tertiary education (Nambar 2005). Learners who are unfamiliar with the importance of being able to read effectively and efficiently need to be taught how to approach texts to maximize their literacy experiences. These learners should be encouraged to seek opportunities to practice their literacy practices with learners from the host country (Duff 2007) so as to minimize conflict with the prevailing literacy practices (Morita 2009, Leibowitz 2005, Zamel & Spack 2004).

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