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International students: language, culture and the 'performance of identity'

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Abstract: This paper examines student enactments of and reflections on the final task of an English for specific academic purposes pre-sessional programme. Centred around the theme of 'Communication and the Performance of Identity', students were asked to consider and 'perform' their own identity through a media of their choice. Analysis of the tasks and follow up interviews reveal the multiple, intersecting identities of students studying in a culture and language that is not their own. These interweave with key underlying pre-occupations of language development, disciplinary knowledge and societal structures. By focusing on identity studies alongside the language and culture of academic contexts, international students began developing an understanding of, and reflexivity around, their position within UK HE contexts. I argue that this focus, whilst concurrently highlighting occluded language practices, eases transition into a new study environment, enabling students to better access the curriculum, but also to understand their resistance to it.

Paper: An increasing focus on internationalisation as both an economic and an educational policy within the UK Higher Education context has led to an exponential growth in the number of students who are studying with English as an additional language, particularly at taught post-graduate level. For many of these students, the first contact they have with their chosen University is via a summer pre-sessional programme, where they study English for academic purposes (EAP) in order to meet the language requirements for their academic programme.

These programmes are typically only 6 to 12 weeks long yet make the claim that they are able to adequately prepare students for the linguistic demands of taught post-graduate academic study across the range of disciplines. These programmes are frequently taught in isolation, in EAP units that have little contact with the disciplines they are working to support students to enter, thus perpetuating the 'assumption that language gives unmediated access to knowledge and must therefore be transparent' (Turner, 2011:29).

However, as the number of students who need to develop their academic English alongside their

content understanding increases, it is no longer possible to maintain this binary and false divide between language and subject knowledge. Nor is it possible to maintain the position that there is one 'correct' English for academic communication that is, and should be, attainable by all, across all disciplines.

This paper, then, focuses on one pedagogical intervention that was developed as part of an attempt to bridge this language/ academic content divide within a six-week pre-sessional programme and thus foreground language as an integral element of disciplinary knowledge creation and communication.

This intervention was the final task of the first iteration of a content-based pre-sessional programme: 'Language through Communication and Society'. Created in collaboration with subject academics, this programme worked to examine and develop academic language through selected foundational content of the students' chosen discipline. The final unit of study centred on the theme of 'Communication and the Performance of Identity'. Students were asked to critically engage with core subject texts (Hall, 1996; Goffman, 1992 [1959]; Thumin, 2012) and demonstrate their understandings through a final transitional task. This task asked students to consider their own current sense of identity and if/ how it was likely to change over the course of their Masters degree. They were then asked to 'perform' this through a media of their choice at an end of programme event.

Enactments of this final task, taking into account conflicts, negotiations, and the extent to which students felt able to employ agency within a group task, demonstrate the multiple ways in which students engaged with the subject literature on identity. By relating the literature to their own position as an international student making the transition into taught post-graduate study, students were able to reflexively consider how or if they were becoming more socialized into their discipline and the co-responding academic cultures.

Follow up interviews, taking place once the students were on their academic programme, highlight the multiple, intersecting identities of students studying in a culture and language that is not their own, suggesting a complexity that is often hidden underneath the sometimes essentialist assumptions made around students who come from 'other' national cultures. By engaging with concepts of identity, students began to understand and articulate their position, and to recognize the 'emotional experience of self-doubt, the unsettling feeling that arises when one questions one's ways of seeing, of being in the world' (Timmermans, 2010; 10). Students were able to reflect on their place within the academy and had developed the conceptual language to enable them to communicate this. In this way, conflicting and intersecting identities emerged around the often-contradictory themes of: performative, representational and core identities; international, national and individual identity; troublesome and transformative knowledge; power, agency and choice. These then interwove with some common key underlying pre-occupations of language development; disciplinary knowledge and societal structures.

Thus, the development of an academic identity is highlighted through the two frameworks of Academic Literacies and of Threshold Concepts, where language compounds conceptual difficulty and leads 'to a transformation of personal identity' (Meyer and Land, 2003; 4). However, these frameworks are layered with a more socially real student narrative of experience and change within which I consider whether the overall impact of this content-based language task led to greater

student agency and criticality, to socialization and transition, or indeed to something entirely different.

The students who were the focus of this study saw themselves as both powerful and powerless; they understood that they were moving from a position of high levels of cultural capital in their own countries into one where they had less, but that this was temporary; they both had, and lacked, social capital within the same sphere. Thus, in order for students to understand and gain access to the education system they are becoming part of, it is necessary for them, as well as those who work with them, to understand their identity as complex and oscillating, as moving through linguistic, cultural, structural and knowledge-based troublesome, transitional and transforming spaces, as both fixed and changing. In understanding this, I argue that there is a concurrent need to scrutinise our curriculum, our pedagogies and the current occlusion of linguistic practices within the academy.

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