

University of Hawai'i, Mānoa
Department of Second Language Studies
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**Socialization into L2 Academic Culture
Through Leading Discussion Circles**

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INTRODUCTION

During the panel discussion with professors at the Fall Retreat of the Second Language Studies Department of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), a question concerning classroom participation came up. A student wanted to know what professors could do to help non-native English speaking students (NNESs) to have more say in class discussions because it seems that native-English speakers (NESs) are the ones who usually talk the most. The professors on the panel gave good pieces of advice to teachers about ways to engage all students in one's classes and to provide everyone a chance to express their opinions.

While professors and teachers do have a role to play in facilitating the access of (less vocal) NNES students to class discussion, it also seems to be the responsibility of the students to make an effort to take the initiative and to become a more active participant in their classes. Active participation on the part of the student is important, especially in the U.S., since it appears to be a central characteristic of the North-American educational culture (Ballard 1996; Holliday, 1997).

Students who go overseas to study at a university in the United States do not only move to a foreign country but also to a foreign educational culture which, depending on the students' home country, can be very different from the academic and classroom culture they grew up in. The problem tends to be that typically, international students are not prepared for the educational as well as sociocultural changes. The students have usually taken formal language courses in their home country where they have (successfully) developed their writing, reading, speaking, and listening skills. Therefore, they may assume that these skills are sufficient for attaining academic success. But as Ballard (1996) points out, international students often experience difficulties despite their language abilities. The reason for this is that "[m]asked by language problems lie the much deeper problems of adjusting to a new

intellectual culture, a new way of thinking and of processing knowledge to meet the expectations inherent in the Anglo educational system” (Ballard, 1996, p. 150).

One characteristic of the North-American intellectual culture is active student participation (Holliday, 1997). Holliday argues that this notion of participation is specific to a particular professional-academic culture which he refers to as BANA (British, Australasian, and North-American). Students coming from countries outside the BANA-circle to study at the universities in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, and the USA may not be accustomed the BANA educational culture nor understand its rules. As a consequence, they may experience difficulties in achieving success in their studies despite having good English language skills. Therefore, it appears that in order to be successful in their studies, the non-BANA or NNES students need to learn the values that underlie and the rules that govern the classroom culture of the target country. In the process of learning these characteristics, the students will probably experience difficulties due to the clash of values, appropriating identities, social relations, and ideologies (Willet 1995).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

International students’ needs

There have been various studies that have looked at the needs of ESL students in the arena of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Ferris & Tagg (1996a, 1996b) provide a good overview of research that has concentrated on EAP surveys on academic oral and aural requirements. Ferris & Tagg (1996a, p. 51), citing Johns (1991, p. 72), state that “there has been a tendency for teachers and curriculum designers, especially ‘general’ English classes, to ‘intuit’ the needs and future language uses of students, rather than attempt to discover them”. Therefore, Ferris & Tagg call for more studies that would describe and examine real-

world academic tasks students in college and university classes have to perform in order to better equip EAP students.

Ferris & Tagg (1996a, 1996b) themselves did a survey research to determine the academic oral communication skills subject-matter instructors expect their students to have or develop. Ferris & Tagg sent questionnaires to instructors at four different institutions of higher education in California. Ferris & Tagg (1996a) describe the institutions as follows: a large community college with a sizeable ESL population, a large public university that focuses primarily on undergraduate teaching, a large public university that focuses on research and graduate programs, and a large private school that emphasizes research and graduate programs. The respondents taught primarily graduate and upper-division courses.

On the basis of the responses, Ferris & Tagg (1996a) drew the following conclusions with regard to listening and speaking tasks: the degree of interaction in respondents' classes varied across academic disciplines; and tasks such as in-class debates, student-led discussions, and out-of-class assignments which require interaction with native speakers seem to be quite uncommon in any discipline. Another observation was that the smaller the classes, the more interactive tasks teachers tend employ. Surprisingly, traditional formal speaking assignments (e.g., giving a prepared report/speech in front of the class) are not as common in subject-matter courses as people might think. Instead, the growing trend is to let students work in pairs or groups. It is worthwhile to bear in mind that these are general conclusions on the basis of mainly upper-division and graduate courses, and that the academic oral communication needs of EAP students depend on the particular program, class and instructor.

