

International Students' English Language Learning Experiences: Academic Literacy in Graduate School

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Abstract: This case study explores the English language experiences and academic cultural adjustment of international doctoral students in the USA. Participants included three doctoral students from three different countries who are at different stages of their study. Using literacy memoir, interview, and email responses as data collection methods, the study was aimed to understand the factors affecting the students' academic cultural adjustment. Thematic analysis reveals that the students' academic adjustment was influenced by their prior English language experiences which provided limited opportunities to develop language skills through meaningful communicative interactions. The different classroom culture and expectations had also affected the students' academic literacy performance in their academic programs. Implications of the study highlights the need for university as the host institution of these international students to be more sensitive to different cultural capitals and the need for the sending countries to reform their curriculums to accommodate active English communication in the academic contexts.

Keywords: *cultural adjustment, academic literacy, international students*

Abstrak: Studi kasus ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman belajar bahasa Inggris dan penyesuaian budaya mahasiswa doctoral internasional di Amerika Serikat. Partisipan penelitian ini terdiri dari tiga mahasiswa doctoral yang berasal dari tiga negara dan yang berada pada tahap studi doctoral yang bervariasi. Menggunakan literacy memoir, interview, dan respon melalui surel sebagai metode pengambilan data, studi ini bertujuan untuk memahami faktor – faktor yang mempengaruhi penyesuaian budaya mahasiswa internasional. Analisis tematik menunjukkan bahwa penyesuaian budaya mahasiswa internasional dipengaruhi oleh pengalaman belajar bahasa Inggris di negara mereka yang kurang memberikan kesempatan dalam membangun keterampilan melalui interaksi komunikatif yang bermakna. Implikasi penelitian ini menggaris bawahi pentingnya universitas penerima mahasiswa internasional untuk lebih sensitif terhadap perbedaan *cultural capital* yang dibawa oleh mahasiswa internasional dan perlunya negara pengirim untuk mereformasi kurikulum mereka agar dapat mengakomodasi pembelajaran bahasa Inggris yang komunikatif dalam konteks akademik.

Kata-kata Kunci: *penyesuaian budaya, literasi akademik, siswa internasional*

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Global competition in the age of knowledge economy has contributed to the increased number of students studying overseas. United States of America remains one of the top 3 countries of destination for International students. Report from Institute of International Education (2013) shows a 9.8 % increase of new international students' enrollment, from 228,467 students in 2011/2012 to 250,920 students in 2012/13. During the 2016-2017 school year, the number of international students reached all time high: 1,078,822 students attending universities across the USA.

Given the important contributions of international students in terms of economic aspect as well as the cultural and knowledge enrichments to both the sending and the receiving countries, scholarly works have explored the challenges and barriers that the international students are facing during their education sojourn. Research has extensively examined the international students' social and cultural adjustment in the new country (e.g. Myles and Cheng, 2003). Other studies have focused on psychology and mental health of international students (e.g. Hyun, et. al. 2007). Studies in these areas are concerned with how the cultural and social differences psychologically affect the students' process of transition to a new culture.

International students face different socio-cultural and academic expectations in their host institutions. These expectations to some degree are varied from those of their home country. As a consequence, these students may experience various degree of culture shock. According to Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004), culture shock is, "multiple demands for adjustment that individual experience at the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, and physiological levels, when they relocate to another culture (p. 168)." After experiencing excitement upon arrival at the new country, making adjustment to the new culture is the first thing the students have to deal with. In a more specific context, culture in this study refers to the academic culture in the graduate school.

This study will not discuss socio-cultural issues in general, rather it will focus on the academic culture in terms of academic literacy demands of the graduate school. As the students enter the English academic setting, they are expected to meet the standard norms of academic English. Research on

second language writing and rhetoric for example, examines how international students as bi/multilingual writers struggle to develop voices and identities in learning to play "the games of academia" (Casanave, 2002).

