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FOUND IN TRANSLATION: HOW BROKERING PRACTICES SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' LEARNING

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Abstract

Research on international students for whom English is an additional language (EAL) tend to focus on their lack of language proficiency and active participation in the classroom. However, examining their informal learning practices such as brokering provides an opportunity to understand how international EAL students respond to academic demands on their own terms. This article reports on first-year international university students' informal help-seeking interactions with brokers, many of whom who were able to bridge both language and knowledge gaps. Language brokering, literacy brokering, and resource brokering are highlighted as different types of brokering which deal with different aspects of academic learning. Among the range of brokering practices, peer brokering stands out as an important form of academic support. Thus, educators and administrators alike should consider enhancing opportunities for international students to build social connections with potential brokers.

Keywords: Academic support; brokering; informal learning; international students; peers

Despite the recognition of informal learning as ubiquitous and significant (Barnett, 2010; Barron, 2006), much of educational research focuses on formal settings such as the classroom (Rogers, 2008). In addition, studies on international students for whom English is an additional language (EAL) tend to highlight students' insufficient language proficiency (Brown, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Lee, Farruggia, & Brown, 2013) and lack of class participation (Halic, Greenberg, & Paulus, 2009; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). Characterising students in terms of what they lack, however, contributes to a deficit perspective of international students (Marginson, 2013; Ryan & Louie, 2007). In mitigating this deficit framing, several scholars have called for greater attention to international students' agency (Marginson, 2013; Tran & Vu, 2018; Volet & Jones, 2012). Writing about multilingual and transnational contexts, Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck (2005) argue that agency results from the interplay between people's language repertoires, and the ways social structures or environments encourages (or not) the use of their resources.

Several studies have investigated the social dimension of international students' academic learning, suggesting the importance of peer relations (Che, 2013; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Nam & Beckett, 2011; Séror, 2011; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). Several studies, for example, highlight how peers were preferred over institutional advisors. Both Che (2013) and Nam and Beckett (2011) found that EAL students at their respective U.S. universities viewed advisors as unfamiliar with the content or field of study, and so preferred to consult classmates and other peers. In addition, Séror (2011) found that Japanese exchange students at a Canadian university preferred seeking informal help from peers rather than institutional resources, as they felt on a more equal footing with those peers whom they could engage with about their work.

The strength of peer support is further highlighted in Montgomery and McDowell's (2009) U.K. study in which international students initiated study groups with each other to discuss lectures and assignments, obtain peer feedback, and prepare for examinations. In addition, Zappa-Hollman and Duff's (2015) study on Mexican exchange students at a Canadian university revealed co-national peers (i.e., those from the same country) provided reciprocal academic support such as jointly interpreting assignments and exchanging notes.

For academic matters relating specifically to the English language, however, native English-speaking peers were approached to correct participants' English language errors (Che, 2013; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). Che's (2013) study also found that while EAL students' approached native English

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speakers for their perceived expertise in language-related issues such as proofreading, students preferred ethno-lingual peers (i.e., sharing a common ethnicity and language) to engage with in discussing more general aspects of their work. Nonetheless, there is still limited research on how international students' informal social relations provide academic support, as well as the specific areas of academic learning that students seek assistance with.

This article draws on my doctoral research that investigated first-year international EAL students' informal help-seeking interactions as part their brokering practices. Brokering refers to seeking or receiving assistance from an intermediary (i.e., the broker) who has access to valued resources which are otherwise difficult to obtain (Stovel, Golub, & Milgrom, 2011). In the remainder of this article, I outline my research methods, and discuss who the participants approached as brokers, and the types of brokering they engaged in. The article concludes with suggested applications and directions for future research.

Methodology

I used a multi-methodological approach combining ethnographic and micro-analytic approaches (Sawchuk, 2008) to answer the overarching research question, 'What is the nature of brokering practices among international EAL students?' as well as the following specific questions:

RQ1. What aspects of academic learning are brokered?

RQ2. Who are the brokers?

RQ3. Why are these brokers chosen?

RQ4. What are the characteristics of brokering relationships?