Just as important as describing and examining real-world academic tasks students encounter is to understand what perceptions students have of their academic aural and oral skills. Ferris (1998) argues that the reason for this is that instructors are not always aware of

the struggles students have, or of the tasks with which, or of the reasons why they have those difficulties. Ferris conducted a study to find out ESL students' perceptions of the aural/oral skills requirements in their subject-matter courses, and of their difficulties in meeting the expectations. The vast majority of the respondents were undergraduate immigrant students. The participants reported that they had most difficulty with oral presentations, whole-class discussions, and note taking. The tasks that seemed to be the least problematic were small-group discussions and class participation. Ferris compared her findings with those of Ferris & Tagg (1996a) to see the similarities and differences between the responses of students and instructors (both groups of respondents were from the same institutions). She found that the responses of the two groups overlapped very little.

Ferris (1998) discusses that the comparison of the two studies suggests that ESL students may know their academic weaknesses and difficulties relatively well, but they may not have an accurate sense of the importance of these problems. This finding seems to point to the constant need to examine the target academic contexts of ESL students so that EAP instructors could better prepare the students to adapt to the target learning culture.

Instead of taking this kind of 'adaptation' as the best solution, some researchers have adopted a critical stance. For example, Benesh (1996) claims that although English for academic purposes is assumed to be guided by learner needs, the reality often is that the term actually refers to institutional demands that are mistaken for the desires of learners. She calls for critical needs analysis that would, on the one hand, acknowledge existing institutional forms and power relations, and on the other hand, attempt to find possibilities to change the 'system'. In other words, rather than generating suggestions for international students on how to best adapt to the academic culture of the target country, researchers should look for ways to challenge the traditional positioning of ESL students and help instructors to design

activities that oppose the status quo to enable students to learn the skills and knowledge they really need.

The present study looks at the task of leading a discussion circle in an Advanced Listening and Teaching course at the English Language Institute (ELI) at UHM. Although the research paper mainly describes and interprets the experiences of a group of international students, it also discusses some issues that might suggest a more critical analysis of learners' needs.

General Framework

The general framework of the research paper is language socialization. During the past two decades, there have been several studies which have adopted this theoretical orientation (Duff, 1995; Heath, 1983; Ochs, 1988, Schieffelin & Ochs, 1995; Willet, 1995; cited in Morita, 2000; Duff, 2000; Poole, 1992, cited in Kobayashi, 2003). Morita (2000) provides a straightforward definition of the term 'language socialization': "[it is] the process by which children and other newcomers to a social group become socialized into the group's culture through exposure to and engagement in language-mediated social activities" (p. 281). Kobayashi (2003) provides a similar definition, explaining that newcomers acquire linguistic and sociocultural knowledge through observation and participation in interactions in their new community "with the assistance of more experienced members" (p. 338).

One type of experienced members is the Native-English-Speaking students who are the course mates of international students. For example, Morita (2000) studied discourse socialization of international graduate TESL students and made comparisons with NES students. Leki (2001) looked at the academic socialization of two international undergraduate students through group work tasks with NES students. Although NESs are invaluable for novices in their language socialization process, newcomer-peers can be great assets as well.

For example, Kobayashi's (2003) study clearly indicates that support from and collaboration with other novices can lead to successful participation in their target community. The present study also reveals the importance of ESL students' supportive cooperation for successful academic socialization.

As can be seen from the definitions provided above, language socialization does not happen by just being exposed to the TL. Instead, it requires participation in language-mediated events. Morita (2000) states that "participation in socioculturally organized, language-mediated activities is the key to the acquisition of both linguistic and sociocultural knowledge" (p. 281). Watson-Gegeo (2004), referring to the work Lave & Wenger (1991), explains that newcomers need to have participation in specific ways: "in expert performances of all knowledge skills, including language" (p. 341). Learners begin their language socialization process as peripheral participants, but with the help of active participation involving other actors, they become full participants.

