Agency, discourse and academic practice: Reconceptualising international students in an Australian university

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Outline

• Genesis and context of the study
• The study: Theoretical position
• The study: Methodology
• Findings related to:
  ➢ English
  ➢ Academic practices
  ➢ Teaching
  ➢ Student identities and crafting of the ‘self’
• Implications
Genesis and context of the study

- Researcher experience and subjectivity:
  - International language student in Germany
  - ESP teacher – English for MBA studies
  - Social positionings and representations of international students

- Previous research and research literature:
  - Three discernible ‘waves’ of representations of international student learning approaches

- Context:
  - Increased recruitment of international students, particularly in coursework Master’s degrees
  - Increased linguistic, cultural, educational diversity on Australian campuses and in courses

The study: Theoretical position

- Foreground student accounts:
  - How do the students identify the preferred practices in the course, that is, the particular ways of knowing, doing and being in individual practices and overall in the course?
  - How do the students respond?
  - What about the teaching? How does it impact?
  - How do the students position themselves in the course; how are they positioned? How do they represent their undertaking in and experience of the course?

- Transdisciplinary:
  - Globalisation theory, discourse theory, teaching and learning theory, SLA theory, second language learning strategy theory
A social practice view

A practice:
- Individual or general
- Multiple elements
- Dialectical relations
- Ways of knowing, doing and being
- Configured as response to prevailing discourses, e.g. in HE: internationalisation, marketisation, massification, critical enquiry, autonomous learning, nation-building
- Social analysis with interest in capturing complexity and change.

The study: Methodology

- Case study of a Master of Education course
  - Enrolment: ten international, 11 domestic
  - Participants: Lecturer + six international students:
    - Female: China, Mozambique, Singapore
    - Male: Argentina, Thailand, Vietnam

- Data:
  - Interviews; written archive; videoed class sessions, email communication, course evaluation

- Analytical method:
  - Critical Discourse Analysis; Conversation Analysis; Classroom analysis
  - Development of CDA method for texts produced by ESL speakers
What counts as English

• Little reference to English in university documents; only in admission policy

• MEd course assignment presentation guidelines:
  - successful written communication requires a level of adherence to the conventions of our common language …
  - Logic of equivalence (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985): successful written communication = adherence to conventions of our common language
  - hard to disentangle English and writing; they internalise each other; easy to blame ‘poor’ student writing on language.
  - But academic writing – not ‘natural’; students identified that teaching is helpful.

What counts as English

• Increasing prevalence of talk: interactive seminars

• SLA theory: performance in second language (L2), especially with native speakers, creates anxiety; threat to ‘face’; concerns about self-representation and legitimacy in class:

  I am nobody (Thai student)
  I’m not actually comfortable to talk with the native speaker. (Chinese student)

• English impacted on:
  - performance of activities; sense of self-representation; perceptions of relations with colleagues and lecturer.
**Academic practices**

- **High use of metaphor:**
  - *Flying in the air; getting down to the ground* (Chinese student)
  - *You don’t have to follow the score; you can jazz around* (Argentinean student)
  - *Everything is not just like a smooth road* (Thai student)
  - *Critical thinking = deeper* (Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese students)
  - *The formula was all correct; people were really contributing and the learning was very focussed* (Singaporean student)

- **Identified practices:**
  - Negotiating assignment topics; pursuing individual interests; critical thinking; participating in class discussions by voicing opinions; independent sourcing of literature and building own critical position; extended writing

- **Paradoxes** (Mozambican student)
  - focus on West
  - lack of literature on Mozambique
  - critical but constrained

- **Mediating factors:**
  - strategy use
  - sense of congruence with course and an investment in success
    - student grades
  - the lecturer’s teaching approach.
Teaching

One of her unique methods is like she’s teaching techniques of reading or writing. That’s good especially for those Asian or international students they are not quite used to this kind of writing style. She’s helping us gradually to adapt this kind of writing (Chinese student)

• Students regarded lecturer highly; considered teaching approach facilitated their learning.
• Generative: generated new knowledge and generated a community of learners

• Features of the teaching:
  ➢ Revoicing and reformulating student initiations in discipline-specific terms and concepts: induction into discipline
  ➢ SL techniques:
    o ‘message abundancy’ (Gibbons, 2003) such as hand gestures and slowed oral delivery
    o ‘namings’
    o scaffolding student contributions
  ➢ Explicit teaching:
    o academic reading and writing
    o explication and modeling of critique and critical analysis

• Lecturer’s positions:
  ➢ Students have right to access valued genres: ‘genres of power’.
  ➢ Institution has responsibility to teach valued practices.
Student identities: Crafting the ‘self’

- Time-mediated personal change
- Recognition of context boundedness and issues of transferability:
  - West is not necessarily best.
- Sacrifice and agency
- Study brought transformation and opportunities:
  - radically changed world views;
  - opportunities for travel;
  - new personal and professional beginnings;
  - greater job security and higher income on return home;
  - crafting a life.

Implications

- Students are actively engaged in managing their linguistic, academic and social lives during their sojourns.
- Students are making strategic decisions about uptake, enactment, resistance.
- Need to deconstruct the taken-for-granted: Recognising the pervasiveness and impact of English in course practices;
- Learning is conducted within social contexts; intellectual processes are socially influenced. Learning cannot be seen as located solely with student – in her/his head.
Implications

• The institution has responsibilities for bringing academic expectations to the students; not the reverse.
  ➢ Noted value of teaching highly valued, high-stakes course practices. Emphasis on teaching for learning; not just content transmission.

• Recognition of pedagogy for diverse student groups, particularly one that recognises second language users
  ➢ generate both knowledge/skills and community with participation.

• Communities with learners from diverse backgrounds:
  ➢ Possibilities for enriched curriculum and development of intercultural competence.

References


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