RQ5. What are the dynamics of brokering interactions?

The research was based at a university in New Zealand where international students made up approximately 15 percent of the student population. Ten international EAL students were recruited from two social science faculties, nine of whom were of Chinese ethnicity (Table 1). Data collection was carried out during students' initial academic semester which was likely to present substantial help-seeking or brokering activity, since it was a period that presented the greatest adjustment challenges for students (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998). In view of the relatively short timeframe, I used focused ethnography to examine the specific phenomenon of brokering among a particular group of students (Higginbottom, Pillay, & Boadu, 2013; Knoblauch, 2005). In addition, conventional ethnographic methods were adapted to suit the "focus on communicative activities, [or] experiences by communication" (Knoblauch, 2005, para. 2).

Instead of long unstructured interviews that are commonly associated with ethnography, I conducted regular semi-structured interviews during which I explored with participants the possibility of observing their brokering interactions. As informal learning practices such as brokering were likely to occur spontaneously or planned with short notice (Eraut, 2004), it was not feasible to engage in lengthy participant observation. Instead, when observations were conducted, I obtained permission from participants to audio-record the meeting and took on the role of a spectator (Patton, 2015). I also collected records of digitally-based brokering interactions, that is, screenshots of mobile phone message exchanges. In addition, artefacts related to brokering interactions (draft essays annotated by learning advisors) were also collected. Further details of how I used focused ethnography is found in Lee (2017b).

Table 1: Summary of Participants' Background (pseudonyms used)

No.	Name	Age	Nationality	Level of study	Prior educational qualification or experience
1	**Linda** **key informant**	Early 20s	Mainland Chinese	Postgraduate diploma First semester	Bachelor degree from a public university in Mainland China, IELTS in Mainland China
2	**Kim** **key informant**	Early 20s	Taiwanese Chinese	Postgraduate diploma First semester	Bachelor degree from a private university in Taiwan China, English language programme in New Zealand
3	**Jane** **key informant**	Early 20s	Mainland Chinese	Bachelor degree First semester	Eighteen months of tertiary level study at a private university in Mainland China, including an English language component
4	Josh	Early 20s	Malaysian Chinese	Honours year First semester	Bachelor degree from a private university in Malaysia, an offshore campus of an Australian university where the medium of instruction was English
5	Sarah	Early 20s	Mainland Chinese	Bachelor degree First semester	Twelve months of tertiary level study at a private university in Mainland China, English language programme in New Zealand
6	Henry	Early 20s	Mainland Chinese	Bachelor degree First semester	One-year academic preparatory programme for university entrance in New Zealand
7	Cindy	Early 20s	Japanese	Bachelor degree First semester (exchange student)	Two years of undergraduate study at a private university in Japan, TOEFL in Japan
8	Annie	Early 30s	Mainland Chinese	Bachelor degree First semester	Bachelor degree from a university in Mainland China, English language programme in New Zealand
9	Kevin	Early 40s	Mainland Chinese	Bachelor degree First semester	IELTS in Mainland China (Participant did not disclose his educational qualifications from Mainland China)
10	Simon	Early 20s	Mainland Chinese	Bachelor degree Second semester	Two-year academic preparation at a private university in Mainland China as part of a joint programme between

No.	Name	Age	Nationality	Level of study	Prior educational qualification or experience
					the Chinese university and the New Zealand university

As I was bilingual in English and Mandarin, I offered Chinese participants the opportunity to conduct the interviews in Mandarin, five of whom elected to do so. Three Chinese participants, Linda, Kim and Jane, were key informants who engaged in regular brokering interactions and provided brokering artefacts. They and their brokers also gave permission for the interactions to be recorded. Linda and Kim provided digital records of their brokering interactions with peers on instant messaging applications *WeChat* and *Facebook Messenger* respectively, while Jane's brokering interactions with a learning advisor during face-to-face consultations were observed and audio-recorded. All data transcriptions were made available to participants for verification and comment as part of member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I undertook the translation and transcription of the Mandarin interviews and Chinese message exchanges, while engaging a professional translator for the audio-recorded advising consultations in Mandarin (Lee, 2017a).