The present study looks at the participation of a twenty-one international students in discussion groups in their advanced-level ELI class. It analyzes the experiences of the leaders of those discussions, and the kind of support they received from their group members, all of whom are non-native speakers of English. Although the students participated in the task as rightful members, they can still be seen as 'wearing the shoes' of peripheral participants for the reason that the activity took place in an ELI class not in a regular course ('the real' academic context). The ELI class is a Credit-No Credit course required for graduation but it may not be applied towards the requirement of an academic degree.

The goal of the present study is to better understand the academic socialization of international students at UHM through their participation in discussion groups, especially as a discussion group leader. The research questions that the study addresses are:

- What seem to be the biggest difficulties the students encounter in leading a discussion group? How do they cope? What difficulties result from differences between academic cultures in the students' home country and in the U.S.?
- How do they perceive discussion groups and the task of leading them?
- What are they learning in relation to this activity?

METHOD

To explore the research questions, I employed qualitative-interpretive approach. Data were collected through four methods: a) collection of students' reflective summaries on being a leader of a discussion group, b) tape-recorded interviews with three students and casual conversations with the teacher, c) class observation, and d) collections of relevant documents. The interpretations are based primarily on the reflective summaries of twelve discussion group leaders, and on interviews with three of them.

In compliance with regulations at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, approval from the English Language Institute and clearance by the Institutional Review Board was obtained for this research. All participants were volunteers and signed informed consent.

Setting, participants, and data collection

The study was conducted in one of the Advanced Listening and Speaking courses at the ELI at UHM. Twenty-one students from various Asian countries were enrolled in that particular course. More than half of them consented to participate in the study: altogether twelve students, eight females and four males. They were mainly of Asian origin: four from Japan, three from China, three from Korea, one from India, and one from Micronesia. All of them were adults and advanced ESL learners who were taking regular courses at the UH as full-time undergraduate or graduate students.

The instructor of the course was a M.A. student at the Department of Second Language Studies (SLS) at UHM. At the time of the study, we were both enrolled in the same SLS class for which this paper is written. She kindly opened her class to me to solicit for volunteers and was of invaluable help throughout the study.

The Advanced Listening and Speaking course the participants were taking was one of the most advanced classes. When they passed the course, they did not have to take any supplemental ESL courses. The course had several aims. The two goals relevant in light of the present study are to help students to improve their skills 1) as a discussion leader in a student-directed way, 2) as an active participant in discussions (Instructor's course syllabus).

To attain these goals, each student had to prepare a topic for and lead a small group discussion twice the semester. The ELI class met three times a week: on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The so-called Discussion Circles (DCs) took place on Mondays. The students first signed up the dates they wanted to be a leader. By Wednesday prior to their DC, the leaders chose a topic. The leaders had a complete freedom to choose a topic as long as it was academic and appropriate to discuss in class. On Friday, the teacher would introduce the topic and ask the rest of the class which group they wanted be in for the following Monday. The DCs usually consisted of four persons: the leader and three members. There were typically five DCs taking place at the same time. When more than three people wanted to be in a group, some of them had to pick another topic and leader.

The instructor graded the discussion leaders on the basis of five criteria: 1) preparation, 2) leading, 3) facilitation, 4) summary 5) self-reflection. To meet the last two criteria, the students had to write a brief summary of the discussion and reflect upon their experience as a leader.

I chose to study the task of discussion circles for the reason that discussions seem to be very common in North American academic culture (Tse, 2000). The other reason was that

each student had to lead a discussion group twice, which led me to assume that students' reflective writings would reveal whether and how they managed to apply what they learned from their first experience.

