Examining the Impact of Social Interactions on Thai Students' Classroom Participation in a Pre-Sessional EAP Course in a British University

Singhanat Nomnian

Abstract

This case study aims to examine the impact of social interactions on Thai students' classroom participation in a pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme in a British university. The data collection tools for this study included the semi-structured interviews, classroom observation, and English speaking logs. The findings suggest that there was a complicated interrelationship between English language learning and social interactions in the community. Using English in communicating with British people helped improve Thai students' language competence and their adaptation to British culture and society. The students also become more confident in their use of English in the EAP classroom in communicating with their teachers and fellow students. It is therefore important that English teachers adapt the communication experience of students outside the classroom to classroom instruction, particularly for developing listening and speaking skills, This will give students opportunities for communication inside the classroom that they can apply in real practice outside the classroom and so contribute to their linguistic, cultural and academic development while they are pursuing higher studies in Britain.

บทคัดย่อ

กรณีศึกษานี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาผลกระทบของการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมของนักศึกษาไทย อันจะมีผลต่อการมีส่วนร่วมในชั้นเรียนของนักศึกษาไทยเหล่านี้ที่ศึกษาวิชาภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อวิชาการเพื่อเตรียมตัวศึกษาในระดับปริญญาโท ณ มหาวิทยาลัยแห่งหนึ่งในประเทศอังกฤษ เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการศึกษานี้คือการสัมภาษณ์แบบกึ่งทางการ การสังเกตการณ์ในห้องเรียนและการเขียนบันทึก ผลวิจัยชี้ให้เห็นถึงความสัมพันธ์ซึ่งซับซ้อนระหว่างการเรียนภาษาอังกฤษและการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์ในชุมชน ซึ่งการใช้ภาษาในการสื่อสารกับชาวอังกฤษนี้ช่วยส่งเสริมความสามารถในการใช้ภาษาและการปรับตัวเข้ากับวัฒนธรรม และสังคมอังกฤษได้ดีขึ้น นอกจากนี้นักศึกษาไทยเหล่านี้ยังมีความมั่นใจในการใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารในห้องเรียนกับอาจารย์และเพื่อนร่วมชั้นเรียนเพิ่มขึ้น ดังนั้นจึงเป็นสิ่ง

Dr. Singhanat Nomnian Lecturer Center for English and Applied Linguistics, School of Social Sciences and Liberal Arts, Mahidol University, Kanchanaburi Campus

สำคัญที่อาจารย์ผู้สอนวิชาภาษาอังกฤษจะนำเอาประสบการณ์ในการสื่อสารนอกชั้นเรียนของนักศึกษา มาประยุกต์ใช้ในห้องเรียน โดยเฉพาะการพัฒนาสื่อการสอนสำหรับทักษะพูดและฟังเพื่อที่จะสร้างโอกาส ทางการสื่อสารของนักศึกษาในชั้นเรียนและสามารถนำไปฝึกปฏิบัติได้จริงนอกชั้นเรียน อันจะนำไปสู่ การพัฒนาทางภาษา วัฒนธรรม และวิชาการขณะศึกษา ระดับอุดมศึกษาในประเทศอังกฤษ

Introduction

The study aims to examine Thai students' perspectives on the role social interactions in pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms in a British university. Students' engagement has recently been a subject of debate in higher education with regard to curricula and the student 'being engaged', at two levels: first, there is the matter of what it is for the student to be engaged, and second, there is the question of what it is to increase students' involvement (Barnett and Coate, 2005). Participation does not only refer to engagement in certain activities, but also to becoming active members in social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities; in other words, "participation shapes not only what we do, but who we are and how we interpret what we do" (Wenger, 1998: 4). In this view, student engagement is critically important in understanding of how students respond socially and culturally to their educational circumstances and teaching and learning opportunities (McFadden and Munns, 2004). Recent studies on the teaching and learning of international students demand a distinct response from UK higher education institutions because these students have no experience of education in the UK. The institutions must understand their students' previous educational backgrounds and teachers must be willing to question their own assumptions (Sastry, 2004).

