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'See, these big potatoes they all think this way': International students' experiences in constructing knowledge in higher education

Ly Thi Tran

University of Melbourne, Australia
t.tran20@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au

Abstract: Various studies explore the difficulties international students encounter in Australian higher education. Relatively little research has however focused on the challenges arising from the students' negotiation of different ways of constructing knowledge in doing specific tasks for their course and compare their perceptions with the academic staff's expectations. Drawing on an interdisciplinary framework for discourse analysis which I have developed based on Lillis' (2001) heuristic for exploring student writing and positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), this study examines international students' experiences to construct knowledge in their first texts at an Australian University and the lecturers' views on this aspect. This paper argues that the students' understandings of the possibilities to incorporate their previous working experiences embedded in their home countries in constructing knowledge in Australian higher education and the academic staff's expectations appear to be dissimilar. These mismatches may disadvantage the students in their attempts to take control of their academic life. The discussion indicates that in order to make the curriculum accessible to the increasing diverse student population, there seems to be a need to demystify the opportunities and the relevant ways for students to articulate and reflect different dimensions of knowledge, including international students' past working experiences, into pedagogical practices in specific disciplines.

Key words: international students, disciplinary expectations, academic writing

Introduction

The increasing number of international students in Australian higher education has led to growing attempts from University communities to develop and implement policies on the internationalization of the curriculum. Research into international students' experiences in Australian institutions has been concerned with a range of topics including students' views on their chosen courses and institutions, students' learning styles, their adaption to the university and their identity (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Koehne, 2005; McInnes, 2001). However, there seems to be a lack of awareness of the relationship between international students' understandings of specific demands in disciplinary practice and their lecturers' expectations. Drawing on the accounts of two international students and the views of two lecturers in the Education discipline at an Australian University, this paper argues that there may be mismatches between the students' interpretations of what is required of them in disciplinary writing and the academic staff's expectations and these mismatches may disempower the students in their attempts to gain membership in their disciplinary community. In particular, the discussion in this study highlights that in order to support international students' participation in higher education, policies to respond to cultural diversity and inclusive practices in the curriculum need to make explicit about the possibilities and in particular, the relevant ways for students to reflect on their personal experience and knowledge about their home context in disciplinary practices in Australian higher education. This helps to make international students' learning more authentic and relevant to the real-world which they may enter when coming back to work in their home countries and ensuring good returns in their investment in their postgraduate courses in Australia.

This paper will first address the key issues around international students' challenges in adapting to the new academic context and student academic writing. Next, the methodology framework adopted in the study will be elaborated. The accounts of two international students in writing their first texts at the Australian University and the views of two academics on how to use evidences to support ideas in academic writing will be discussed. The paper concludes with some implications for the university to better support international students' engagement in the disciplinary practices.

Students' challenges in adapting to the new academic context and student academic writing

A great deal of research has been devoted to identifying challenges of international students in Australian Universities as being related to different ways of constructing knowledge and different learning styles which do not tend to match the Australian academic expectations (Ballard & Clanchy, 1995; McInnes, 2001). An emergent line of literature has however questioned the common stereotypes about the cultural learning styles and experiences of Asian students (see, for example, Biggs, 1996; Jones, 2005). Based on a case study which examines how international students adapt to an Australian learning environment, Jones (2005) illustrates that the conceptualizations of critical thinking between international students and local ones appear to be very similar. In particular, some research investigates how international students can be viewed as "agents" who may be capable of transforming their own situation in order to gain access into the practices of Western Universities (Kettle, 2005). Highlighted in these studies is the need to avoid oversimplifications and to explore the complexities in the students' processes of adapting to their disciplinary practices.

Research into the area of intercultural communications, writing across cultures and teaching international students (Cadman, 2000; Connor, 1996; Fox, 1994; Ryan, 2000) has established that international students' writing practices may be shaped by both their academic writing traditions into which they have been socialized during their previous schooling and the current academic context of their institutions. Although attention has been increasingly focused on problems facing international students in adapting to the new academic environment, there is currently 'a lack of literature looking in detail' (Todd, 1997:1) into postgraduate overseas students' experiences of studying and writing. These views highlight the need to go beyond the routine in studying student writing and identify new ways to gain an insight into their real experience and struggle in writing their own texts. This study aims to explore how international Vietnamese and Chinese students negotiate their writing by listening not only to their general perceptions of disciplinary conventions and expectations on academic writing but more importantly to their real accounts of producing their own texts. That is, students written texts, their potential choices and their intentions in making meaning through writing their own texts are placed at the center of this study.