I collected twenty reflective summaries (twelve writings from the first round of DCs, eight from the second). The three tape-recorded interviews were conducted with three graduate volunteers, all of them were males. I initially planned to have interviews with any of the students who would be willing to, but the instructor kindly suggested me to focus on graduate students for the reason that they are more likely to encounter DC type of tasks in their regular classes than undergraduates. The interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes. They concentrated on expanding some of the issues raised in the writings of those particular students, and on obtaining culture-specific interpretations of students' experiences. The informal interviews with the teacher were relatively short and were mainly about getting answers to my questions about the task and the ELI class in general. I also observed three classes devoted to discussion groups to get a general feel of the class. The classroom atmosphere seemed very friendly and lively. The collection of relevant documents included the course outline, handouts, and OHPs concerning the discussion activity. These materials helped me to see what the students were required and advised to do. This enabled me to get a better understanding of their reflective writings, especially in terms of frequently mentioned issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections concentrate on the main findings in the light of research questions presented above.

Perceptions of leading a discussion group

Although the teacher had not explicitly asked students to write about their perceptions, one can get a general feel of their attitudes toward the task by reading their summaries. In general, it seems that the students had positive perceptions of the discussion groups as well as of leading them. It appears that the common factor in making the discussions pleasant and well-perceived was good cooperation between the leaders and their DC members. For example, SN wrote that “[e]verybody was welprepared for the topic, so it was nice experience to share views and think of various terms and issues of the topic. Everybody enjoys discussion and really this topic stimulated us to think about environmental problems”. YS wrote that “[e]ach member of the group contributes interesting opinions to the group and helped discussion more enjoyable and beneficial for each of us. TT, SW and DJ helped me to be successful as a leader”. YM wrote that “I tried to provide them several facts about my topic briefly at the beginning of our discussion. Fortunately they began to response to my topic so I could be relaxed”. This shows that involving the members was not necessarily an easy task, but it was worth the effort and resulted in pleasant experiences.

It seems that by being a leader of a DC, the students understood the value of group members, and that the key to a successful discussion is members’ willingness to cooperate with the leader by making an effort to share their views and opinions.

It appears that another reason for positive perceptions was that the task was quite stress-free and the class-environment friendly. I observed the DCs three times and each of those times the DCs seemed lively and friendly. SN summarized this issue nicely:

In ELI class especially I observed one thing -- everybody was at same level, so everybody used to make mistakes, everybody used to make fun of others - something that this friendly activity was there - so everybody started involving in this discussion kind of activity. In regular class perhaps we may shy, I may get wrong - so something

like that thing didn't happen in ELI class - so that was a kind of open discussion kind of thing or this kind of group of friends we enjoyed in ELI class (interview, November 23, 2004).

Since the students were at the same language proficiency level, SN seemed to feel that even if at times he or his fellow ELI students were not understandable, no-one looked down on them, and that it did not harm their relationships with other group members. Based on this reflection, one can get the sense that in regular classes, the international students might want to participate more actively, but still remain fairly silent for the fear of making language mistakes and being misunderstood, and as a possible consequence, be remembered by the professor and fellow course mates as the confusing/confused foreigner.

It is interesting that the positive experiences did not result in complacency on the part of the leaders, but appeared to encourage them to learn to become a better leader. For example, YZ wrote:

We didn't feel stressful or any nervous; and we agree with each other after questions and answers. It's really a nice discussion, after this experience I will try to find more information on how to be a good discussion group leader.

This excerpt seems to reinforce the observation that the students enjoyed the discussion groups and leading them for the reason that there was a friendly atmosphere and DC members felt confident about themselves to share their views.

The biggest difficulties the students encountered

The main difficulties the leaders had concerned handling the discussions. It posed problems in three aspects - time-management, discussion topic, and members' participation.

Time-management, although seemingly an easy task, proved to be a challenge for several students. The instructor also remarked that one of the difficulties her students

encountered was covering all the questions the leaders had put forward within the time-limit.

DJ commented on the issue of time-management in the following words:

Time controlling was not as easy as how I thought. It seemed like our group wanted to share more, but some struggled expressing their opinions into words. ... If we use time effectively then we will have more efficient discussion circle.