Previous literature has tentatively generalised that Asian learners are passive and non-participative due to their collectivist cultures and reproductive approach to learning as opposed to the 'Western' learning approach, which involves questioning and independent and critical thinking (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Such deterministic views of learning and stereotyping of learners seems to be based on rigid cultural and national attributes. However, learning can alternatively be viewed as changing patterns of learners' participation in specific social practices, which create their socially situated identities (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Being and becoming international students in UK higher education is, therefore, a process of struggle, resistance, reconstruction, and transformation in order to become legitimate members of an academic and social communities (Busher, 2002). Ridley (2004)

suggests that complete integration into the discourse of a particular higher education discipline may not always take place, but the opportunity to engage should be available by providing access to the keys to demystify the unfamiliar academic discourses in which they are immersed. UK higher education institutions must be aware or be equipped to ensure that culturally different student groups receive real equality of access to apparent educational opportunities because they constitute important community within universities and their engagement is likely to have considerable impacts on shaping the teaching and learning dynamic shared by everyone in the classroom (Turner, 2006).

Multilingual classroom ecology

This study employs Creese and Martin's (2003) 'multilingual classroom ecology' perspective to explore the key issues of individual inter-relationships, interactions and ideologies within classrooms where linguistic diversity exists. This perspective is based on Haugen's (1972: 325) 'linguistic ecology', which is defined as:

> *the study of interactions between any given language and its environment... The true environment of a language is the society that uses it as one of its codes. Language exists only in the minds of its users, and it only functions in relating these users to one another and to nature, i.e. their social and natural environment. Part of its ecology is therefore psychological: its interaction with other languages in the minds of bi- and multilingual speakers. Another part of its ecology is sociological: its interaction with the society in which it functions as a medium of communication. The ecology of a language is determined primarily by the people who learn it, use it, and transmit it to others.*

Haugen's language ecology can address the relationship between Thai students' choice and use of languages, at least Thai and English. Communicative practices in multilingual educational settings are more complex and illuminating than simple reflections of existing social boundaries. Heller and Martin-Jones (2001) illustrate an understanding of education-based processes of social and cultural production, reproduction, and linkages between local interactional practices and institutional process.

Classrooms and education institutions, however, are not the only primary settings for individual's construction of identity and agency. McKay and Hornberger (1996) view an

individual as a communicative actor drawing on a variety of linguistic resources in interactions based on their social and cultural identities. The informal social systems develop over time as learners engage in a shared practice in order to create and reinforce both tacit and explicit common expectations and worldviews (Lewis and Ketter, 2004). Norton (2000) claims that there is a relationship between social contexts and language learners' communicative ability in a target language community.

Social contexts such as local communities, media and popular culture, and work are salient arenas in which individual behaviours and lives are situated. Troman and Jeffrey (2004) point out that these are all interrelated and implicated in the development of social identities as well as agency, and thus individuals creatively adapt and accommodate the tensions and constraints of economic, educational, and social policies. Guile and Griffiths (2001) note that the process of change and development from one context (e.g., school) to another (e.g., workplace) results in changes in one's sense of identity. Learning in higher education therefore derives from the interrelationship between space and time, which allows both a personal and unique trajectory through varieties of complex spaces of opportunities and a social journey as learners share aspect of their trajectory with others through relevant points in time. Russel (2005) claims that international students should therefore be seen as providing an additional dimension to the academic and cultural life of a university, and thus it is necessary to educate UK students and staff in their attitudes to international students to benefit all parties.

Research methodology

1. Qualitative case study approach

A qualitative case study approach was employed in this study in order to investigate the factors affecting a group of Thai students' oral participation in multilingual classroom contexts and practices in a British university. By exploring the experiences of a group of Thai students in depth, the study attempted to identify some general trends and significant patterns among research participants. Merriam (1988) considers case study as a suitable approach for not only dealing with critical problems of practice, but also extending the knowledge base of various aspects of education. Richards (2003) mentions that a particular case could be related to broader issues and develop explanations in wider contexts where appropriate. Thai students' language use in classroom practices was not only related to communications within the classrooms but also socio-cultural contexts in which they lived.