In internationalizing higher education, it seems integral to create opportunities for international students to reflect on their experiences in order to "avoid losing international scholars' voices 'into the air' and to develop new critical appreciation of the variety of knowledges in the world" (Cadman, 2000, p488). Research has also been concerned with the need to have dialogues for international students and University communities to mediate institutional pedagogy and practices (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004, p345). Thus, mutual understandings between international students and academics appear to be fundamental in avoiding the discrepancy between the students' needs along with their adaptations and the University's responses. This study which was conducted with both students and lecturers may contribute to the knowledge of the cross cultural, disciplinary and institutional issues relating

to the writing values, concerns and practices of international Vietnamese and Chinese students at an Australian University.

Research framework

This paper relates to a larger study which examined how international students mediated between different interpretations of disciplinary writing and the academic staff's expectations on student writing. An interdisciplinary framework for exploring student and lecturer views on disciplinary writing expectations has been developed based on Lillis' (2001) *talks around texts* and positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). Lillis' (2001) *talks around texts* has been employed as the main tool for collecting and interpreting data from the international students. Each student was invited to an one-hour interview in which he/she was asked to talk about his/her experience in writing the first text at the Australian University. The *talks around texts* allowed the opportunities for the students to reflect on their challenges of writing these texts and in particular, how they attempted to negotiate their lecturers' expectations and the disciplinary requirements. This framework appears to be powerful in studying writing since it engages with the notion of student writing as social practice (Lillis, 2001) and makes visible the experiences and intentions of students as insiders in constructing their own texts.

While the focus of talk around texts is on students' writing in higher education and the institutional regulations in influencing students' writing from the students' perspectives only, this study attempts to investigate these issues from the perspectives of the lecturers as well. In-depth interviews were conducted with the lecturers to explore their expectations on student writing. Positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) is adopted to enable an exploration of the students' writing experiences and the institutional practices from the lecturers' perspectives, which are not addressed by Lillis' *talk around text*. Positioning theory explores how individuals position themselves and others in discourses. This theory refers to the discursive constructions of individual storylines and concepts through which a person's actions can be made intelligible and seen as social acts (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Positioning theory can thus be used as an analytical tool to complement Lillis' heuristic for exploring how students position themselves and their institutional practices as well as how the lecturers position their expectations.

International students' views on how to support ideas in disciplinary writing

In this section, the perceptions of Bình and Wang (these are not real names of the students) on what counts as relevant evidence in writing their first texts for their course at an Australian University will be discussed. Bình and Wang are from Vietnam and China respectively and they were enrolled in Masters of Education. The texts Bình and Wang talked about were the first assignments for the first subject - second language development, of their Master course. For this subject, the students were given the opportunity to choose and write an essay about 2,400 words in length on one of the factors such as input, age, motivation or formal instruction, which influences second language acquisition. Wang decided to work on the topic: 'How input influences second language acquisition' while Bình chose the topic about the role of formal instruction on second language acquisition.

Wang tended to perceive her prior teaching practice in China as her personal experience and did not include it in her writing. Rather, she appeared to solely rely on published studies and researchers' claims to make her idea more convincing. Wang compared the new way of supporting the arguments she learnt from the Australian University with her Chinese way:

I use some big words or quotations from big potatoes like Ellis, Krashen... I think they are more powerful, stronger to support my opinion... those I quote from the published papers to show that, 'see, these big potatoes they all think this way'. But in Chinese way of writing mostly I use like 'I have experience this and they are helpful and useful for my students'. And I think they are very good so I will use my practice but here, no, never... they [the lecturers] will not accept that. So I have that expectation or understanding here and I won't do that here in Australia. (Wang's talk around text).

It indicated from Wang's account that her personal teaching experience appeared to be valued in her disciplinary writing in home country. However, she seemed to believe that it was no longer relevant when she stepped into the Australian culture of academic writing. Through Wang's story of her publications about her teaching practice in China, which she mentioned several times during the talk around text, Wang tended to position herself as a scholar who had some voice in Chinese academia thanks to her ability to write about her personal experience. Engaging in disciplinary writing in Australia, Wang forced-self positioned (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as a student who chose to keep her teaching experience silent since she believed that it was not welcomed by her lecturer. At the same time, Wang also positioned her previous teaching experience, which seemed to be directly related to the topic about the role of input in second language acquisition, as being “weaker”, “less convincing” and “less relevant” than the expert's opinions.

