

Teaching Practice

Off-Shore and out of Reach: Student Voice in Pre-Departure EAP pedagogies

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This paper explores the complexities of developing and delivering English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pre-departure programs. We reflect on experiences of co-teaching in a Lao PDR based program for students planning to undertake tertiary studies in New Zealand or Australia. Taking a sociocultural perspective, we examine the way that the Lao pre-departure program aims to attend to the particularities of both local and target contexts and to facilitate student adaptation to the chosen institution and discipline. The program takes a participatory approach to EAP and the broader acculturation processes, making space for individual student voice as part of the modeling and scaffolding of academic English. Based on this experience of transnational collaboration in development and delivery, we discuss critical issues of relevance to the planning and delivery of EAP pre-departure courses and productive international study experiences.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes, pre-departure training, academic culture

Context

Pre-departure English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs, delivered in students' country of origin, take a wide variety of forms, though most have similar aims in preparing their students for study in an English speaking tertiary context. Whatever the form of the program, it is often underpinned by the conceptualisation of the student as deficient in knowledge and skills (Leung & Street, 2012). This article takes up some of the key notions in EAP to examine the importance of context and student voice in academic readiness / pre-departure programs. The article arose from opportunities the authors have had to travel to Lao PDR to teach in the final weeks of a pre-departure course, over a period of several years. Students on the course had gained partial acceptance into a scholarship program funding study of diploma or degree qualifications in Australia or New Zealand. In order to confirm their places, scholarship

applicants have to meet the entry requirements of the target institution, including English language proficiency requirements. Like many scholarship programs, NZ ASEAN and Australia Awards have a focus on social and economic development in the home country, in this case, Lao PDR, supporting communities and growth in a number of target fields, as well as on establishing and maintaining links with the donor countries (Australia Awards, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017). This article is based on two cohorts, 2014 and 2015, that were similar in terms of age range and gender representation, with similar proportions of students from cities and provinces in Lao PDR.

The article begins by reviewing threads in the EAP and transnational education literature that reinforce the value of including student perspectives and experiences in teaching and learning practices. This is followed by a description of the program as a whole, and an outline of the pedagogy on which we based our contribution. We then report on ways that we used student questions as a resource to promote discussion, reflection and, more broadly, student agency.

Background

Here we explore the manner in which the Lao program identified students' academic and social needs: a process that we observe is different from traditional needs analysis. Traditional forms of needs analysis often set parameters for student needs through asking pre-identified questions or statements and asking students to agree or disagree (Benesch, 2001; Evans & Green, 2007). In this way the design of a needs analysis questionnaire may limit students to using criteria pre-determined by teachers or course designers to describe their needs. From the beginning of our work with the program in 2011, the course coordinators approached this issue by inviting students to come up with questions that they would like answered by the visiting academics and these wide-ranging questions then formed the basis of what we covered in our component. What struck us was the way that this provided an important channel for students to say what it was that they needed to know, and gave space to student voice in determining the content of the program (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). As we observed the agency that use of their questions gave students, we saw that their concerns could provide an organic base for the program. This drew us to use Kumaravadivelu's postmethod lens to investigate how the overall program and our component could respond to the Lao students' needs. Questions that we sought to answer were: how do students get prepared; what helps to build their cultural competence, confidence and knowledge; and how can our pedagogy demonstrate diversity as a resource?

EAP curricula typically include English language development in use of grammar and vocabulary, awareness-raising of features of academic discourse, production of academic written and spoken texts, preparation for entry tests, cultural awareness and tertiary study skills development. Courses may offer discipline-specific learning or take a generic focus. When following an EAP program, students may experience a generic representation of educational cultures, in terms of an eastern – western dichotomy (Doherty and Singh, 2005; Holliday, 2007; Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2012). It is not uncommon to see learning materials that discuss ways that people may approach academic work without addressing what is really meant by "academic culture". One exception is the work by Brick, Herke & Wong (2016) that helps to address this by explicating academic culture, although this conveys the

assumption that students will be acculturating to a Western model.

The program under investigation takes into account the Lao students' educational backgrounds. Lao students are not necessarily experienced in the expectations and practices of New Zealand and Australian academic cultures (Souriyavongsa, Rany, Jafre Zainol Abidin, & Leong, 2013), which require that students be independent learners and critical thinkers and manage a large load of academic reading. The Lao college recognises that the students will need the opportunity of time to add other ways of learning and study to their existing repertoire of skills. Their program draws on contemporary EAP, TESOL and education research and practice as evidenced in the teacher and student materials and references.