2. Research participants and setting

A group of seven Thai students, enrolled in a pre-sessional EAP course, was the main focus of this study. There were five females, called Pinkie (22), Julie (23), Oudy (25), Pook (25), and Pekky (26), and two males called Sharp (25) and Petch (26). Following the pre-sessional course, they planned to undertake studies for a master's degree in MSc Marketing. In this study, informed consent was given in a written form. This study took place in the Language Unit that offers language courses to overseas students according to their language proficiency all year round. This study focused on a pre-sessional course in which the Thai students enrolled for 10 weeks between July and September 2005. Overseas students are required to have IELTS 5.5 in order to take the course. This course prepares overseas students for academic degree programmes at the university. They are taught the language and study skills needed for taking part in seminars, lectures, group projects, research and essay writing. There are classes on listening to lectures and note-taking, presentation, discussion skills, library skills, grammar, vocabulary and style for academic writing, reading academic texts, and writing for a research assignment.

3. Data collection and analysis

This study primarily employed semi-structured interviews. A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted between July 2005 and April 2006. During a pre-sessional EAP course, I interviewed the participants three times, once at the beginning of the course, and another two times in August and September 2005. This study, however, not only employed semi-structured interviews, but also English speaking logs, and classroom observations to illustrate the extent to which methodological triangulation could potentially strengthen both validity and reliability of the study to confirm the emerging findings. The individual cases were compared with one another to increase the richness and complexity of the interpretations. Participants' narratives obtained through interviews were the primary source of data, while other kinds of data such as field notes from classroom observations and English speaking logs also supplemented this. Based on open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), data analysis in this study was inductive according as categories and themes were indentified from the Thai participants' interview transcripts, which were read several times to examine key issues affecting each Thai student's classroom participation. Once the key factors of each student were identified, I compared them across the students to summarise the common themes from the seven students.

Findings

This section presents the main findings of the study. Most Thai participants such as Julie, Oudy, Petch, Pinkie, and Sharp recognised an interdependence of classroom learning and discussions, and social interactions, which promoted their confidence to participate in the discussions with classmates. The formal classroom learning could equip these Thai students' English proficiency for social interactions. For example, Julie, one of the Thai participants, became confident to communicate with the locals when going out. Her social encounters enabled her to gain experiences that could be shared with her classmates to whom she began to talk more as shown below.

Extract 1

Studying in the class, like grammar and discussion, allows me to gain more confidence to speak with others outside the class and dare to ask questions. If I get lost, I dare to ask people directions. When I go back to class, I tend to ask more questions as well. For example, when I went to London, I asked lots of questions about changing trains. When I got back here, I told my friends in class about it. I had lots of stories to tell them.

(Julie, English translation, 25/08/05)

The following extract illustrates the importance of context, interlocutors, and aims of communication.

Extract 2

Outside the classroom, when I said something, local people didn't understand me. I didn't know if it's because of my pronunciation. Like 'What do you want?' I had no stress and intonation, which they couldn't understand me. When they didn't understand, I had to change the way I spoke for the second time in order to make them understand.

(Julie, English translation, 25/08/05)

Julie realised that when she spoke with local people, she had no stress and intonation which led to unintelligibility, so she had to alter her way of speaking to get her message across. This incident showed a relationship between what happened in class and how it could contribute to speaking encounters outside the class. On the one hand,

classroom discussion, listening and speaking practice and grammar instruction contribute to Julie's confidence to experiment in her listening and speaking in social contexts. Social encounters and interactions, on the other hand, provided her with experiences and confidence, and this motivated her to engage more with her tutors and peers.

Likewise, Petch's direct experience allowed him to be aware of how the local accent sounds.

Extract 3

I know how the local accent sounds such as 'cheers' /ʃez/ or 'thank you'
/θæŋki/. If you want to use them, you have to use them correctly according
to their local accent. Otherwise, it would sound funny.