Bình commented on how she supported her argument in her first assignment at the Australian University:

Usually I use the articles in the journal, I usually use the others' findings to support, I also use books. Sometimes I use my own experience but just a little bit, I think anecdote is not a very good evidence... Yes, I think it's valuable because I had that experience, so I know the importance of form focus instruction, that's why I support form focus instruction (Bình's talk around text).

Bình confirmed that the major sources of evidence she employed in her argumentative text were published research and anecdote seemed not to be valid in academic writing. It would appear from the above quote and Bình's text that although on the surface, she appeared to largely depend on the others' findings to build up her main argument, the original element which enabled her to come up with that argument was not from the literature. Rather, her argument about the significance of form focus instruction was rooted in her four year learning experience as an English major student and her three year teaching experience as a lecturer of English in a Vietnamese context. The paradox emerged because she did not make it visible in her writing that it was her personal experience that played a vital role in helping her to originally form the argument. Rather, this aspect of Bình's account whereby she acknowledged the significance of her personal experience could only be revealed through her talk around the text. This confirmed the value of listening to students talking about their texts (Lillis, 2001) and creating opportunities for students reflecting on their experiences (Cadman, 2000) in unpacking the silences underlying their particular ways of constructing knowledge. It would hence indicate from Bình's account and her text that she tended to position herself differently (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) on the surface of her writing and in her talk about her writing. She appeared to express her agency and attempted to situate herself in a more powerful position in her writing through her use of evidence from researchers' findings, which perhaps, in her perception, seemed to be expected by her lecturer.

The following instance from the conclusion of her essay is the only time Bình referred to her previous experience as a teacher of English:

From the practice of a teacher, I think form-focused instruction is more or less beneficial to learners' second language acquisition. If not, there are not as many language classes and centers as people can see nowadays. Long (1983) has concluded "instruction is good for you" (p.379) (Binh's text).

She further accounted for her little use of personal experience:

I just think that someone's experience is not a good source of evidence, so I didn't mention much here, only in the conclusion I think. I just say that "from the practice of a teacher, I think..." , something like that, very short (Binh's talk around text).

It can be seen that Binh's attitude toward the use of personal experience was complex. Binh referred to her previous practice as a teacher to show her personal viewpoint but she did not give some concrete examples about how form - focus instruction helped to facilitate language learning in her classes to illustrate her argument. In the talk around text (Lillis, 2001), she revealed that since she understood that her teaching experience was not good evidence, she just mentioned it briefly. Noticeably, after referring to her practice of teaching to support form-focus instruction, Binh turned to the comment of one of prominent authors in this field, "instruction is good for you", to add weight to her comment:

For example, in this assignment, like this "Long has concluded..." , I just think that I need someone to support me, so I just use some kind of famous author to support me, I think it's good (Binh's talk around text).

Although Long's (1993) statement quoted by Binh (see the above excerpt from Binh's writing), which appeared to be very short and general, did little to support Binh's argument in the context of this paragraph, its presence seemed necessary for Binh because it embodied the authority of the expert. Binh thus did not seem confident and comfortable to include her personal working experience in disciplinary writing and once she mentioned it, she immediately got back to the expert and relied on his statement to support hers. It would appear from Binh's instance of writing and her talk about writing this part that she tended to position herself (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as being inferior to the expert and her teaching experience as not as relevant to support her arguments as the expert's ideas. Hence, through the students' positioning of themselves and their previous teaching experience, they also seemed to position their lecturer (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999) as someone who did not expect students to include their personal experience in writing. This is contradictory to the lecturers' perceptions, which will be discussed in the next section.

Lecturers' views

This section explores how Anna and Kevin, who lectured in the education discipline in which Wang and Binh were enrolled, positioned their views on the use of personal experience in academic writing. According to Anna, she expected her students to incorporate their personal experience in language classrooms into writing the literature review:

I do like to have an introduction which sets why the students explore this topic, perhaps relating that to their experience in the classroom. Like from my experience in the classroom, I found that the students have difficulties with writing and I want to explore why writing is difficult for the students... I don't like people say that I had a student who did this and therefore that's true. Just relate it in terms of their teaching practice and perhaps use it as a reason to explore this question in the literature and in the research project, not as the basic for the whole essay (Anna's in-depth interview).