In his summary, TI mentioned two organizational matters that he did not pay initially attention to, and as a result, the discussion suffered. He explains:

First of all, I made a mistake not to decide who a time-keeper was. I did not make it clear who would be a recorder, either. ... As a result, our discussion had to stop halfway, right when our discussion became exciting. That was a technical mistakes (sic!) of mine as a leader. I would like to improve this point next time.

TI's second reflective summary does not touch upon the issue of time. In the introductory paragraph he states that "I think that my job was quite successful compared with the first one for the following reasons". The reasons he writes about are the slightly controversial nature of the chosen topic ('What is beauty?') which generated an interesting discussion, and the fact that they managed to reach a common agreement by the end of the discussion. Since he does not mention the issue of time, it may be assumed that he had learned from his first experience and managed well the second time.

The second issue several students wrote about concerned the discussion topic. The problem some students encountered was that the topic was too broad. It seems that those students had hoped that without narrowing down their topic to specific issues, the members would have more freedom to pick an aspect that they would like to discuss, and that as a result, the members would feel more interested in defending their position and contributing

actively to the discussion. As it turned out, this strategy worked better in theory than in practice. As ARK notes about their discussion on ‘Future’:

All I wanted to share was my imaginations. I thought it would be very fun. Indeed, it was very idealistic but the topic itself was too big to bring and sort out group member’s opinions. When the topic itself is too big, all the members seemed at first lost what to talk first and hesitated to talk. After few minutes of talking, I realized that the discussion topic was too big. ... After a while, all got chatter and chatter and as the talking went on I found out once more that the topic is too big so we couldn’t organize member’s opinions.

Another student, TT, experimented having a discussion without any handout. Handouts were not a requirement, but students usually made them, since the teacher gave them points for that kind of preparation. TT explains that “In order to obtain more broad ideas from my group members, I intentionally did not make any handouts this time”. The resulting discussion did not seem to be successful, since TT wrote that “the test ‘discussion without handout’ was failure in my discussion because no specific information provided ahead leads the topic unclear”.

The instructor commented that sometimes the students got carried away and began chatting or did not manage to form a fruitful discussion because they had too much fun. “I wanted them to be academic and meaningful discussion.” (personal communication, December 12, 2004). It seems that, in general, the discussions were meaningful. The problem sometimes was that the topics generated various opinions from which it was hard to choose the one to consider at a deeper level.

Another difficulty the discussion leaders typically experienced was engaging discussion group members. A couple of students said that their course mates did not seem interested in the topic they had prepared for discussion. YM reflects,

My topic was “homeless” and my group seemed not interested in it because they did not choose it. However it was challenge for me because I had to think how I could involve them into discussion. I felt that I should prepare several interesting facts about homeless to catch their attention.

As explained above, sometimes the students could not join their first-preference DC because three students had already signed up for it. It seems that YM was having difficulty with students who had had to choose her DC as a second choice. YM’s summary reveals that she struggled with the involvement of the members throughout the discussion, but she succeeded in it: “Fortunately they began to response to my topic so I could be relaxed”. In her second DC, she faced a similar challenge. She starts her second summary with the following words: “Compared with last time, I can’t feel that I could involve group members to discussion”. She seems to believe that the reason lies in her since she did not manage to do enough research on her topic. She concludes: “However, as I myself could not focus on a specific aspect of this topic, it must have made confuse them”.

SW was also struggling with engaging every member of her DC. She wrote:

After giving introduction of this topic, I wish every group members can give feedback, but the reaction of group members are different, some people can react actively, however, maybe one person look tired or idle, so how do you attract his attention depend on your communication skills.

It seems that students were facing the ‘everyday’ problem – lack of motivation to participate. In general, students’ writings suggest that they succeeded in engaging all the members. In contrast, there were some, who had the problem of too active participants. YS writes:

Comparing the first time of DC as a leader, it was much tougher for me to get 5 people talk equally in the discussion. I had to cut ARK's talk at the beginning of the discussion because I knew it was my job to navigate the group. But I really felt bad about what I did to her because she was just trying to help me and get discussion active. Maybe I could have done a better job if I could give more detailed, clear information about what the security does at the airport

It appears that YS felt that he could have done a better job by the help of better preparation. It seems that the discussion leaders generally ascribed the perceived difficulties or failures to their poor preparation or leading, not to the members. This seems to suggest that they were quite responsible leaders who looked for ways to improve themselves.

