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Framing the discourse practices of higher education: Academic literacies, hidden cultures and the transition experience of postgraduate Chinese students.

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Abstract: In recent years, the proportion of university students from a non-English speaking background (NESB) has been increasing in the UK and beyond. This is widely acknowledged to hold great potential to enhance the educational setting. However, the transition from previous educational cultures can be demanding for these students.

This paper will examine accounts of this process and will propose framing as a concept which may hold potential in this area. The background theoretical work will be summarized with particular reference to Higher Education, where it has been applied to the analysis of text rhetorical structure. It will be argued, with reference to an interview study with mainland Chinese postgraduate students, that this framework may be extended to cover transitions into the discourse practices of UK Higher Education in general. It will conclude with implications for practice.

Keywords: Framing, Chinese students, academic discourse

Transitions to UK higher education

In published discussions of NESB students' transitions to UK Higher Education, it is recognized that gaining academic discourse proficiency and confidence can present a serious challenge. However, the pitfalls of a 'deficit model' which 'blames' the students has drawn criticism (e.g. Watkins and Biggs 2001). Emphasis is now placed more on the responsibility of the Higher Education sector to adapt content and process, using inclusive pedagogical practices more appropriate to international cohorts (e.g. de Vita 2000, Jackson 2002). However, many NESB students still seem to find the transition experience extremely demanding, (e.g. Gaskin 2002), and as a result may not fulfill their academic potential. The challenges are diverse, but this paper proposes that a central factor in supporting such students is the degree to which the literacy and discursive demands of the new context are made explicit to, and considered by, students and lecturers alike.

Framing

The concept of *framing* originated with Bateson (1972) and was subsequently developed via diverse terminology and disciplines by Gumperz (1982), Goffman (1974), Schank & Abelson (1977), and Tannen (1979, 1993). Tannen favours Ross's (1975) overarching term *structures of expectation*, being the concept that "...on the basis of one's experience of the world in a given culture (or combination of cultures), one organizes knowledge about the world and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events, and experiences." (1993: 16).

Inherent in the notion of framing is the idea that a scene of action alone does not provide sufficient information about the context: “The scene is too complex and broad to be informative by itself. Specific features of context must be pointed to continually and sustained through communicative behaviour” (Erickson 1982: 159). Erickson argues that the ability to read and use these cues is crucial to *communicative competence* (Hymes 1974).

Research in schools has investigated areas such as the language used by students in reading groups (Wilkinson & Calculator 1982), discourse rules in teacher-student interaction (Stefano, Pepinsky & Sanders 1982), and structures of control in the classroom (Ervin-Tripp 1982). Wilkinson (1982) sees active participation in classroom discourse as demanding both structural linguistic competence and *classroom communicative competence*, echoing Mehan (1979). She highlights the barriers faced by children unfamiliar with the setting, and cites studies of language differences between school and home (Philips 1972, Heath 1982), arguing that “...culturally diverse students do not receive an adequate explication of the ‘rules of the game’ for classroom interaction, which can contribute to their failure to learn these rules” (1982: 6), concluding that this can result in an inability to function adequately in the classroom, leading to lowered teacher expectations.

The higher education context

The challenges of the transition to Higher Education may be similarly linked to lack of familiarity with participation norms. In Higher Education research, the concept of framing has hitherto been applied most extensively to reading, writing and rhetorical structure. MacLachlan & Reid (1994) identify four kinds of interpretive framing processes, positing different levels of information the reader may draw upon to interpret the text:

- *Extratextual*: background knowledge and experience
- *Intratextual*: cues such as headings, subheadings and cohesive devices
- *Circumstantial*: the cover, peripheral features such as title or abstract
- *Intertextual*: linking other readings with present reading

Other related work includes that of Carrell (1984), who focuses on the effects of rhetorical organization on (NESB) readers, and Plum (1998), who concludes that the most influential factor generating difficulties in academic literacy is the lack of a demonstrated model of academic writing, as part of Candlin and Plum’s (1998) in-depth study of academic literacies and writing processes in various disciplines. Bell (2002) uses MacLachlan and Reid’s (1994) model in a study focusing on NESB student reading strategies, specifically on adjustments made when reading in English.

Background to the Napier study

The proportion of international, and particularly Chinese, students on Napier Business Masters programmes has increased in recent years, presenting cohorts with different strengths and needs from those of their predecessors. This can be challenging to lecturers, who strive to adapt their teaching approaches to suit the international composition of their modules. A key aim of the study was to investigate the experiences of these Chinese students in their transition to the UK context at Napier. It also focused on areas of the learning experience which demanded adjustment in learning approaches or modes of interaction; and the resultant strategies employed. There was a concurrent focus on the experiences of teaching staff and

adaptations to their approach to learning, teaching and assessment. This paper will focus on the student data.

