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Surviving as an English Teacher in the West: A Case Study of Iranian English Teachers in Australia

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of social integration and professional recognition of non-English-speaking-background (NESB) teachers of English in Australia. The case study profiles two Iranian postgraduate students of English teaching in an Australian university and describes their struggle to construct a social and professional identity. The students' intercultural interaction strategies within their academic and professional community are explored and compared with those of their native colleagues. This paper emerged from a larger-scale qualitative study on identification of second language interaction strategies of postgraduate international students in Australia. The discussions can help Iranian English teachers to gain a foretaste of the ongoing struggles they may face as nonnative English teachers in English-speaking countries.

Introduction

One aspect of language that often troubles non-English-speaking-background (NESB) English teachers in the West is the interpersonal dimension: how to establish networks within their second language community, how to develop their professional and social identity, how to avoid marginalization, and how to avoid feeling different from or inferior to their local native-speaker colleagues.

Gee's (2005) sociolinguistic theory suggests that language is composed of a set of dynamic "Discourses," rather than fixed rules. Gee (2004a) introduces the notion of Discourse with capital D to refer to the actual language in use in a given social context. Based on Gee's theory, second-language proficiency is relative and depends on the extent of the learner's exposure to different social Discourses. Exposure to different social settings facilitates proficiency and confidence for engagement in similar social interactions.

Despite this recent emphasis on the social aspect of language learning, ESL/EFL classroom practice in most countries still lacks interpersonal language interactions. As a

result, NESB immigrants or students who move to the West sometimes suffer from a serious mismatch between their prior experiences and their social and interpersonal needs within their target community (Sawir, 2005). Even NESB English learners who reach a proficiency level that makes them eligible to teach English in their home countries may have only had exposure to the Discourses of classrooms, and therefore lack the confidence to engage in informal social interactions, particularly with their native English-speaking colleagues. A few studies have recently focused on the construction and development of NESB professional and social identity in English speaking countries (Miller, 2004). This study, however, focuses on the struggles of Iranian-background English teachers in English-speaking countries. It addresses questions such as: Is the Discourse of informal social interactions as developed as formal classroom Discourse in NESB English teachers? If not, how can this problem impact the construction of their social and professional identity and their integration and recognition within their target community?

The Study

This study is part of a larger study on the social interaction strategies of international students in an Australian university. It is a case study of two postgraduate international students who moved to Australia to study for their PhD in TESOL. The participants have a background of teaching English in Iran and both arrived in Australia less than six months prior to data collection. Dara taught English in a secondary school for seven years before moving to Australia. Saba taught English in a college in Iran for six years before moving to Australia.

Data were generated by videorecording focused interviews with participants, audiorecording their tearoom conversations and electronic journals. Data recording started with audiorecording four one-hour sessions of tearoom conversation in the faculty staffroom. These were later transcribed. Ten questions emerged out of the transcribed conversations, which were used later in a focused interview with the participants. The interview was videotaped and later transcribed. The audio- and videorecordings started in September 2008 and were completed in February 2009. The collection of the participants' electronic journals was continued through the whole course of the research, which lasted two years.

Context of Exploration

This study took place at a large university in Melbourne, a metropolitan city with a diverse population. The university, where up to one hundred different languages other than English are spoken, provided a perfect research ground for the observation and exploration of intercultural communicative behavior. Living, studying and working in Melbourne provides a context where people from a variety of non-English-speaking backgrounds are involved in daily face-to-face intercultural interactions. On arrival in multicultural Melbourne, people from each of these cultural backgrounds need to adjust not only to Anglo-Australians, but to a variety of communities with which they might share very little cultural history. Not only do they have to communicate in a language

other than their mother tongue, but they need to comprehend and respond to an array of world Englishes.

In the Faculty of Education, the site of this study, there are almost 400 postgraduate [Higher Degree Research--HDR] students, the majority of whom are international students. The top five countries students come from are China, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and Hong Kong. The diversity of international students has resulted in great sociocultural and linguistic diversity, making the Faculty an ideal setting in which to carry out this language socialization project.

The Education Faculty along with the Research Graduate School accommodate research students in shared offices. On each floor, there is a tearoom that is used for morning tea and lunch. The tearooms have free tea and coffee, crockery, a microwave, and tables and chairs. Both postgraduate students and staff use the facilities. These tearooms are the sites of daily interactions between the Faculty staff and postgraduate students. For this project, focusing on English used in social encounters, the tearooms were ideal sites for recording casual conversations between postgraduate students.