This study aims to further our understanding of international students' English language experiences in relation to academic literacy in the Graduate School. Theoretically, this study is expected to give contribution to the existing literature on EFL learning and content area literacy. Practically, this study is expected to provide the stake holders in the home countries (e.g. TESOL curriculum designers) and the authorities in the host countries information about English academic challenges the International graduate students face, so that they can design curriculum and academic supports that can help international students to make smooth transition to the academic literacy expected in the graduate school in US Higher Education Institutions.

International Students and Language Learning Experience

The teaching of English is concerned more about learning the knowledge of linguistic aspects of language which is realized in the form of learning grammatical rules in isolation. By that it means the learning of English did not reflect the functions of language as medium of communication. The other common method was rote memorization of vocabulary. These teaching methods are commonly found in EFL classrooms in Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Korea (Hu, 2002 & 2005; Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Li, 1998). In general, the EFL teaching in most part of the Asian countries is often considered lack of communicative skills. The traditional EFL approach often employs teacher-directed teaching style that does not promote students' agency to actively use English for communication. This approach is not adequate to meet the need for oral communications. Wong's study (2004) revealed that the international students who are accustomed to the teacher-centered learning, found it difficult to make transition to an environment that required active participation.

In relation to the language learning experience, Yeh and Inose's (2003) study on international undergraduate and graduate students in a large urban university in the US shows that English language proficiency

significant predictor of acculturative distress. This implies the need for English instructions for preparing students to face the academic demands of host institutions.

Cultural Differences

International students bring cultural capitals which may not fit the norms in the host countries. Bourdieu (1989) used the term cultural capital to explain the relationship between individual agency and the influence and legacy of family and institutions. These cultural capitals contain a mix of personal, social, and academic elements which includes linguistic knowledge, speech patterns conceptual knowledge, informal interpersonal skills, habits and manners in and outside educational contexts. International students are expected to fit into the universities' existing practices. This sometimes results in the mismatch between international students' cultural capitals and the host institution cultural norms and habitus.

A study of academic literacies conducted by Sheridan (2011) revealed a gap between expectations and international students' capabilities. The institutional habitus and academic literacies implied that the students have to be as confident in their spoken ability to convey their arguments as in their written expressions.

International Students and Academic Literacy

Studying in a doctoral program is not easy for international as well as domestic students. Graduate students face academic and social transition issues, especially in the beginning of their program. Studies on graduate students' adjustments have shown that international students had more difficulty adapting than their domestic counterparts. Andrade's review of research on International students' adjustment (2006) identifies language proficiency, study habit, educational background, and personal characteristics as contributing factors in students' academic success.

Given that success in graduate school highly depends on the ability to participate in academic discourse, international students have to be able to use English for academic purposes. International students, particularly from Asian countries, are often assumed to be lack of participation in classroom discussion. Hellsten and Prescott's (2004) study explained that this happened when the students

found "the conversational flow did not come easily in English language." (p. 346). Asian students often feel unconfident with their pronunciations and are afraid of making mistakes when they try to say the words.

A more comprehensive study of university staffs' perceptions toward International students and the students' perception of their difficulties can be found in the research conducted by Robertson, Line, Jones, and Thomas (2000). The university staff mentioned five areas of problems: technical language, textbook language understanding, reluctance to participate, grammatical English understanding, and dependence of rote learning. This is in line with the students' perceived difficulties, which consisted of two main areas: (1) language. The students found it difficult to understand the lectures and their meaning, lack of confidence to speak in front of the Australian classmates, and other language issues such as colloquial language and question interpretation; (2) social. The students often felt isolated from their Australian classmates and experienced homesickness.

METHOD

In order to better understand the lived experiences of international students in navigating their education sojourn, qualitative methodology is appropriate since the principal objective of this research methodology is to understand how participants make meaning in and of their lives. Because of the nature of my research questions, I used a qualitative approach in my study of International students' English language experience and their academic literacy at the Graduate school. Case study method was employed to capture the complexity of how international students learn English prior to studying at the graduate program at Indiana University. Case study method is not generalizable due to the nature of its purpose and scope. However, it follows the qualitative concept of scientific research. Gilham (2002: 1-2) explained case study as the kind of research that investigates:

1. a unit of human activity embedded in the real world;
2. which can only be studied or understood in context;
3. which exists in here and now;
4. that merges in its contexts so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw

Case study attempts to investigate the issues emerged from the above-mentioned

situation with range of different kinds of evidence which is there in the case setting.