Literature review

Setting out Some Key Principles

Viewed from a socio-cultural perspective, intercultural academic preparation demands recognition of both students' and teachers' contexts which are "not necessarily limited to specific geopolitical boundaries" (Johnson, 2006, p. 245), but can encompass a range of contextual factors including socio-political and socio-economic diversity as well as prior educational experiences. As course designers and practitioners we were aware of not setting up a hierarchy or dichotomy in terms of how tertiary academic culture in English language settings is portrayed in relation to the Lao educational culture students have experienced. We think it important to value students' previous academic experiences and successes. Support for validating what students bring comes from observing that some students see themselves through a deficit lens and are daunted by fears about the expectations of lecturers in their target academic context. Along with the Lao teachers, we needed to build self-confidence and what Sawir et al. (2012) call a sense of security.

Doherty and Singh (2005) point out the potential for idealised and particularized images of Western education settings or student behaviour to be held up as norms in a way that "positions the international student as outsider or Other" (p. 53). This can impact students' feelings of legitimacy and have the effect of silencing or at least making them less confident of their right to speak (Norton, 2013). Idealising or presenting a "sanitised" view of Western academic tradition (Doherty & Singh, 2005) may also fail to acknowledge the constant and rapid change occurring in tertiary institutions worldwide.

One challenge of EAP or tertiary preparation courses is the fact that they are by nature focused around the notion of an "imagined community" (Norton 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011). The communities of practice of the target context are inevitably being evoked and in a sense imagined into being by EAP teachers and course materials, but are understandably hard for students to connect with in any real sense. Course designers and teachers target the building of confidence but their work may also undermine that same confidence as students may have the sense of never quite measuring up, and can become conscious of the need and, in many cases the pressure, to both adapt and to downplay their own linguistic and cultural individuality, rather than people in the target institution adapting to them and learning about other ways of doing and being (Holliday, 2007).

For EAP to be effective and allow students to adopt or adapt to a somewhat new academic identity, the program needs to address the wide range of student needs from a socio-cultural perspective and not narrowly focus on instrumental skills. The key constructs of a socio-cultural perspective - internalization, transformation and mediation - inform Kumaravadivelu's (2003) postmethod pedagogy which allows a contextualized, flexible approach to program design and delivery. Postmethod pedagogy refutes the idea that there is a methodology that will suit all contexts at all times. His broader pedagogical framework rests on three pedagogic parameters: particularity, practicality and possibility. The parameter of particularity takes into account the particular needs and particular context of the learners when making decisions about how and what to teach. That of practicality recognises and acknowledges the teacher's sense-making, that is, the teacher-generated theory of practice which informs and is informed by teaching. This sense-making sees the classroom walls as permeable; the learners are situated within the context that exists outside of the classroom. The third parameter of possibility takes account of the socio-political world and is the dimension that is concerned with identity and social transformation. Language teaching and learning is much more than teaching and learning language. Teachers must be aware of both the socio-political and cultural reality that shapes their and their students' lives and of their capacity to transform their own and their students' realities. This highly responsive framework allows program designers and deliverers to acknowledge the students' background knowledge and experiences, to validate the teachers' own learning and theory-making as well as the potential for students and teachers to change. Kumaravadivelu identifies ten macrostrategies that teachers are able to draw on as part of postmethod pedagogy; we address those relevant to our work in the Lao program later in the article.

Aspects of EAP Course Design and Pedagogy: the EAP Program

The pre-departure program under discussion here worked with a multi-dimensional curriculum with the following key features:

- **Critical thinking:** making thinking explicit and visible. Students and teachers are encouraged to use questions to generate critical thinking;
- **Reflection:** students are encouraged to reflect on their previous and current learning. Teachers are encouraged to adopt a reflective stance in relation to their own practice and to student output/outcomes;
- **Communicative skills:** the teachers provide opportunities for input and for students to give written and spoken output;
- **Awareness of teacher talk and the fact that this can help or hinder student output;**
- **Language discovery:** along with awareness of text purpose, audience expectations, genre and specific discourse features;
- **Resourcefulness:** expanding awareness of tools and resources students can draw on to help achieve their goals.

The basis for this appears to be language teaching within a sociocultural model that emphasises that language use is shaped by social contexts and purposes, as described by Johnson (2009). Although the leaders and teachers did not refer to a specific theory when describing the course to us, they said that they aim to develop in students a willingness to consider how choices of features such as genre, discourse patterns, level of formality, sentence

level grammar may be made differently depending on factors such as the relationships among the participants, the purpose of a text or utterance and the context in which it is used. Their teaching and learning processes encourage teachers to work collaboratively with students in a way which seemed to us to align with the postmethod pedagogy of Kumaravadivelu as described above (2003, 2006). The program as a whole is built on a generative interactive model of curriculum design, as part of which the students and teachers meet regularly to discuss the students' progress and concerns. These discussions then inform the program design. The design is underpinned with the notion of looking forward to the new tertiary environment and identifying what additional knowledge and skills the students need. This concern with providing coherent and cohesive academic preparation led to the inclusion of practising Australian and New Zealand academics to provide insights into how things may be done in the destination universities.