I used thematic analysis to examine all the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003), and a micro-analytic approach based on Conversation Analysis (CA) for recorded brokering interactions. In the CA analysis, interactions were examined in terms of how epistemic asymmetry was managed in the course of turn-taking (Heritage, 2013). In this article, I draw from the thematic analysis of interviews, records of brokering interactions, and annotated essays associated with the three key informants. The following section discusses some answers to RQs 1–3 by way of highlighting the various types of brokering that participants engaged in, and the brokers they approached.

Findings and Discussion

My analysis reveals three types of brokering related to academic learning: resource brokering, language brokering, and literacy brokering. In discussing these types of brokering, I use the term *seeker* to refer to the participant who is seeking assistance, and *broker* to refer to the person who is approached to provide that assistance. I also distinguish between two types of brokers, peers (e.g., classmates) and non-peers (e.g., learning advisors). Peers are defined as those from similar social or status groups who do not have power over each other as a result of their positions or responsibilities (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001). Non-peers can be described in opposite terms to peers; they are those who are in more powerful positions or of higher status.

R*esource brokering* takes its name from an Oxford dictionary definition of *resource*: "A stock or supply of money, materials, staff, and other assets that can be drawn on by a person … in order to function effectively". Used in the context of academic learning, resource brokering refers to making available materials that the broker is already in possession of, and that allows the seeker to function effectively. For example, several participants asked their brokers to share their audio-recordings of lectures and photographs of the lecture slides captured using the brokers' mobile phones. Henry, for example, exchanged photographs of the tutor's detailed slide presentations with his classmate as the slides were not made available to students but were crucial for completing assignments and preparing for tests:

> During tutorial, we will use our [phone] camera to take photos of the answer on the screen. ... There could be some lessons that I did not take photos of. And some he did not take photos of. So when we meet, we are sharing with each other the answers we have. (Translated from Mandarin; Henry, Interview, 6 April 2016)

Resource brokering appears to offer the least valuable form of knowledge since it attends to the outward material form that must still be unpacked by the seekers themselves. Nonetheless, resource

brokering serves an important functional purpose for enabling access to otherwise forfeited information or knowledge.

Language brokering is about informally translating or interpreting the source language, English, into the seeker's target language (Tse, 1995, 1996). As an informal activity, language brokering underpinned many of the brokering interactions where brokers were co-nationals or ethno-linguals who spoke the seekers' native language, as indicated in studies such as Che (2013) and Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015). For several of the Chinese participants, their brokers used Mandarin to explain materials that were in English such as lecture notes and assignment instructions. For example, Henry, who was from China, approached a co-national to explain the lecture notes in their native Mandarin language. Kim who was from Taiwan, consulted Josh, a Chinese Malaysian, because he was fluent in both English and Mandarin. While the use of the seekers' native language during such interactions was implied during interview responses, it was clearly seen in the data on brokering interactions. Linda and Kim, for example, used Chinese in their digital message exchanges with their brokers (see Extract 1 for the exchange between Linda and her broker), while Jane communicated with a co-national learning advisor in Mandarin during their meetings (see Extract 2).