Participants

The research was conducted in a college town located in the Midwest region of United States of America. The research was conducted for over a period of semester. The participants were students who were taking a graduate course in academic writing. The participants were selected based on their linguistic and cultural backgrounds and the fields of study. Three doctoral students at the School of Education majoring in Language Education, Math Education, and Counseling and Educational Psychology were voluntarily involved in this research. They were at different stages of doctoral program. Thus, providing important information regarding their experiences and struggles in different stage of their study. The detailed information about the participants is described as follows.

Yucheng is a PhD candidate majoring in Counseling and Educational Psychology. She speaks three languages which include Mandarin as her primary language, Taiwanese, and English. Yucheng studied her undergrad and Master's programs in Taiwan and had been in America for almost six years at the time of this interview. She had done a research for her dissertation and was currently preparing for her dissertation defense.

Yazid is a first-year doctoral student majoring in Math Education. He is from Turkey and speaks Turkish as his primary language. He is a passive user of Adyghe, a language spoken by his parents who came from the Southern part of Russia. He learned English as a foreign language in Turkey. English has become his second language since he studied for a Master program in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Eunji is a second-year doctoral student at Language Education Department. She is from South Korea and speaks Korean as her primary language. She also speaks English as a second language and a little bit of French.

Data Collection

For the purpose of data triangulation, I used three kinds of data collection methods which include: interview, participants' literacy memoir, and email responses.

Literacy Memoir

Before conducting the interviews, I asked the participants to write their literacy mem-

oir. Literacy memoir, also known as literacy autobiography, is the narrative that helps students reflect on their experiences as a literate person, in this context being a literate person of English as a second/foreign language. Qualitative research approaches have recognized the importance of narratives as part of data collection process. Rodriguez and Cho (2011) argue that autobiographical accounts and personal narratives can offer ways to explore the multiplicity and complexity of social identities of a learner/teacher.

My purpose of asking students to write their literacy memoir was to get insights on their view of their English language experiences. I did not give them parameter of what they should write, rather the students decided themselves of what to tell or include in their memoirs. I informed them that I would not review or judge their writing to make sure that they would not feel the pressure of being criticized based on their writing. I emphasized that this memoir was to get information of the English learning experiences from their point of views. The literacy memoir also served as the preliminary data to inform the process of constructing interview questions.

Interview

Interview gave me access through words to an individual's constructed reality and interpretation of the participants' English language learning experience. I used open-ended interview questions. The interview was conducted on face to face, individual basis.

Email Responses and Discussion

Email was conducted as the follow up of the interview after the whole interviews were transcribed. These were convenient ways to clarify or to elaborate some of the points stated in the interviews. This also served as member-checking process to enhance the trustworthiness of the research.

Data Analysis

According to Gibson (2010: 55), "data analysis involves working through a conceptual problem in relation to a set of data. This data will have been designed and produced through the research process specifically so that the research problem can be dealt with." I used thematic analysis as an analytical tool in this study. Thematic analysis of narrative focuses on what is the text says rather than

how it is structured. Thematic analysis provides a qualitative, detailed and nuanced account of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). It involves the search for and identification of common threads that extend across the data (an entire interview and the literacy memoirs) through careful reading and re-reading of the data and recognizing pattern within the data where emerging themes becomes the categories for analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Prior English Learning Experiences

Early English Learning Experiences

All participants started that their formal English at the first year of Junior High School (7th grade). However, the participants of this study had various exposures to English prior to the formal English lesson taught in schools.

Yucheng learned English formally in the first grade of Junior High School (7th grade). However, she learned English out-of-school in the third grade. She joined a group of students who received English instruction from a private teacher. She recalled learning to sound English phonetic symbols and to write Roman alphabets. The teacher used the book for American children learning to read and write. This private group learning lasted for about one year. She did not have the conversation skills but only memorizing words and writing sentences. In the Junior High School the English language learning focused on grammar and functional skills such as "greetings" and reading passages. All of these were geared toward standardized test preparation.

