Oral Academic Discourse Socialisation: Challenges Faced by International Undergraduate Students in a Malaysian Public University

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Abstract

This paper reports a qualitative study which examines the challenges faced by six international undergraduate students in their socialisation of oral academic discourse in a Malaysian public university. Data were collected employing interviews. Students' presentations were also collected. Semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and qualitative content analysis was employed to examine the challenges faced by international undergraduate students in their socialisation of oral academic discourse. The results reveal that the major difficulties international undergraduate students face in their oral academic discourse socialisation are related to linguistic knowledge, presentation skills and content-related difficulties. Linguistic difficulties constrain students to express complex concepts and ideas while engaged in oral presentations. Difficulties related to presentation skills are associated with how to prepare PowerPoint slides and how to organise the content of the presentations. This study also reveals that content difficulties may be related to the specific topics the students are asked to prepare presentations on. In this study I argue that understanding the challenges faced by undergraduate international students in their oral academic discourse socialisation can be one of the essential steps to help them overcome the challenges they face.

Keywords: applied linguistics, socialisation of oral academic discourse, academic presentation, international students, Malaysia

1. Introduction

This study contributes to the ongoing interest of research on the socialisation of oral academic discourse of international students in host universities. As stated by Duff (2010, p. 171), "discourse socialization places more emphasis on social processes, negotiation, and interaction". Thus, this study focuses on exploring the challenges experienced by a group of undergraduate international students in the process of socialisation of oral academic presentations. In this study, I selected academic presentation as a form of oral academic discourse practice which is widely used in Malaysian universities for assessing students' performance and also in the weekly tutorials in various university courses. Focusing on international students, research on the socialisation of academic discourse in higher education has been a recent trend and has not been fully explored and investigated in Second Language (L2) contexts (Duff, 2003, 2010; Hyland, 2006). This line of research has taken into account the importance of understanding and exploring the challenges faced by international students in order to uncover the major difficulties international students face in the process of socialisation of oral academic discourse.

Globally, there has been an increase in the number of international students who leave their countries to pursue post-secondary education in other countries including USA, Australia, Canada, UK and other European countries. Most of international students who join universities in USA, Australia, Canada and UK are non-native English speakers (NNESs) who enrol in English-medium universities every year (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). The increase of international students in host countries can be attributed to the belief that attracting international students is beneficial for the host countries because international students can remarkably contribute to the diversity of the student population and bring economic benefits to the community as well (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

In the previous few decades, countries in the Asia Pacific region have also witnessed a remarkable and significant development through implementing effective plans for reform and restructuring in higher education

(Kaur & Sidhu, 2009). China, Malaysia, and India are developing strategies to attract students and to export educational programs and institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 294). In Malaysia, there have been active promotions for higher education in order to attract more international students. Furthermore, the benefits and opportunities offered by Malaysian higher education have been made clear through promotional campaigns among countries in Asia and the Middle East. As a result of these developments and plans, international students in Malaysia were 69 164 and reached 80 750 in 2009. It is expected that international students in Malaysian institutions of higher education will reach 200,000 in 2020 (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010).

It has been reported that ESL international undergraduate students in university content classrooms experience frustration and inadequacy in oral academic activities (Leki, 2001; Morita, 2004). Thus, understanding the challenges and difficulties these students face in their new academic communities has become critical because this can provide feedback to policy makers and authorities in the host countries, which, in turn, can result in improvement and development in the higher education industry. At the undergraduate level, international students in most Malaysian universities are required to complete several activities to complete the programmes they joined. These activities, which include final examinations, tests, quizzes, assignments and oral academic presentations, are related to the assessment of their learning.

It is important to note that the successful performance in oral activities carried out by students in higher education in English-speaking countries is not only judged based on students' language proficiency but also on their understanding of rules and specific behaviours valued by each discipline and each institutional context (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). To develop knowledge on the rules as stipulated by a specific discourse community is an issue which needs time through which the students, as new comers to a specific community, socialise themselves with the rules and complexities of a discourse community; the whole process itself is a challenging one for non-native speakers of English language (Ferris, 1998; Morita, 2000). As a result of the fact that the socialisation is a complex process, it has been reported that international students in university content classrooms in English-speaking countries report feelings of inadequacy and frustration while participating in oral classroom activities such as whole-class discussions and formal oral presentations (Leki, 2001; Morita, 2004).