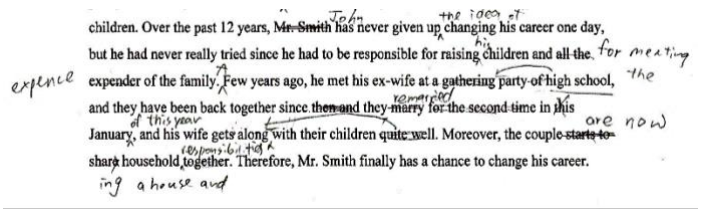
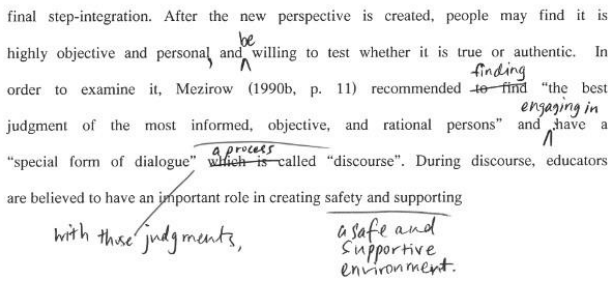
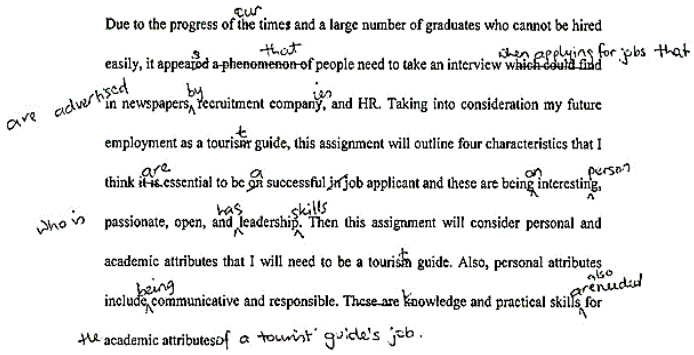
Literacy brokering takes language brokering further by making explicit the meaning and/or implications of texts or practices (Perry, 2009). According to Perry (2009), literacy brokering addresses different areas of knowledge: i) genre knowledge which refers to the features, purposes and organisation about academic texts such as essays and assignment instructions (e.g., APA referencing style, structure of a critical review essay); ii) linguistic knowledge which refers to grammar, vocabulary and other technical aspects about language (e.g., highlighting incorrect grammar usage); and iii) sociocultural knowledge which refers to the beliefs, values, and expectations associated with academic-related texts and practices (e.g., advice on how to interact with classmates).

Literacy brokering was provided by peers who had some particular academic expertise derived from having prior academic experience, and/or demonstrated accomplishment (e.g., obtaining high marks in a subject). Often, peer brokers explicated genre knowledge related to particular academic texts and practices they were already familiar with. For example, Linda, who was in a postgraduate bridging programme, was required to enrol in papers that were taken by second or third year students. Linda approached Emily, a co-national classmate in her final year of study, who was able to explain to Linda various academic practices related to assignment submission. On the other hand, Sarah and Henry were undergraduates whose classmates were similarly first-year students. Realising that their classmates were not able to help them with their questions, they found among their social networks co-national *seniors*, fellow students who were one or two years ahead of them in similar study programmes. Their respective seniors not only had prior academic experience, but also did well in the subjects Sarah and Henry needed help with. Co-national seniors were thus able to help Sarah and Henry better understand disciplinary concepts and interpret challenging test questions.

While studies such as Montgomery and McDowell (2009) and Zappa-Hollman and Duff (2015) have identified classmates and other peers as a common source of academic peer support, these findings provide a more detailed understanding of different types of peers and their potential limitations. Peers in the same academic level were not typically more knowledgeable about academic matters than the seekers themselves. Rather, it was peers who had accumulated academic-related hindsight over a period of time who were approached as brokers.

Literacy brokering was also provided by non-peer brokers but mostly related to linguistic knowledge. Such non-peer brokers were the learning advisors, typically English-speaking academic staff at a centralised or departmental unit at the institution. The availability of learning advisors for consultation was promoted on the university website during orientation sessions and posted on faculty noticeboards. While learning advisors supported all areas of learning, consultations commonly focused on writing-related issues. The key informants consulted learning advisors on most occasions when they had writing assignments. The annotated draft writing obtained from the key informants illustrates how learning advisors addressed various aspects of linguistic knowledge (Table 2). They revised students' sentence construction by introducing additional words or re-ordering words to make sentence meaning clearer or more coherent; introduced appropriate vocabulary or corrected words; and made changes to incorrect grammatical expression.