Yazid began to learn English in Junior High School (7th grade). It was one of the elective subjects. In his school, students could choose one of the foreign languages, i.e. English, French, and Germany. Since almost all students chose English, he joined the crowd and learned English as a foreign language. Because of its high popularity, only English class was available. The school did not open the other foreign language classes. He recalled learning grammatical rules in English and never had speaking or conversation in the class.

Eunji had an exposure to English speaking environment for a year because she joined her parents who were studying at Austin, Texas. She was in the third grade and did not speak English at all when she came to the

States. She had an after school English lesson given by a volunteer teacher to help her learn English in order to be able to study in a mainstream English-mediated classroom. When she came back to Korea, she joined an English course at the Private Institution to maintain her English. At that time, English was only taught from the Junior High School level. Therefore, the only way to help her continue using English was at the out-of-school English course. Moreover, her mother, who was a teacher of English at High School, taught her English grammar to help her prepare for the test. Her aunt, who owns an English Private Institution, exposed her to a program called English through telephone (a popular program at that time) in which she received a telephone call every morning to talk in English for 20 minutes.

English at the University Level

Among the participants, Eunji was the only one who learned English intensively because she was majoring in English Education at the Korean National University. In the freshman year she studied all the skills such as listening and conversation which were taught by English Native Speaking Professors. She got the chance to speak in English in the school but did not use it in her daily life outside of school. While studying at the junior year, she was selected to be sent to join an intensive English program at Michigan State for 1 month where she joined an integrated English program focusing on oral communication. Eunji had an experience of studying at a Korean graduate school for 1 semester before she decided to apply for a Master's program at a Midwestern University.

Yucheng had English classes in her freshman year. At the university level in Taiwan, not only English grammar was taught but also conversation. Yucheng described that the English classes often required students to speak on the stage, "that's the first time I speak English in class. I was embarrassed because I could not speak fluently." That was the reason she decided to join the English Village during the break. It was a month-intensive English program where the participants stayed in a certain place to study English and used it in their daily life during the program. This included English language skills for communication and singing competition.

Yazid did not mention any significant experience at the undergrad program. Since he

was majoring in Math education, he did not receive any English instructions. However, Yazid had received an intensive English program prior to begin his study in American Higher Institution. “We take a course for a month to study English. It’s the same thing [as the English instruction as high school] ... a little bit speaking part and writing part.” He also had to take ESL intensive class for a quarter in an American University. He explained that the program, “focused on essay format, how to start your thinking, you need to explain your paragraph with examples.”

Motivation to Learn and Use English

Motivation to study English is one of the identified elements of international students’ academic success (Andrade, 2006). The participants had different degree of motivation to learn English. The nature of the schools’ emphasis on academic achievement had influenced the way these students perceived English language learning. When they were in Junior and Senior High School, all participants leaned English for the sake of good grades. Only Eunji showed an interest in English. She represented her school in an English speaking contest. This motivated her to learn English beyond the grades. Meanwhile, Yazid did not have certain motivation to learn English in Junior and Senior High schools except for fulfilling the school requirement.

Yucheng and Eunji felt significant changes in motivation when they were in the university. As an English Education student, Eunji was motivated to improve her English for preparing to become a teacher. She had the opportunity to study with the native speaking professors and interacted in English with the classmates. When she was in a Master program in Taiwan, Yucheng had an English class that required the students to listen to the radio broadcasted in English and shared what they heard in the class. Meanwhile, Yazid began using English when he started his Master program in Ohio.

In their home country where they studied their undergrad programs, all the participants used English mostly in academic settings. Eunji used English mostly in the university where they were studying. Yazid only used Turkish for communication in his home country. Yucheng rarely used English in her daily life except in the academic seminar on campus,” “If we have a small seminar

in our department .. we have some scholars from England .. we used English. In a national seminar .. we have a translator but it will be easier to talk directly to the speakers in English.”