What are the students learning?

There were some recurrent issues students wrote about in their writings. One reason for this is that the teacher had given them instructions on what to points to consider in their reflective summaries, and in general, the students followed the guidelines. Based on these recurrent themes, one can get a glimpse into their academic socialization process.

1. Topic

It seems that through their task of leading a DC, they began to understand the importance of narrowing down a topic. For example, YM struggled with getting her group members involved because she thought that an interesting topic will generate a lively discussion in itself, but as it turned out, it did not. She wrote:

My topic was about "cosmetic (plastic) surgery" and I felt that this topic was interesting enough to discuss, however, it was not. For me, cosmetic surgery was the main thing so

still I can't understand why they asked what main topic was. I guess if I did more research, I could have enough knowledge to find out specific aspect of this topic.

Several students remarked the importance of asking specific questions to enhance exchange of ideas. For example, YS wrote:

To make the discussion more active, I asked clear and specific questions to each member based on the material that I gave them. Also, I tried to provide questions that are interesting and fun to discuss for them. By doing that, I was able to facilitate the discussion group well, and was confident to be the leader of the group.

It seems that through participation in this activity, students began to realize the effectiveness of asking questions. Hopefully they will transfer this observation to their regular classes and learn from it that one ways of becoming a more active participant in class discussions is to think of questions to ask from their professors or fellow students.

2. Right to equal participation

As can be seen from the discussion above, the DC leaders sometimes struggled with getting all the members involved. In other words, they understood that it takes effort to generate a discussion. At the same time, the reflective summaries revealed that the leaders were not content with simply having a talkative group whose members were chatting away. Furthermore, they seemed to be fairly concerned about enabling each member to contribute equally. For example, DF concluded that her first discussion went well because "everyone was given chances to speak and point out their opinions". She was also satisfied with her second DC since "everyone shared their opinions".

In his interview, TI commented that in one of his discussion groups, he had a problem with a student who just kept talking. I asked him how he reacted, and he explained that he

tried to stop that person talking by asking other members for their opinions. He concluded that,

But, umm, I think, in my opinion, before participating, people should know the rule, for example, I don't know, the one talking should be finished within two minutes or something like that. Or the members should talk equally – that's discussion.
(interview, November 23, 2004)

As can be seen from above, TI seemed very conscious about the fact that different students had a different concept of discussions. According to the instructor, prior to DCs began taking place, they talked about the differences between, for example, a debate and a discussion. But as it turns out, knowing the 'rules' of discussion does not make it always work in the ideal sense. Therefore, it seems that the discussion leaders had to learn to accommodate to the demands of the particular situation.

3. Preparation

Some students described what they did in preparation for the discussion and what strategies they planned to use to engage their course mates. For example, YS writes that before his discussion on vegetarianism, he researched the positive and negative aspects of the topic in order to come up with fairly specific questions that would be interesting and fun to discuss. YM explained that she searched for interesting facts about the chosen topic in order to involve her group members in the discussion. It seems that the students were learning that leading is much more than doing most of the talk during the discussion and that it is about engaging every member in a subtle way. As ARK concludes,

But having all members' participations are one of leader's responsibilities that if one doesn't talk much, ask questions to have opinions. Being a leader is really hard at the point that I had to be well prepared and able to answer any questions they might have.

4. Reaching a conclusion

At one point I was surprised that so many students seemed to be concerned with reaching a conclusion. Then I looked at the handout on the DCs provided by the instructor and understood that they were following her instructions. The handout read “Write a brief summary (max. 1 page) on debate conclusion...” (Instructor’s handout).