Table 2: Analysis of Samples of Annotated Writing by Learning Advisors

Sample of annotated writing	Aspects of linguistic knowledge brokered
 children. Over the past 12 years, ~~Mr. Smith~~ John has never given up the idea of changing his career one day, but he had never really tried since he had to be responsible for raising his children and ~~all the~~ for meeting the expender of the family. Few years ago, he met his ex-wife at a gathering ~~party of~~ high school, and they have been back together since ~~then and~~ they remarried ~~marry for the second time~~ in this January of this year, and his wife gets along with their children quite well. Moreover, the couple ~~starts to~~ are now share household responsibility together. Therefore, Mr. Smith finally has a chance to change his career. ing a house and expence **Sample 1. Kim, Annotated essay, 12 April 2016**	*Sentence construction* E.g., "his wife gets along quite well with their children", instead of "his wife gets along with their children quite well" *Vocabulary* E.g., "remarried" instead of "marry for the second time"; "expense" instead of "expender" *Grammar* E.g., "are now sharing a house" instead of "starts to share household"
 final step-integration. After the new perspective is created, people may find it is highly objective and personal, and be willing to test whether it is true or authentic. In order to examine it, Mezirow (1990b, p. 11) recommended ~~to find~~ finding "the best judgment of the most informed, objective, and rational persons" and engaging in have a "special form of dialogue" a process ~~which is~~ called "discourse". During discourse, educators are believed to have an important role in creating safety and supporting with these judgments, a safe and supportive environment. **Sample 2. Linda, Annotated essay, 26 April 2016**	*Sentence construction* E.g., "engaging in a special form of dialogue with those judgments", instead of "have a special form of dialogue" *Vocabulary* E.g., "a process" instead of "which is called" E.g., "a safe and supportive environment" instead of "safety and supporting" *Grammar* E.g. "finding" instead of "to find"
 Due to the progress of our the times and a large number of graduates who cannot be hired easily, it appeared ~~a phenomenon of~~ that people need to take an interview when applying for jobs that ~~which could find~~ in newspapers, are advertised by recruitment company, is and HR. Taking into consideration my future employment as a tourism tourist guide, this assignment will outline four characteristics that I think ~~it is~~ are essential to be a on successful in job applicant and these are being on interesting, person passionate, open, and has leadership skills. Then this assignment will consider personal and academic attributes that I will need to be a tourism tourist guide. Also, personal attributes include being communicative and responsible. ~~These are~~ also are included knowledge and practical skills for the academic attributes of a tourist guide's job. who is **Sample 3. Jane, Annotated essay, 10 June 2016**	*Sentence construction* E.g., "personal attributes include being communicative and responsible", instead of "personal attributes include communicative and responsible" *Vocabulary* E.g., "when applying for jobs that are advertised in newspapers" instead of "which could find in newspapers" E.g., "tourist guide" instead of "tourism guide" *Grammar* E.g., "characteristics that I think are essential to be successful" instead of "characteristics that I think it is essential to be a successful"

Similar to how EAL students called on native English speakers to check for language errors in their writing (Che, 2013; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015), learning advisors were seen as experts in English language and academic writing. However, these non-peer brokers were also used for practical reasons. According to the key informants, advisors' corrections of their draft writing were often directly incorporated in students' final submitted work so as to increase the quality of their work and earn a higher grade. For example, Kim explained during an interview, she was concerned with ensuring that

her writing was free of error so that she would be awarded marks based on her mastery of the subject, rather than be penalised for her language mistakes (Kim, Interview, 17 May 2016).

Unlike studies that suggest EAL students' preference for peer over non-peer brokers for writing-related assistance (Che, 2013; Nam & Beckett, 2011; Séror, 2011), these findings highlight the strategic use of non-peer brokers as proof-readers to meet seekers' academic goals. Furthermore, while such literacy brokering of linguistic knowledge made explicit the technical details of writing, participants did not necessarily treat such brokering as opportunities for improving their written English. One important implication of this finding is therefore the pedagogical ambiguity of learning advisors.