Anna thought that it was relevant for her students to refer to their classroom experience in the introduction of the essay as a reason for exploring the topic for writing rather than as a basic for the whole essay. She was strongly opposed to the ways students might make generalizations based on their own experience in a particular context. In light of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), through her self-positioning as a lecturer who was interested in seeing her students integrate their personal experience into the literature review in relevant ways, Anna tended to reproduce her disciplinary practices as valuing the dimensions of knowledge embedded in international students' previous experience. However, the discussion of the students' views revealed that the students tended to position their disciplinary practices either implicit about the possibilities in doing so or not accepting students' previous personal experience as relevant evidence.

Kevin recalled on the best piece of writing from one of his international students:

I can remember an academic essay written by an Indonesian international student who wrote a really nice essay on reading strategies and that's interesting too because he was able to bring in his own experience as a Muslim. Because as a Muslim, he learnt to read the Koran very early but the Koran is written in Arabic, which is not the language people speak in Indonesia... if you can relate to your own experience which is directly relevant to the topic, it works very well (Kevin's in-depth interview).

The above excerpt illustrated Kevin's view of the possibility for students to use personal experience in academic writing. Through taking the example of a successful essay where the international student writer was able to integrate his experience of learning the Koran into supporting his ideas about reading strategies, Kevin tended to position himself as a lecturer who was willing to accept students' use of personal experience in writing if it was relevant. During the interview, Kevin also stressed on the need for international students to see whether the views and theories addressed in the course materials could be applicable in their home context. Hence, he appeared to appreciate the students' attempts to incorporate their personal experience and background knowledge about their particular context and reflect on the theories they learn in their chosen course. Kevin and Anna seemed to be somewhat dissimilar in this regard. While Kevin expected students to draw on their prior knowledge and experience in their home country to be critical of current research, Anna thought that this dimension of knowledge should be mainly referred to as a reason to explore the topic.

Conclusion

The ways Wang and Bình positioned their previous teaching experience would indicate that in the students' perception, there was little space for personal experience to be heard and recognized in academic writing even though in some cases, how they constructed their arguments was greatly shaped by their prior working experience. It appears that the students' understandings of the disciplinary requirements were incongruent with the lecturers' expectations whereby student personal experience might be considered as valid evidence in academic writing. This gap could be the indication that the students might misinterpret the lecturer's expectation since it might not be explicitly communicated to the students or the students did not actively seek the opportunities to get to know their lecturer's expectation correctly. In any way, the mismatch would disadvantage the students in their attempts to gain access to their disciplinary community and achieve success in their course. While cultural aspects have often been described as the main sources of difficulties for international students in Australian higher education, the students' accounts in this study illustrated that how to uncover the disciplinary expectations and mediate between different interpretations of academic writing appears to be challenging in students' engagement in disciplinary practices.

However, this aspect has been missed in much of the literature on international students in higher education.

Although both lecturers thought that students' personal experience and knowledge embedded in their home context should be encouraged in academic writing, their perceptions of the relevant ways of integrating this source of knowledge into writing the literature review were different. This mismatch in the display of disciplinary knowledge could make it harder for the students to understand what was required of them. However, the problems facing international students appear to be viewed mainly as a deficit in international students themselves. Yet, little focus is given on examining the current ways the lecturers' expectations and disciplinary conventions are negotiated and communicated to international students and how international students struggle to make sense of what is expected of them in their disciplines. There thus seems to be a need to develop communication acts in which disciplinary codes are made explicit and diverse ways of knowing/grounding knowledge are acknowledged. Pace and Middendorf (2004) suggest a helpful model for decoding the disciplines, which involves steps such as articulating the crucial disciplinary cognitive operations, teaching those operations to their students, evaluating the student performances and sharing them with others. The finding of this study indicates that more effort and initiatives from the University communities are needed to demystify the relevant ways to incorporate students' personal working experiences into pedagogical practices in specific disciplines. This helps to facilitate students' understandings of the disciplinary expectations, thereby making the curriculum more accessible to students from diverse cultural backgrounds and improving the teaching and learning quality in higher education.

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