Some discussion leaders were able to state very explicitly what the conclusion of their exchange of ideas was, while others admitted that their group did not reach an agreement. It seems that those who did not reach a conclusion felt that they had somehow failed as discussion leaders. For example, DF writes that “We had a great discussion only that we weren’t able to point out our final decision on this topic”. Analyzing his “misses as a discussion leader”, TI states that “we did not have a time-keeper, we could not measure time, and finally we could not reached to a certain conclusion”. Another student summarizes her DC by saying “In my group, three people supports pro and one person agrees with con. We did not get one conclusion...”.

These examples seem to indicate that students thought that one of the expectations of the instructor was that every discussion should end with an agreed-upon conclusion. The written and oral feedback provided by the teacher actually showed that reaching a definite conclusion was not a requirement. In her view, it was absolutely acceptable that the participants did not reach a definite agreement:

I reminded them that academic discussion, unlike business meeting etc., is not a place to reach a concrete conclusion or select the best solution or anything. It should be a place to freely exchange opinions and view points without being personally criticized. (personal communication, December 12, 2004)

In one of our casual conversations, the instructor explained that what she meant by the word ‘conclusion’ in the handout was the overall result of the discussion. She suggested that her

students might have been overly worried with reaching a conclusion for the reason that they came from cultures that place emphasis on reaching an agreement by the end of discussions.

Based on their second reflective summaries, it seems that some students picked up on the instructor's expectations. For example, DF's second summary leaves the impression that although she did not agree with the opinion of some of her group members, she did not push them towards reaching a final decision. This seems to suggest that the student had begun to understand that each issue has its positive and negative sides and that the goal of discussions is to exchange ideas rather than convince the other party to agree with one's opinion.

5. Cultural differences

The participants were mainly from Asian countries. It seems that through their participation in the DC activity, they were learning to understand the (academic) cultural differences. The following insights were obtained from casual conversations with the instructor and the recorded interviews with the three graduate students.

The instructor made some general remarks about the cultural differences she had noticed. She said that the opinions of some of her Asian students tended to be either too general or personally attacking. She explained that sometimes the students would outright attack other persons with their remarks instead of criticizing their ideas. The teacher also made the comment that one should not make any generalizations based on this observation since it may be a personality issue. She told that she explained to her students how to state their opinions, ask questions, and clarifications in an indirect manner. It seemed to her that some students picked up on these things while others did not. She also explained that she did not insist on changing their communicative style but trusted their good judgment. In her words, overall, the students cooperated well and the discussions were peaceful.

The three interviews with graduate students revealed some of their perceptions of cultural differences between the academic cultures in the U.S. and their home country.

In his writing, YZ (a M.A. student from China) stated that “It seems to be easy to be a group leader, while it’s not simple at all”. I asked for his explanation and he told me that in his home country they typically have leader-centered discussions. He thought that leading a discussion would be an easy task because he assumed that he as a leader can do most of the talking while other group members simply listen. Instead, he had to learn to lead in a different manner: “but while I practiced it, I found it’s totally different. We need to have different opinions, and we should let them finish, and should exchange, and we should also keep the time” (interview, November 22, 2004).

Through being a DC leader, YZ seems to have understood one of the main points of (leading) discussions – to listen to and be open-minded about the opinions of all the members of a group. This observation seems to be in line with one of the expectations of the instructor. She expected that the students would learn to “appreciate different opinions without getting too personal, listen to others with balanced view” (personal communication, December 12, 2004).

In my interview with SN (a PhD student from India), he emphasized the friendly attitude of professors at UH. He said that in his regular classes, they have regularly open discussions where everyone can freely share their ideas or ask questions without appearing like an intruder. He explained that in his home country this kind of open and friendly discussion happens rarely: “in general, this friendly atmosphere is not there. Means, if you try to involve in that particular discussion topic, it’s assumed as a kind of interruption, something like that”. SN’s reflection might suggest that international students may need to overcome some of their beliefs about ‘proper’ classroom conduct – that expressing one’s opinion or asking the professor is not seen as an interruption in the North-American academic culture.