While genre and linguistic knowledge were commonly sought after, there were fewer instances of sociocultural knowledge being brokered. One example can be found in a *WeChat* exchange between Linda and Emily, about a group assignment (Extract 1). A domestic student and group leader nicknamed 'Boss' (because of her reputation as an academic over-achiever), had proposed a presentation topic in an email to the group which Linda and Emily were part of. After Linda complained to Emily about the overly academic nature of the topic, Emily offered advice to Linda about how to respond to Boss:

Extract 1: WeChat message exchange between Linda and Emily (Emily: White box, Linda: Grey box)

Turn #	WeChat message
1	**7 May 2016 12:46**
	要不你单独发学霸提提意见
	Why don't you send an individual message to Boss and offer your opinion
2	或者就是你写出来周五给她看看
	Or you can write it out and let her take a look on Friday
3	嗯嗯，我想的是看看具体背景，有个成熟的想法了再告诉她
	Ok okay, I'm thinking of reading the specific background information, after I have a developed idea then I will tell her

Emily the broker provides two suggestions on how to respond to Boss's proposed presentation topic: either replying directly to Boss's email (turn #1), or waiting until a later time to talk to her in person (turn #2). As Emily has experienced working in groups for other subjects, her suggestions reflect particular beliefs and values she has about communicating with group members—that is, suggesting a different opinion should be done privately. Linda readily aligns herself with Emily's point of view through her acknowledgement of Emily's advice, and the subsequent announcement of her course of action, a variation of Emily's suggested responses.

Another example of brokering sociocultural knowledge occurred during a consultation between Jane and Tim, a co-national learning advisor who provided advice about adopting a particular study attitude as seen in Extract 2:

Extract 2: Consultation between Jane and Tim

Turn #	Transcription

1	Jane:	… 我觉得那老师应该会，看一下是怎么说。万一是外国学生写的，他肯定知道他不太了解什么东西嘛，对吧？ … I feel the teacher can find whether it is written by a foreign student or not when he is marking the assignment. He doesn't think that foreign students know much about it, right?
2	Tim:	但是，你应该反过来想。是你要来这儿上学。 But you should think of it this way: It is you who has come here to study.
3	Jane:	((slight laughter))
4	Tim:	对吧？他没逼着你来这儿上学。是你要来这儿上学。所以你应该改变自己去适应他们这种，他的这种题目。 Right? He didn't force you to be a student here. It is you who want to study overseas. Therefore, you need to adapt yourself to their requirements such as assignment topics like this.
5	Jane:	嗯。 Oh.

Jane expresses her concern that she is disadvantaged in the assignment, as being a foreigner, she does not know much about the New Zealand related topic (turn #1). However, Tim does not respond empathetically as expected (turn #2), to which Jane responds with an embarrassed laugh for not having a view that aligns with the advisor's view. In turn #4, Tim states plainly and strongly that it is Jane who needs to change her attitude and adapt to the assignment requirements, and by implication, the host institution in general. Jane's final response in turn #5 is an acknowledgement token (oh) which indicates her acceptance of his particular point of view. The presence of sociocultural knowledge in brokering interactions thus suggests that academic support goes beyond addressing assignment-specific concerns (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015).

Conclusion

The above findings and discussion provide some insight into the nature of informal academic learning among international EAL students. Firstly, the most optimal form of brokering appears to be done by ethno-lingual peer brokers such as co-national classmates or seniors who have prior experience or expertise in some area of study. With the ability to communicate in EAL students' native language, these peer brokers provide academic support in a socially and culturally familiar context. Faculty staff could consider facilitating peer brokering opportunities, such as inviting seniors or relatively more experienced students to mentor first-year international EAL students, taking into account potential matches in terms of language and cultural backgrounds.

Secondly, the most valuable type of brokering would appear to be the linguistic brokering provided by learning advisors whose feedback translates into improved short-term academic results. While the pedagogical aspect of advisory consultations was not examined in this research, future studies could consider how such brokering interactions could better serve the longer-term academic writing needs of students.

Finally, while both peers and non-peers served as brokers, peer brokers were more significant by virtue of their social presence in students' lives as fellow students. Academic support should not be limited to specialised staff but should be seen as co-existing with informal brokering interactions that takes place in the social spaces of students. This study has provided a glimpse into how such informal brokering interactions among a small sample of students at one particular New Zealand university. One possible direction for future research is to investigate the extent of peer brokering interactions among different academic levels of students so as to better understand the strengths, as well as potential limitations of peer support. In this way, researchers themselves can function as brokers between international students and the institutions that host them.

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