Over the past two decades, there has been an increase in the number of studies on written academic discourse. However, little attention has been given to the socialisation of oral academic discourse. By focusing on one particular oral activity, i.e. oral presentations, this study reports the findings of a qualitative case study on oral academic discourse socialisation of six undergraduate international students in one of the Malaysian public universities. This study is built on three theories: language socialisation, sociolinguistics and new literacies.

Academic discourse socialisation in L2 contexts has been the focus of some studies. Focusing on oral academic presentations as the unit of analysis, Morita (2000) explored the language socialisation of non-native speakers in a large western Canadian university. She found that students became gradually socialised into the academic discourse through observing, performing, and reviewing a task such as oral academic presentations. She also argued that the process of the academic discourse socialisation is a complex and conflictual process of negotiation in which students faced various types of difficulties. Kobayashi (2003) examined the types of collaborations that were performed by NNESs in a Canadian university as they negotiated understandings of task demands and reached agreement about their joint task performance. He showed that academic presentations appeared as an opportunity for NNESs to socialise themselves with the demands and the nature of practices in oral academic discourse. Recently, Zappa-Hollman (2007) focused on six non-native graduate students' engagement in the academic presentations to explore their discourse socialisation in regular content courses at a Canadian university. Zappa-Hollman found that the challenges faced by the students may be associated with three types of problems of an interrelated nature: linguistics, sociocultural and psychological.

In the Malaysian context, studies on international students (e.g., Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Pandian, 2008; Yusoff, 2012; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010) have focused on international graduate students' academic needs and their sociocultural adjustment. Some of these studies collected data from international postgraduate students. While Pandian (2008) examined diversity and multicultural awareness that influence the growth and development of graduate students, Kaur and Sidhu (2009) focused on the problems of postgraduate students and their adjustment to a new environment. However, Yusoff (2012) collected data from undergraduate students in a Malaysian public university and examined the relationship between self-efficacy, perceived social support, and psychological adjustment.

Surveying previous studies on language socialisation and academic discourse socialisation shows that little attention has been given to studies on the socialisation of academic discourse. Furthermore, some of the previous

studies on the socialisation of oral academic discourse have focused on graduate students in university context. Specifically, Zappa-Hollman (2007) clearly argues that there is a need for qualitative case studies on the issue of oral academic discourse socialisation. This shows that there is a need for studies on the challenges faced by the first year undergraduate students in the process of socialisation of oral academic discourse. Furthermore, it is significant to mention that although studies on international students in Malaysia have focused on various issues such as academic needs and sociocultural adjustment, the issue of oral academic discourse of international undergraduate students has not received an adequate attention from researchers. Apart from that, Yusoff (2012) stated that "Although the number of international students on campuses continues to increase; only a limited number of recently published studies have examined this topic in Malaysia". Through reviewing the previous studies, it can be clearly comprehended that some of these studies lack in-depth investigation concerning international students' academic difficulties. Some of these studies employed questionnaires to survey the entire international student population in an institution without taking into account students' cultural, social, or educational backgrounds into consideration. Understanding difficulties related to socialisation of oral academic presentations needs to be done through listening to international undergraduate students, observing them and examining the documents they prepare to present in front their lecturers, tutors and peers.

Thus, the main purpose of this study is to explore the challenges faced by a group of international undergraduate students in the process of socialisation of oral academic discourse. The present study is supported by the theoretical concept of language socialisation (Ochs, 1988; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984) in order to explore academic presentations by a group of international undergraduate students in a Malaysian public university. In addition, this study draws on sociological, anthropological, and psychological approaches to the study of social and linguistic competence within a given social group. Language socialisation refers to the socialisation of international students when they are involved in the use of language and the socialisation to English in oral presentation activities (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). According to this view, language socialisation is considered to be a lifelong, interactive process which begins at the moment a human being starts social contact.