Methodology

Three postgraduate Business programmes popular with Chinese students were chosen, opportunity sampling was used, and seven students volunteered to be interviewed retrospectively towards the end of their programmes. Semi-structured interviews were carefully conducted in English to ensure full understanding, and students had the opportunity to write any afterthoughts in Chinese. The categorization outlined above has been extended in the analysis below to encompass context rather than solely text;

- *Extracontextual*: background knowledge and experience of the norms and practices of the UK educational context
- *Intracontextual*: includes cohesive devices in spoken discourse and non-academic texts such as emails and noticeboards
- *Circumstantial*: features identifying the text or discourse type and associated norms, may be behavioral or textual
- *Intercontextual*: linking background academic culture with UK Higher Education

Findings and analysis

Three broad areas were raised repeatedly by students; lecture comprehension, use of source materials, and participation in interactive group work.

“Watching the teachers speaking”: Lecture comprehension

This challenge was of particular concern in the first semester. Students reported the following experiences:

- Understanding ‘almost nothing’ initially, and reliance on reading
- Extreme difficulty in notetaking, especially if lecturers wrote while talking
- Preference for full advance handouts over PowerPoint
- Tendency to ask for lecturer clarification at the end, one-to-one
- Unwillingness to ask questions in class, due to lack of language confidence

Listening was identified by five of the seven students as the most challenging linguistic aspect of their initial experience, and a source of anxiety for some. This student seems to view it as a yardstick by which she measured her linguistic competence as a whole:

Oh, I just felt my English was terrible, you know, em especially listening comprehension. I couldn’t understand the lecturers... I just record the lecture and after the lecture I replay it and write down. (Student 1)

One student referred to Chinese students acting more as observers than participants:

We feel we are constantly watching the teachers speaking. (Student 3)

Culturally unfamiliar illustrative examples were also raised:

One student from my MBA class when she was in the lecture and she heard the word BMW she asked the teacher what does BMW mean? (Student 2)

This may be analyzed as an example of a dearth of *extracontextual framing*, causing a barrier to participation.

In China we got all this knowledge from books...sometimes here when we listen to the lecturer something we could not find from the books. (Student 5)

This comment suggests that, although in terms of *circumstantial framing*, the UK lecture may superficially resemble its Chinese counterpart, the relationship to the source materials and subsequent participation requirement is profoundly different. Another student emphasizes the use of textual support in lecture comprehension:

You must read the, the handouts after the lectures and I felt, that if, before the lecture if you read something about the, the subject it would be very helpful. (Student 1)

I feel really bad about the lesson part because eh the lecturer went different accents... sometimes I feel I understand perhaps 80% to 90% but after that ... I looking at books I just think oh I didn't hear anything. (Student 7)

Students also refer to a lack of previous experience with their subjects at Chinese university:

Before I came here I never studied Finance and Accounting... So for me I, some basic things ... I didn't know. After the lecture I had to read out loud, try to understand the, the, the basic things. (Student 1)

Maybe just half, I can half understand the lecturer 'cause the language ...second maybe my ...study background, because maybe I haven't eh, eh, more business before I started em, MBA. (Student 6)

This could be interpreted as an example of *intercontextual framing*, where previous educational experience is not adequate in terms of providing a basis for comprehension.

“The books looked so big”: Use of source materials

Reading and writing were salient issues for students, who commented on:

- Difficulties with the volume of reading
- Need for lecturer guidance when selecting literature
- The Chinese practice of focusing on one book
- Initial unfamiliarity with the concept of plagiarism
- Writing difficulties leading to plagiarism

Students commented that:

At first time I do feel quite stress when you're reading because, you know, too much to read and uh..., I can remember the books looked so big and at first time I just can read several pages in an hour, and it's really, really slow. (Student 3)

There's some, all sorts of reference or articles you should read. After you read a lot you can find they have some similar idea, very similar, so that's also the vocabulary they use is similar. So that is, I think it's repeated, you know, first I need a word...but after many attempts you don't always read the dictionary. (Student 2)

Student 2's comment seems to show an initial lack of *intercontextual framing* posing a barrier to interpretation. He describes building a predictive lexical store through reading, decreasing

reliance on dictionaries as his access to intercontextual framing increased. The same student refers to awareness of rhetorical structure, which may be interpreted in terms of *intracontextual framing*:

When I read articles ... you think is very easy to understand, it's not from the vocabulary, because the structure, maybe it's familiar with you, it's easy to understand but maybe another article is completely different. (Student 2)

Another student refers to Chinese language source materials:

I got the same book in Chinese...so before the class I read it, so in the class I feel easier. (Student 4)

This may be interpreted as a use of *intercontextual framing*, drawing explicitly on Chinese texts. Another example may be the use of Chinese language explanations in reading comprehension:

I ...often ask some other students what's the meaning of this concept ... they explain for me... in Chinese to me ...after that when I read eh English materials and books that easier to understand. (Student 1)

There is some evidence of a lack of *extracontextual framing* in terms of the norms of reading:

I think the teaching lesson is different because em in China the lecturer maybe use a same, textbook... but here always change textbook, always follow em the change of the word and change of the knowledge. (Student 6)

“We were so quiet”: participation in interactive group work

This was another issue on which students commented extensively, raising the following points:

- They had experienced only lecture format at Chinese university
- Reliance on colleagues to explain concepts in Chinese
- They seldom spoke initially due to lack of language confidence
- Easier to participate in smaller groups
- All-Chinese groups spoke Chinese; it felt unnatural to speak English
- UK students avoided joining them for group assessments
- Substantive tutorial content was at times unfamiliar