(Petch, English translation, 05/04/06)

Being aware of varieties of English accent spoken by local people, he realised that it was important to accommodate those local accents in order to avoid 'funny' usage or pronunciation.

Petch became accustomed to a Chinese accent since he studied and stayed with Chinese students as he said:

Extract 4

Now I understand English with a Chinese accent. I don't need to ask
them to repeat what they say. I have also stored English words with Chinese
accent. On my first day here, I couldn't understand what they said. I have
realised that my English isn't as bad as I had thought. If you first come
here without any confidence, things will go down the hill. I feel that I am
not that bad. I can understand them. In Thailand I had no chance to
practice English. Coming here is a sudden change for me. I didn't know
what to say. I wasn't confident. When I later adjusted myself, I felt much
better.

(Petch, English translation, 11/08/05)

Petch's gradual adjustment to the new living and learning conditions in the UK and improvement of his English allowed him to gain more confidence to communicate with other overseas students, especially Chinese students. He familiarised himself with a Chinese

accent, and this enabled him to understand them. It is interesting to note that the impact of social interactions in the UK helped rectify his negative perceptions of his English and promoted a more positive direction in his language learning and living in the UK.

Similarly, Pinkie positively viewed learning English with Chinese students, and this helped her to understand Chinese students' spoken English in the MSc Marketing classrooms.

Extract 5

It helped me in a sense that I could understand Chinese students' pronunciation. At first, I didn't understand at all. Chinese students would not understand my accent. In the EAP course, it helped me adjust to their accent because I could get used to my Chinese friends' accent when studying in a master's programme.

<div align="right">(Pinkie, English translation, 05/04/06)</div>

Pinkie developed an interesting communicative strategy with the Chinese students in her group by unanimously using their first language to discuss with their respective Thai or Chinese friends first and then using English for a group discussion as she said.

Extract 6

Sarah and Niki spoke in Chinese and I spoke in Thai with other Thai friends and then we spoke in English to share our ideas.

<div align="right">(Pinkie, English translation, 05/04/06)</div>

Pinkie perceived that discussing issues in one's first language and sharing ideas in English were productive for both parties because they felt comfortable about expressing their ideas.

Oudy also noticed the positive change in her English due to the fact that she had more chances to speak English as she stated:

Extract 7

I think now my English is better than before maybe because I live in English environment. And maybe because I try to speak English everyday. Even

though I stay with my Thai friends, I want to speak English as much as I can.

> *(Oudy, Original in English, 11/09/05)*

Despite staying with Thai friends in her accommodation, she liked to speak English with them because she realised that she wanted to seek every possible opportunity to improve her English as much as she could. She recognised that practicing pronunciation in the class enabled her to speak English with the locals as she said:

Extract 8

I think when we speak with native speakers or foreigners, we should be aware of pronouncing words or sentences correctly.

> *(Oudy, Original in English, 11/09/05)*

Similarly, Sharp wanted to learn more about the varieties of English accent and daily expressions because he found Birmingham accent difficult to understand when he travelled as he suggested:

Extract 9

Like 'Could you tell me...?' 'Would you tell me...?' 'Do you mind...?' My tutor told me to use these expressions because they sound more polite. But the course should focus more on these kinds of expressions. In my girlfriend's university, they taught more of daily expressions, slang, or how British people speak and how students should speak. They should teach expressions that I could use in my daily life. I want to know how British people actually talk. Like 'can't' or how Birmingham people speak. This is more interesting than practice listening.

> *(Sharp, English translation, 04/09/05)*

Sharp recognised that English language was not only used in the classroom but also in his daily activities while living and studying in England, and he found it more interesting to learn about daily expressions and English accents. The more he travelled, the more he noticed that there were other English accents that he was not familiar with.