2. Methodology

In this study a qualitative approach was employed because qualitative approaches are considered to have contribution to a greater understanding of perceptions, attitudes and processes. Qualitative approaches have been adopted lately by many L2 researchers because qualitative research places greater emphasis on contexts and interpretations of social practice (e.g., Davis, 1995; Johnson, 1992). In its employment of qualitative (or ethnographic) multiple case study approach (Merriam, 1998), this study intends to gain an in-depth and holistic understanding of the lived experience of undergraduate students (Duff, 2012). Furthermore, the employment of qualitative approach in this study was intended to contribute to the findings of the studies conducted by Morita (2000), Kobayashi (2003), and Zappa-Hollman (2007). However, this study goes further by examining oral academic presentations of international undergraduate students in a Malaysian public university.

The participants in this study were six international undergraduate female students who were enrolled in a B.A programme in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) which is the leading research university in Malaysia (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010). At the time of collecting data, only these six international students were enrolled in the programme. In addition to this justification of selecting six students, for this study, the purposeful sampling, which is a strategy that researchers apply to select information-rich participants, was found to be appropriate. This is because the focus on the information-rich participants increases the utility of a small sample (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998) because the richer the description the researcher provides in the study, the easier it is for readers to understand the context and the participants (Croker, 2009).

The programme the students were enrolled in is called English for Professionals (EfPs) and it comprises courses which emphasise both theoretical and practical language skills. As shown in Table 1, two students were from Nigeria and the other four were from Iran, China, Korea, and Thailand respectively. Four students were in their first year and one student was in her second year. The sixth student, Berit, was an exchange student who had spent two years majoring in English in a university in her country before joining the current programme in the Malaysian university. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 22 except one student who was 27. For ethical considerations, pseudonyms were used in this study and in reporting the findings of the study.

Table 1. Demographic data of the participants

	The participants (Pseudonyms)	Sex	Age	Nationality
1	Jane	F	27	Nigeria
2	Izzy	F	20	Nigeria
3	Rilla	F	21	Iran
4	Zoe	F	21	China
5	Berit	F	22	Korea
6	Akilah	F	20	Thailand

For data collection, multiple types of data were gathered over a three-month period. Data were collected employing semi-structured interviews and documents collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students to understand and examine the difficulties they encountered when they were engaged in the process of oral academic discourse socialisation. In addition to the data obtained through semi-structured interviews, students' PowerPoint presentations were collected and examined for further validation of the difficulties the students revealed that they encountered in the process of oral academic discourse socialisation. Qualitative data analysis was employed to find the emergent themes regarding students' socialisation processes. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. After that, the data were coded based on the purpose of the study. A final refinement of the coding process was done and it resulted in categorising the data into three main patterns: linguistic difficulties, presentation skills difficulties and content-related difficulties.

3. Results

The qualitative data analysis revealed that the major difficulties faced by international undergraduate students in their oral academic discourse socialisation are linguistic difficulties, presentation skills difficulties and content-related difficulties. Each one of these types of difficulties is presented and discussed below with some extracts from the interviews conducted with the six participants.

The linguistic difficulties international students faced while socialising themselves with oral presentation discourse were related to their proficiency in English language, especially their oral presentation skills. Subsequently, these linguistic difficulties constrained the students to express complex concepts and ideas while engaged in oral academic presentations. Although some of the students like Zoe, Akilah and Rilla had some intensive courses in proficiency English to fulfil the requirements of joining the programme, they showed that these courses did not help them much to cope with the demands of being a student in EfPs programme. Thus, linguistic difficulties imply that the students were not able to provide accurate responses when they were asked by their lecturers in the presentation sessions. This study reveals that the linguistic difficulties played a major role in the students' socialisation of oral academic discourse. It has been found through interviewing the six participants that they had little exposure to the use of English before joining EfPs because in their countries English is considered a foreign language. Furthermore, most of the participants showed that they did not have enough practice of reading texts and materials in English in their pre-university and school education because most of the materials they used were in their first languages. The extracts from the semi-structured interviews provided below show that in the process of oral academic discourse socialisation international students' linguistics difficulties restricted them to socialise themselves to the norms and practices of oral academic presentations in their current discourse community. Furthermore, the extracts given below support my findings regarding the linguistic difficulties the students have when preparing and/or presenting their oral presentations.