A sense of embarrassment about English seemed to inhibit participation for some students:

In tutorials I, in the very beginning I, I remember, I seldom speak...because of my terrible English, you know. When I wanted to express something oh I just, it was difficult, very hard to, to, to speak. (Student 1)

Students point to a lack of familiarity with the discourse norms of a tutorial:

In the beginning ... we were so quiet because we never argued with the lecturers, saying ‘Oh no I don’t agree’. We never said this. (Student 5)

In here we have group discussion and tutorial, from my memories when I started in the university there was no activity like this. So, it’s very different. At the beginning Chinese

students, although their English level very high and they don't like to speak a lot. I ... maybe I know the answer but I don't want to speak. (Student 2)

These issues may be seen as arising not only from a lack of *extracontextual framing*, but also in terms of *circumstantial framing* an inability to recognize the markers defining the parameters of a tutorial, such as the (unstated) 'rule' of the discourse event that participants should actively contribute. The use of Chinese was discussed:

Sometimes, in Chinese group we can co-operate better than others...Maybe ...you can follow each other's idea better, understand them better...Sometimes eh speak Chinese, sometimes speak English. I know that's not good. (laughter) (Student 6)

We often speak Chinese and the programme leader says obviously 'Don't speak Chinese'. ...But, for me, I think it's quite good...a lot of students they can express and see some concept in Chinese. (Student 1)

The Chinese language may be viewed here as a *intercontextual framing* resource, albeit one which seemed to be prohibited and used covertly.

Hidden cultures, academic literacies and discourse practices

The students' accounts of their transition experiences seem to confirm and significantly extend the scope of MacLachlan & Reid's (1994) model. A common thread in the interviews was the need to decode participation and discourse norms from contextual cues. These cues are not unproblematic for the students, and seem to be characterized by a lack of explicitness, where expectations are only partially articulated. Added to this is the complexity of the process of socialization into a discipline (Becher & Trowler 2001). The resultant overall opacity may have a gatekeeping function - decoding the 'hidden culture' of the system, it could be argued, is an additional, implicit requirement. There may be a hope that NESB students will develop academic literacies simply through exposure and informal guidance from home students. However, the data suggests that the reality of the transition experience is rather different, and raises ethical issues as to the responsibilities of the universities in supporting these students.

Implications for practice

Chinese students' experiences have been analyzed within the fields of language learning (e.g. Harvey 1985, Ho and Crookall 1995) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (e.g. O'Connell and 2001). There may be benefit in developing formal collegiate links with EAP specialists, by sharing practices for mutual benefit.

In wider terms, induction, support and inclusive pedagogic practices provide key opportunities to share expectations, develop target academic literacies and encourage student participation. However, there still seems to be dearth of explicitness in terms of educational rationale, communicative processes and target discourses. The four-part model proposed by MacLachlan & Reid (1994) could provide a theoretical basis and operational checklist for ensuring robust support for students embarking on this transition. Through awareness of these aspects of framing, it may be possible to negotiate and establish shared contextual cues in both written and spoken discourse contexts. Some preliminary implementations, building on established practice, could be the following:

Extracontextual:

- Guided support sessions focused on explicit deconstruction and negotiation of expectations such as academic conventions and plagiarism avoidance.
- Frequently asked questions (FAQs) or 'survival guide' for future students (George and Cowan 1999) provided in the students' first language, constructed collaboratively with previous students.
- A 'buddy' system involving experienced students who interpret and pass on their experience of the UK context.

Intracontextual:

- Guided focus on academic texts such as articles, and also text types for writing, such as essays and reports, focusing on internal structures and cohesive features such as headings.
- Non-academic texts in the university environment such as letters, notices, emails, and student newspapers 'decoded' to enhance students' sense of integration.
- Video analysis of lectures and tutorials used to aid recognition of participation cues.

Circumstantial:

- Rationale and participation norms in academic discourse situations made more explicit, and defining features of encounters such as tutorials and one-to-one supervision 'unpacked'.
- Features identifying and differentiating text types focused on and made explicit, such as differences between a peer-reviewed journal article and a textbook chapter.
- Greater emphasis on sharing assessment criteria with students, and analysis of assessment rubrics in order to clarify expectations.

Intercontextual:

- An element of hybrid approaches to learning, teaching and assessment, drawing on students' existing skills, such as memorization, in a 'sloped' transition from the beginning of a programme.
- Flagging up where marked differences in educational approach exist, with adequate guidance given as to new processes needed to approach new tasks.
- Greater freedom to draw on the students' first language given, avoiding potentially disempowering prohibition. Classroom code-switching seen as beneficial and legitimate strategy, and an atmosphere of acceptance fostered among home students.

The challenge for the Higher Education sector would be to further operationalize these complementary dimensions of framing in a meaningful and inclusive manner. Such measures may not only bring about an increase in the relevance of UK Higher Education to these students and optimize educational experiences and outcomes for them in the future, but may also force us as educators to collaboratively 'unhide', fully articulate and critically examine our own culture-bound values and expectations.

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