Academic Literacy and Challenges

All participants revealed the requirements to participate in class discussion as the most challenging aspects of learning in an American Higher Education Institution. These international students found the first year, especially the first semester, a trial of learning the academic culture. Two of the participants who have been in this university for quiet long time, agreed that the first year of the doctoral program the hardest time for adjustment to a new academic life. Yazid who is in the first semester also felt the same. These students shared identical problems of culture shock in academic contexts.

One of the academic challenges is the different teaching and learning style. All participants described their learning experience in home countries reflected the teacher-centered education. This confirms previous research on international students’ learning experiences. Sawir’s study on international students in Australia (2005) showed that the international students were accustomed to teacher-dominated learning that it was difficult for the students to participate actively in the class discussion.

Yucheng mentioned that she had a lot of culture shock in academic context, “To be honest, in my first semester I just sit in the class. I don’t know what’s the instructor is talking about and I have difficulties in how to turn in my assignment yah..ah.. I think for the very first semester I took one class and the class was very high demanding in conversation. Sometimes the instructor assign you one group and you turn back to your original group to explain what the group is talking about ... and it was difficult for me because I don’t have any conversation skills ... and there was one time I tried to write down something in my note and when I went back to my group ... they [her group members] said just show me your notes.”

When asked whether the difficulty was due to her English or because of the course itself, Yucheng explained, “One thing is because of the course. The subject is not something I familiar with. Ok, uhm...I’m more a quantitative person and that course is more

qualitative that I'm not familiar with, I think it's about math education. And also that course is very free style so we don't have certain textbooks that I can follow. We did have some readings I think...but you know that Americans, they don't really follow the text." The classroom discussions were very fluid that it was hard for Yucheng to follow. She expected a more structured discussion as she usually experienced in Taiwan. "They just talk about what they want to talk about... maybe because what you read is not is not the same with what you will speak. When you speak you use conversational. What we used to be is to read the text that is ... academic writing but when you speak you won't use all the terms in the book."

In their early period of study, students experienced struggle in understanding the interlocutors' accents and in producing intelligible pronunciation. Yucheng believed the issue was related to people's familiarity with different accent, "I think 80% of American understand what I'm talking about ... but they were like 20% I don't know. I think people have different level of listening skills ... some people, they used to listen to different tones, different accents ... and some people just only understand the native speaker speaking so I think for most people I have ... yeah I have bad experience because when .. I feel if someone I'm talking to is not really understand what I'm talking about, I feel frustrating even though I know I can use different ways to describe it but I think it's very easy to pronounce but it's not understanding ... I think I just leave."

Similarly, Yazid experienced difficulty in understanding the native speakers, "Sometimes I don't understand the people ... what they say and also our pronunciation is different. Communication actually in the first time is not good. They couldn't understand me and also I couldn't understand them." Having no sufficient practice in English communication prior to coming to USA for study had influenced the students' ability to communicate in an academic context.

On different note, Eunji emphasized on the difference in teacher-student relationship between the USA and the Korean classroom contexts. She explained, "I felt the relationship between the professors and the students ... it was ..uh.. I know it depends on the professor but here... in the United States the professors want to listen to the students' opinion

first. In American classroom settings students want to speak aloud."

Another academic challenge was the knowledge of the content area. The students revealed that they sometimes found it difficult to make connections with the discussion related to American context. Eunji and Yazid described the difficulties in understanding topics related to American Education as they were not familiar with the system and the current condition. It took them sometimes to get connected with these issues, as Eunji stated, "You know it's the history of literacy in America so I thought, I don't have prior knowledge." She was also concerned about how this issue related to the Korean context, "it was not quiet related to my interest because the literacy ... I didn't...actually in Korea we didn't ... we didn't uh teach a lot of literacy in Korea, so I thought after going back to Korea I don't know how to apply that in Korean setting."