> *Researcher: You are taking my course and two other courses.*
>
> *Zoe: Yes and another course.*
>
> *Researcher: Four courses in a semester. How can you manage assignments, quizzes and tests?*
>
> *Zoe: It is difficult for me ... new words... many things to do... so I have to check the dictionary frequently.*
>
> *Researcher: In the schools in your country, when do you start studying English?*
>
> *Berit: In the first year of elementary schools but we do not have enough practice.*
>
> *Researcher: For how long have you been here in Malaysia?*
>
> *Akilah: Including the language courses [proficiency courses] I have been here for two years.*

> *Researcher: So you had some proficiency courses [in this university] before you started your programme here in this school?*
>
> *Akilah: Yes, I had some proficiency courses.*
>
> *Researcher: Were these proficiency courses useful for the courses you are taking now in this programme?*
>
> *Akilah: No, they were useful for the daily communication... for the core courses I have in this programme, they are not useful.*
>
> *Researcher: Do you have tutorial classes in your university in Korea?*
>
> *Berit: We do not have at all. When I noticed this I was asking what tutorials are.*
>
> *Researcher: Here [in the programme] course is divided into two: lecture and tutorial.*
>
> *Berit: Yes. And having tutorials is new for me.*

A very important finding related to this study is that most of the participants in this study had no adequate previous experience in doing oral academic presentation before they joined the current programme they were in. This can be a source of the difficulties they have in the process of socialising themselves with the oral academic discourse. As a result of this, these international students struggled to be active members in the new academic discourse community which is the university context. This finding can be understood through examining the extracts taken from the interviews, as shown below. For example, Berit who finished two years in her B.A in English in her country mentioned that the students in her country are required to do only 3 oral presentations during the whole programme. It is evident through the extracts given below that the participants did not have adequate background or experience in handling oral academic presentations. Zoe who had some English proficiency courses in the same university for some months before joining EfPs had few chances to do oral academic presentations in the proficiency courses. However, she mentioned that she still had some difficulties in preparation and delivering her presentations.

> *Researcher: In your programme in your country, is giving oral academic presentation a requirement?*
>
> *Berit: Yes. We have to do 3 presentations.*
>
> *Researcher: in each course:*
>
> *Berit: No, in all years of the programme.*
>
> *Researcher: Only three academic presentations in all years of the programme.*
>
> *Berit: Yes.*
>
> *Researcher: Did you have proficiency courses before you joined the programme?*
>
> *Rilla: Yes, for eight months.*
>
> *Researcher: Did you do any oral presentations in this eight-month course?*
>
> *Rilla: Only once ... not that much.*
>
> *Researcher: In our programme, you have the first real experience of doing oral presentations?*
>
> *Rilla: Yes. Before this I did not do tutorial presentations.*
>
> *Researcher: You mentioned that you had some English proficiency courses before joining this programme.*
>
> *Zoe: Yes.*
>
> *Researcher: Did you have oral presentations in your proficiency course you had in USM?*
>
> *Zoe: Yes, only three times but sometimes we had to do group discussion*
>
> *Researcher: Are they the same as we have in our course in this programme?*
>
> *Zoe: No, they are different.... in the proficiency courses short and in this programme I have to prepare and rehearsal before i come to the tutorials.*
>
> *Researcher: Before joining this programme, did you have experience in doing oral presentations?*
>
> *Jane: No. ... in Nigeria no.*
>
> *Researcher: Do you have tutorial classes in your university in Korea?*

Berit: We do not have at all. When I noticed this I was asking what tutorials are.

As shown in the following extracts from the semi-structure interviews, international undergraduate students face difficulties related to presentation skills which are associated with how to prepare PowerPoint slides and how to organise the content of the PowerPoint presentation. Some of these presentations skills are related to psychological factors such as feeling nervous or anxious. As shown in the following extracts from the interviews conducted with the participants, most of them started to learn the use of Microsoft PowerPoint when they joined EfPs which reveals that they had difficulties in their presentations skills. Furthermore, the extracts provided below reveal that the students had some problems in organising their PowerPoint presentations.

Researcher: How do you find yourself when you are presenting in front of your course mates?

Zoe: Nervous and sometimes anxious.

Researcher: But this can be improved or disappeared in the course of time.

Zoe: Ya ... I needed to adapt myself and do rehearsal before I present.

Researcher: Did you prepare and do presentations in your schools in Thailand?

Akilah: Yes, but it was in Thai language. But here it is in English which is difficult for me at the beginning.

Researcher: You learnt how to use PowerPoint to prepare the slides of your presentations.

Akilah: Yes.

Researcher: Where? In high secondary schools in Thailand?