The third interview was with TI, a M.A. student from Japan. He mentioned several times that American students are fairly talkative and aggressive. He said that “American students are so aggressive. They often during lectures, they raise their hand and they ask questions to professors”. He explained that in Japan, students seem to be afraid of interrupting the flow of lectures by their questions or comments. Interestingly, this observation is rather similar to what SN remarked.

I asked them what difficulties they have had in adjusting to the UH academic culture with regard to their regular classes. YZ said that he is still in the process of learning the U.S. system, and he noted that lack of vocabulary poses several problems. In general, he was quite optimistic about his studies at UH. He believes that he will gain more confidence to become an active participant in class discussions as he acquires more background knowledge.

SN confided that for the first days at UH he used to be very shy and did not speak much because it took him some time to get used to the friendly and open class environment. He said that “afterwards, I started involving in these activities and my confidence boosted and then -- now I’m used to this discussion kind of thing, so I don’t face any problem”.

TI made only a brief comment that he would like to be a more active participant in class discussions, but the main hindrance is lack of fluency in English.

The three students all agreed that the ELI Speaking and Listening Class had helped them in various ways, mainly because of the friendly atmosphere where they did not have to worry much about their fluency since their class-mates were having the same difficulties. In addition to this, they benefited from having the chance to practice participating in an U.S. academic-style discussion.

Conclusion

This study attempted to yield a better understanding of the difficulties international students are facing in their socialization process into North-American academic culture through leading discussion circles in their Academic Speaking and Listening class. Drawing on the language socialization perspective, it examined the reflections of the students on their experiences. It was found that the students became socialized into their L2 academic culture by support from and cooperation with their class members, and also by the help of their reflective writings, in which they analyzed their struggles.

It seems that by being a leader of a DC, the students understood the value of group members who are open to share their views and opinions. Leading a DC definitely helped the students to understand the role of a leader and what it takes to have a fruitful discussion. The participants seemed to be learning that it is the cooperation between the leader and the members that truly facilitates discussion. This might sound like common knowledge, yet it was learned through participation in the discussion groups.

The students' reflections also appear to suggest that through leading the DCs they were learning that each member of a discussion group has equal rights with others since these are accorded to them on the basis of their membership, not on their cultural background or ability to formulate linguistically or semantically perfectly understandable comments. At the same time, the comments of some students suggested that despite their equal membership in regular classes, the international students still sometimes tend to remain fairly silent for the fear of making language mistakes and being misunderstood.

The pedagogical implication from the previous observations could be that professors should try to encourage the NNES students in their classes to speak up despite their lack of sufficient vocabulary – that it is their ideas that matter, not the linguistic aspects.

Several students appeared to have difficulties with organizational matters like time-keeping. This seems to indicate that the students were learning the practical value of time-planning, and what is needed to stay within the given time-limits. In addition to this, by experiencing first-hand how fast time goes by, hopefully they are learning to realize that their professors are under time-pressure to cover the topics on the syllabus, which means that when the instructors ask whether anyone has questions, they are not going to wait for a long time for them to speak up. Therefore, it is important for students to realize (or their instructors to point out) that preparing questions before the classes might be a good idea for helping oneself to become a more active participant.

Some of the difficulties the students experienced seemed to result from differences between the academic cultures of their home country and the U.S. The reflections of the graduate students that were interviewed on the differences between the academic cultures in North-America and in their home countries suggested that international students may be dealing with overcoming their beliefs about ‘proper’ classroom conduct – that expressing one’s opinions or asking questions during a class is not seen as an interruption in the North-American academic culture. This might seem like common knowledge, but the international students seem to be learning it through participation in their classes.

The present study looked at the issues discussed above through the triangulation of students’ writings, interviews with three graduate students, and casual personal communication with the instructor. It was an interpretive-qualitative study concentrating on a relatively small number of participants in a specific Academic English course. Therefore, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that one cannot make any wide-scale generalizations about international students on the basis of the findings.

As Morita (2000) notes, there has been relatively little research on academic socialization through oral practices. Together with Morita, I would like to call for further

research examining various oral activities, especially group discussions, since they appear to be fairly common in North-American academic culture.

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