Strategies the Students Used

These international students learned the academic culture and academic literacy required in their field of studies in the first year of their programs. They began by understanding their new cultural and academic norms of the university and making some adjustment of their cultural capitals to match new culture. However, this process was not easy and often made them feel stress. "It was stressful and demanding for the first time but ah .. uhm I try to not to get stressed and I uhm I practice and I uhm I reviewed the article that we ... I have to deal with in class and I try to summarize and think my opinion before going to the class. I prepare questions but sometimes my classmates raised their hands and asked the questions that I already prepared", Eunji explained. She also added that the expectations in the US classroom required her to be prepared to provide arguments and face challenging opinions. She also learned that it was also common for students to question teachers' explanation and to challenge opinions other people poses. This practice was in contrast with her experience in the Korean classrooms where students were reluctant to challenge teachers' explanation. Speaking out their opinion could be considered disrespectful to the teachers.

Yucheng and Yazid described similar strategies to deal with the class discussions. They read the required articles or chapters

related to the topic for that meeting and prepared the questions in advance so that they could appropriately pronounce the sentences. The major issue was sometimes their fluency was halted because of paying too much attention on correctness in grammar and pronunciation.

Another problem was that the fellow students were not patient enough to give them some times to think about the best way to express their opinion. Yucheng often felt frustrated because her classmates often asked her to show them her notes rather than patiently waited for her to figure out how to best summarize the topic of discussion. Yazid stated that he often did the thinking in Turkish and tried to translate the opinion in English. It was not easy because Turkish grammatical structure was different from that of English. Yazid believed that using academic English required “correct words” and the knowledge of the academic language, which was more challenging than using English in informal setting, such as at the shopping center.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This case study explores the international students’ prior English learning experiences, their literacy practice and adaptation at the graduate programs. Prominent finding from this study shows the mismatch between students’ cultural capitals and the university academic cultural norms that contributed to difficulties in making adjustment within the first year of the doctoral program. The contributing factors include:

1. Students learning experiences. The students experienced a heavily-emphasized teacher-centered approach of English learning that provided them with limited opportunities to use English. Moreover, at that time of their studies, in the home countries grammar-translation method dominated the English classrooms. Therefore, the students lacked the opportunity to learn English for communication. The students revealed that their lack of experience in English communication had hindered their ability to follow the flows of the classroom discussions.
2. Limited opportunity to use English for communication, especially outside of school contexts. Language learning is effective when it is used for the real purpose of communication. English classes often expose students with non-authentic com-

municative expressions that are not representative of the real-life communication. These students had hardly ever had the opportunity to use their English language skills for communication with English speaking persons.

3. Differences between students’ cultural norms and the cultural norms and habitus of the host institution. Besides their inexperience of using English for real communication, the students’ cultural backgrounds influenced the way they responded to class activities. Being respectful in their cultures meant not directly challenge the opinion of the authority figures, in this case the professors. The international students need some times to adjust to the new cultural norms that are in contrast with their home culture.

The interviews revealed the students’ effort to understand the new cultural values and the adjustments they made to cope with the academic challenges. They gradually learned the academic literacy demands of their programs and used strategies to actively participate in the class discussion. They learned that Americans highly valued personal opinions and that one of the determinant factors in academic success was active participation in class. Therefore, they tried hard to anticipate the class discussions by reading the required texts and preparing questions and comments related to the topics.

The study highlights the need for University as the host institution of these international students to be more sensitive to the different cultural capitals. Given that the different academic expectations of the home countries and the American universities are significant contributors of students’ academic difficulties, the international students need help in making transition to the new academic literacy. The most common way the American universities deal with this issue is by placing the international students in the ESL intensive programs. However, this might not be the only best answer to the problem. The participants of this study suggested a more informal meeting among the students and the professors, as one of them said, “I think if the professors have enough time they can talk about for example assignment, if the students find difficulties in doing assignment. They might have conversation each other after class because most of international students don’t want to make appointment with the pro-

fessors. It will be helpful if we have enough meeting to share our opinion.”

This study also implies the need for the international students to have more experience in using English for the real communicative purposes. The participants of the study stated that there were some changes in the English teaching methodologies in their home countries. However, it was not clear how these changes affected the preparation for students to study overseas or interact with other people using English as a medium of communication. The sending countries may consider reforming their curriculum to accommodate the need of active English communication in the academic contexts.

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