Discussion

Recognising the significance of the social interactions Thai students experienced in their daily lives offers valuable insights into the interrelationship between the informal social interactions and formal language learning that enhanced Thai students' confidence in classroom participation. The varieties of spoken English should be presented in a pre-sessional course in order to prepare international students for the wider use of English in socio-cultural interactive contexts. Canagarajah (2006) argues that there is a need to develop a dynamic view between classroom and society as learners are negotiated in their language learning. Kumaravadivelu (2003) suggests the concept of context-sensitive, location-specific pedagogy based on the genuine understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural and political particularities and socio-political consciousness that students bring with them to the classroom that catalyse a continual quest for identity formation and social transformation. It is advisable for EAP tutors to take social interaction aspects into account when they develop teaching materials and speaking and listening activities because this would help Thai students become more aware of potential channels for their language use and equip them with relevant linguistic tools for the social contact in order to comprehend with overseas friends and the local people they meet in their daily lives.

Conclusion

Social interactions enabled Thai students to familiarise and adjust themselves to living and learning environments in the UK. It is clear that there was an interrelationship between social contexts and formal classroom learning that enhanced these Thai students' learning experiences and improved their spoken English. The author hopes that insights gained from experiences of Thai students in a pre-sessional EAP course in the UK higher education can contribute to the improvement of overseas education; particularly, the need to understand the impact of the social contexts on international students' linguistic, academic and cultural adjustment.

References

Barnett, R. and Coate, K. 2005. **Engaging the Curriculum in Higher Education.** Berkshire: Open University Press.

Busher, H. 2002. "Cultural, literacy, and the engagement of students with doctoral studies in education." In N. Bacha and R. Bahous, eds. **Language and Change: Selected Papers from the First Regional English Conference at the Lebanese American University, November 2000,** pp. 78-87. Beirut: Librairie du Liban Publishers.

Canagarajah, A. S. 2006. "TESOL at forty: what are the issues?" **TESOL Quarterly** 40, 1: 9-34.

Creese, A. and Martin, P. (eds.) 2003. **Multilingual Classroom Ecologies: Inter-relationships, Interactions and Ideologies.** Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Guile, D. and Griffiths, T. 2001. 'Learning through work experience.' **Journal of Education and Work** 14, 1: 113-131.

Haugen, E. 1972. **The Ecology of Language.** Standford, CA: Standford University Press.

Heller, M. and Martin-Jones, M. (eds.). 2001. **Voices of Authority: Educational and Linguistic Difference.** Westpoint, CT: Ablex Publishing.

Kumaravadivelu, B. 2003. "Problematising cultural stereotypes in TESOL." **TESOL Quarterly** 37/4: 709-719.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. 1991. **Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, C. and Ketter, J. 2004. "Learning as social interaction: interdiscursivity in a teacher and researcher study group." In R. Rogers, ed. **An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis in Education,** pp. 117-146. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

McFadden, M. and Munns, G. 2004. "Student engagement and the social relations of Pedagogy." **British Journal of Sociology of Education** 23, 3: 357-366.

McKay, S.L. and Hornberger, N.H., eds. 1996. **Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Merriam, S. 1988. **Case Study Research in Education.** San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Norton, B. 2000. **Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change.** Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd.

Richards, K. 2003. **Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL.** London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ridley, D. 2004. "Puzzling experiences in higher education: critical moments for conversation." **Studies in Higher Education** 29, 1: 91–107.

Russel, M. 2005. "Marketing education: a review of service quality perceptions among international students." **International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management** 17, 1: 65-77.

Sastry, T. 2004. **Postgraduate Education in the United Kingdom.** London: Higher Education Policy Institute.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. 1998. **Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory And Procedures and Techniques.** 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications.

Troman, G. and Jeffrey, B. 2004. "Introduction." In G. Troman, B. Jeffrey and G. Walford, eds. **Identity, Agency and Social Institutions in Educational Ethnography,** pp. ix-xv. Oxford: Elsevier.

Turner, Y. 2006. "Chinese students in a UK business school: hearing the student voice in reflective teaching and learning practice." **Higher Education Quarterly** 60/1: 27 – 51.

Wenger, E. 1998. **Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.