The existing EAP program therefore allowed space for sociocultural perspectives and methodologies to guide our teaching. Through foregrounding particularities of context and student needs, we aimed to establish an exploratory classroom environment in which we all shared. We wanted students to develop their willingness to reflect on academic and linguistic practices and to actively inquire and participate in shaping them (Johnson, 2006). However, we needed to be realistic about the fact that power issues were still present. As academics in the students' destination countries, we were asked by the college to provide an "expert" voice, so we were prepared to answer the students' questions based on our knowledge and experience. We took up the challenge of Kumaravadivelu's focus on contextualisation, so that discussion and understanding of the local context was central to how we could link student experience in Lao classrooms to the new tertiary context. In assisting students to internalize new information and to develop other ways of thinking about a situation (Johnson & Golombek, 2011), a question we often posed to students was: *How would that happen here?*

We were therefore aiming to bridge the space between the pedagogies of the current EAP pre-departure program and the varied, perhaps less predictable pedagogies that students might encounter overseas. We went about this with reference to the postmethod pedagogy of Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2006) and more broadly the socio-cultural and inquiry based approach (Johnson, 2009) discussed above. Kumaravadivelu's postmethod approach (2003) proposes ten macrostrategies. Out of the ten he identifies, those most relevant to how we worked are discussed here:

- *Maximise learning opportunities*: establish an environment where students can express views, seek clarification and initiate. In the class we incorporated authentic university texts and samples of New Zealand or Australian students' writing, and used these as the basis of group discussions and activities.
- *Contextualise linguistic input*: the authentic academic materials provided examples of "language required for the process of meaning-making" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 205) within the soon-to-be new tertiary context.
- *Foster language awareness*: this meant critically working with the students' linguistic resources, extending their linguistic repertoires, acknowledging the communicative academic strategies they already used and introducing new forms of language use they might encounter in Australian and New Zealand academic contexts.

- *Raise cultural consciousness*: by addressing the notion of academic culture (Brick, Herke & Wong, 2016) we were able to elicit the students' individual experiences and cultural knowledge "to help them connect norms of their own cultural practices with those of the target language community" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 275).

Findings and Discussion: Towards a New Tertiary Context

These macrostrategies provided a framework for conversations with students about the links or dissonances between the student's prior study experiences and those they might have in the new higher education setting. As previously mentioned, the students wrote questions for the visiting lecturers and Lao college staff sent these to us prior to our intensive component. In designing our component of the program we were keen to foreground the students' questions to make their concerns our starting point; in particular, their desire to know how things are done differently in their destination universities.

Initially the number of different questions seemed an overwhelming list of demands for information that was going to vary for each specific study context. For example: *If I cannot finish my assignments on time, what should I do? Is it okay to discuss with professors very often in order to find a solution to a specific problem?* Our initial concern was that students would expect us to answer all questions; they might depend on us to provide responses and to tell them about student life in the destination countries. However, rather than giving direct answers, we decided to design class experiences for students to focus on and consider features of the target academic culture. So, viewed more positively, the large number of questions was a highly effective way to tune in to the range of interests of the students and to plan sessions that would meet their needs, for example: *What type of academic assistance is available to international students?* – a question that students could answer for their specific tertiary institution, once they had an idea of what to look for on websites. We felt as if we could "hear" the voices of the students and also get a sense of what they had learned so far on the pre-departure course. They were clearly imagining the tertiary community that they were going to join, and effectively anticipating situations and issues that might arise, which in a sense is a step towards being proactive and prepared to deal with social and study situations. Their questions therefore enabled us to both maximize learning opportunities and contextualize linguistic input, while encouraging students themselves to seek out and share an appropriately diverse range of responses.

The pre-course elicitation of students' needs allowed them to canvass areas that would not necessarily be addressed in a pre-set questionnaire (Helmer, 2013). The student questions functioned as a mediational tool (Johnson & Golombek, 2011) both for teacher learning and for student agency. The questions stimulated teacher and student thinking and constituted a material tool to make up independent and interactional learning activities. Several of the students' questions were not about language, but about how problems could be solved, for example: *In the case that I am weak in learning some subjects where can I find tutors? Do I have to find them by myself? How much will they cost in general?* Many questions were not about academic matters, but rather about the pragmatics of everyday life, for example: *Should I avoid presenting that I am a scholarship student as local students may have negative feelings against us?* The Lao college staff organised afternoon sessions in which previous scholarship holders

met the pre-departure students and responded to issues such as these. They also surveyed students while they were in-country, asking them to advise their peers on how to prepare for the overseas study experience. In this way students learned from their peers about sociocultural expectations and interactional competence in the new setting (Johnson, 2006). The information from peers and the class discussion of possible responses between us and the students seemed to lead to greater awareness that cultural appropriacy is highly nuanced. We were aiming to raise cultural consciousness without doing so in a simplistic, one-size-fits-all way. As Johnson (2009) notes, "once an individual's concepts have become explicit, they are open to dialogic mediation that can promote reorganisation and refinement" (p. 66).