Akilah: No, in the proficiency courses (intensive proficiency courses ... And I myself tried to learn.

Researcher: Before joining this programme, did you have experience in doing oral presentations?

Jane: No, ... In Nigeria no. It is just when I came here I learnt to use PowerPoint. We never use PowerPoint for presentations in my country ... it may be used there but very few in all years of one programme.

Researcher: So the first experience for you is here?

Jane: Yes and it is very difficult. Before this I have not ever learnt how to prepare presentations through PowerPoint.

The analysis of the data reveals that the international undergraduate students in their oral academic discourse socialisation encountered difficulties related to the content of the academic presentations they prepared and delivered. The extracts from the interviews and the collected presentations the students submitted show that the students encountered some challenges in the process of looking for content for their presentations. The specific topics the students were asked to prepare presentations on appeared to be one of the major sources of content-related difficulties because the students revealed that they struggled to find content related to some of the topics they were asked to prepare and deliver presentations on.

Researcher: In the process of preparing for your presentations, do you refer to books? Is it difficult to fine content?

Rilla: I try to refer to books but sometimes we cannot find books... So I refer to websites and the notes lecturers give to us.

Researcher: Do you take time to prepare oral presentations? I mean days to get it ready?

Rilla: Not in all courses. In the "History and Structure of English" [a course in EfPs] I need days to prepare it because of the nature of the course.

Researcher: So when spend time to prepare the presentations, is because the content or the question/task of the tutorial presentation?

Rilla: The content is sometimes difficult.

Researcher: When you are given a topic to prepare your presentation on, how do you find content? Do you try to find books?

Akilah: Books sometimes difficult.

Researcher: So how do you find content for your oral academic presentation? Do you use Google?

Akilah: Yes.

Researcher: Do you think that the topics you are asked to prepare presentations o

Zoe: Regarding the topics, I think ... sometimes yes ... the topic given by the lecturer can be difficult to find material on.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study was carried out to raise awareness of lecturers and tutors in the context of the study regarding the challenges faced by international undergraduate students in the process of oral academic discourse socialisation. As found by Zappa-Holman (2007), this study confirms that understanding the challenges faced by undergraduate international students in their oral academic discourse socialisation can be the first step to help them overcome these challenges. The challenges faced by international undergraduate students in their oral academic discourse socialisation are linguistic, presentation skills and content-related difficulties. This finding supports what Zappa-Hollman (2007) classifies as linguistic difficulties faced by international students, although Zappa-Hollman focused on graduate students. Similar to the arguments of Duff (2010, p. 170), the findings of this study show that the oral academic socialisation is a complex process which is considered to be "internal and interpersonal struggle for many people, especially for newcomers or novices". This was also argued by Morita (2000). Most of the participants in this study are considered novices in their current academic discourse community. Thus, lecturers and tutors in the context of this study, and may be in similar contexts, may find it important to understand their international students' educational background and their previous experience in oral academic presentation. Lecturers and tutors in the context of the study may brief their students at the beginning of the courses on how to tackle oral academic presentations.

The challenges faced by international students in the process of socialising themselves with oral academic discourse in EfPs programme can be attributed to their educational background, experience in the use of PowerPoint, and the nature of the task of the presentations. This study also reveals that the educational background of the international undergraduate students did not include activities on oral academic discourse. Thus, the participants in their current involvement in oral academic presentations have some difficulties in their preparation and performance in this practice.

In my focus on examining the challenges faced by a group of international students in the process of oral academic discourse socialisation, I found that one of these challenges is the content of the academic presentations the students are asked to work on. The challenges related to the content also involve the complexities of selecting the topics and the tasks of academic presentations. Thus, lecturers and tutors may need to tailor the tasks of oral academic presentations to suit the needs and the abilities of their students. Additionally, lecturers and tutors' understanding of the importance of structuring the tasks of oral academic presentations is essential to support the students in finding the appropriate content and materials for oral presentations.

Further studies are recommended to examine how international undergraduate students attempt to participate successfully and actively in their new discourse communities and the strategies they employ to overcome the challenges they face in their socialisation of oral academic presentations. Another suggestion for further studies is to examine challenges faced by a large number of international undergraduate students in their socialisation of oral academic discourse. This undoubtedly contributes to establishing an extensive list of these challenges.

Acknowledgments

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