One benefit of inviting questions is that it provides a basis to acknowledge and work with the students' prior knowledge, skills and experience, working pragmatically by focusing on their perceptions of areas of need, but also critically in the sense of opening up areas of ambiguity and uncertainty for discussion (Benesch, 2001; Helmer, 2013; Lin, 2012). For example, the following student question clearly identifies the student's self-recognition and desire to find ways to work differently:

I would like to ask about time management skill and willpower to force yourself to do what you need to do. It is easier said than done that you just have to plan and follow your plans. Thus, I would like to receive concrete tips and strategies, something new that can be really helpful, workable and applicable in practice. I have a problem with starting something early. I tend to wait till it's getting closer to the deadlines.

The generation of questions provided an opportunity for students to identify their existing academic practices, language, literacy and linguistics repertoires and see what they might need to add. We applied this critical, additive approach (Helmer, 2013) to our work in Lao PDR, seeing students as already skilled, knowledgeable and capable of extending their academic literacy repertoires. Drawing on recollections of students' proactive management of earlier study experiences was a way to show that diversity of language, background and experience can be a strength and a resource rather than a limitation. This activity fostered language awareness, and at the same time encouraged a positive view of self and the potential for personal agency.

Some student questions about adaptation and social interaction indicate concerns about identity or agency that go beyond identity as a student. It appeared that student identity and agency (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Norton, 2013) were less of a concern for students, perhaps because being proactive learners is a role they are already familiar with. The questions showed a concern with appropriate ways of interacting in English to fit in as students and as members of a new society. This view acknowledges that a good command of English, while helpful, may not be the key factor that opens doors in the new academic and social community. As Sawir et al. (2012) note, "improving language proficiency is not the magic key that suddenly makes every doorway spring open to the international student" (p. 449). Also, if the role and expectations of students are viewed differently in the target disciplinary academic setting (Johnson, 2006), some discourse functions and pre-rehearsed routines may no longer

seem appropriate. On the spot responses to contextual particularities and awareness of the social pragmatics of communication in academic settings may be more helpful.

Overwhelmingly the students found the sessions and integration of information about the academic cultures in Australia and New Zealand to be an important component in the program. Both in their questions and in evaluation responses students clearly expressed the idea that they were going to a new academic culture and it was important to prepare themselves and to additively adapt. Some examples of student evaluation comments emphasise this point:

because the sessions include not only English, but the culture of NZ; which is the basic information for students to adjust themselves to both studying style and culture and, from another student: the knowledge that I can approach my lecturers or tutors about assignments, ask questions about the subject content and other things that affect my study.

The comments suggest that they feel confident to mediate the sometimes unpredictable aspects of culture (Zuengler & Miller, 2006), to participate and to function independently in the new setting.

Conclusion

Taking a socio-cultural perspective (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006; Johnson, 2006, 2009; Zuengler and Miller, 2006 add refs), the teaching practice examined in this article is based on an organic model of program design. The teaching methods are informed by interactions between the students and the teachers, addressing student language needs, knowledge of academic cultures and expectations in relation to students' own perceived readiness for study. In our view it is a responsive program and in Kumaravadivelu's (2003, 2008) terms, it responds to the particularities of students and teachers, the teachers' practicalities, their sense-making, theory building and the seeking of possibilities for transformation. The program's responsiveness to the students' needs and giving space to student voice provides a useful model of pre-departure EAP. The program, while contextualised within the Lao setting, also provides a framework that would be suitable for pre-departure EAP programs delivered elsewhere. It is based on principles which incorporate contemporary approaches to EAP and, perhaps more importantly the central focus on the particularities of the students' needs. The gathering of the students' questions enhances the program's authentic responses to students learning about a new academic culture.

The process of collecting students' questions and concerns seems of great benefit, as students' initial questions, responses and attitudes to new academic practices will undoubtedly be significant to their success. We acknowledge that our suggestion of using student questions as a basis for teaching decisions is only one way of incorporating student voice into course design and teaching practice and teachers in other contexts may come up with different, more locally relevant alternatives. For EAP to be effective and develop students' confidence to expand their academic identities in ways appropriate to the target academic culture, programs need to

address the wide range of student needs and concerns from a sociocultural perspective with a central focus on student voice.

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