Interview Responses

Citizens of multicultural capitals are familiar with terms like *migrant*, *refugee*, *minority groups*, or *labor force* to mark the Other (Pavlenko & Piller, 2001; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). In Western, English-speaking, Australian universities, the term *international student* labels markedness, difference, and Otherness (Ryan & Carroll, 2005). The term is tied to deficiency in English, compensation on achievement, and passiveness. International students in Australian universities are regarded as if they are similar to each other and different from local students (Sawir, 2005).

On enrollment, all students are designated as either local students or international students. International students are those who are distant in some way, and for official purposes, are those who do not come from Australia. Therefore, the construction of an “international student identity” or “local student identity” seems inevitable for all students from the day of their enrollment.

However, education providers and local communities in general seem to have a policy of encouraging interaction between newcomers and locals. As international students, both Saba and Dara showed concern about the need to interact with the local community, not only to improve their English but also to learn the culture and the appropriate socialization patterns. Saba explained:

When I first came to Australia, because I was teaching English, I was very excited to be coming to this English speaking country, and improve my English, so I tried my best to improve all aspects, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and I am very optimistic, I mean I don't need to worry about my future job. I mean I already come from already a very good job, so I tried my best just to improve my English. I come to all seminars, workshops, anything you know my English was

not good enough even though I taught English for seven years, but I need to do many discussions, and a lot of discussions is initiated by local students. You know their response in seminars is very good but we, as international students, you know and when they talk about cultural things, footy and those kind of things, you know we don't have that background, so we can't give any comments, so sometimes we feel isolated from the discussion and the time we have a lot things, not only English but we have to [get] accustomed to their accent here, and also all-English environment, and the culture. (Saba, interview)

Saba made it clear that living and studying in an English-speaking country is essential for a NESB English teacher. She pointed out that she likes to take part in discussions and interactions with the local community, not only to improve her English but also to learn the culture and get familiar with the context and environment. Dara also pointed to the same objective as a major reason for choosing Australia as a destination for her postgraduate studies. Other NESB English teachers in this study have realized that unless they live and interact with the local English-speaking community in an English-speaking environment, they can't back up their teaching with the confidence of a comprehensive competence in English language, culture, and society. Therefore, while many of them have had the opportunity to study for their PhDs in their own countries, they have made this decision to move to Australia to study in an English-speaking context. A major goal for them is to maximize their interactions not only within their educational institute but outside and within the social context as well. However, despite this awareness and conscious investment, a majority of them complain about not having enough chances to mingle with the locals, and they believe that they do not have sufficient social interaction with their local peers. As Dara explains:

Sometimes I think that a PhD students have very limited opportunity to mix with these people because all of them are too busy, and besides the academic stuff, we have some family-oriented responsibilities so after we study, we go home to spend time with our family. I find that nobody is here to talk to me, so they don't spend time with me just with friends of my country (Dara, interview)

A summary report of two hundred PhD students in Australia (Deumert, et al., 2005), shows that international PhD students make up one fourth of the student body of Australian universities. Of these students, 68% females and 63% male students reported suffering from loneliness and isolation. The extracts above exemplify these statistics and stress the fact that international PhD students in Australian universities need to socialize and mix with the local and academic community. For them, socialization is the major channel for interaction and mixing with their academic community. This highlights the fact that international students need English not only for their academic purposes but also for socialization and mixing with the community. Saba supports Dara's point and adds,

In my case, I have no chance no contact with local friends except for my supervisor, I mean I only talk to my supervisor, but I have not any local friend, I mean I could not find local friends (Saba, interview)

Graduate students, particularly international students, are concerned with their limited interactions within their academic community. They both complained about the isolation of working on their own and talking only to their supervisors. They were eager to meet and talk to more people in their faculty and have a chance to mix with local students and staff to interact with the local community.

Interaction at “Hi and bye” level

Aside from the general complaint of having little access to local peers and friends to mingle with, Dara and Saba mentioned that even when they found the chance for social interaction with the local community, their tearoom conversations were short and reduced to “Hi,” smile, and “Bye.” Saba blamed being in rush as the major reason why local students do not tend to stretch out their interactions with their international peers. But Dara blamed her lack of exposure to the discourse of socialization as the major barrier.

Dara: Yeah, just hi and bye... yeah, you know. . . language of socialization is very difficult for us, ... we don't know... what sort of discourse local people here use.

Saba: Yes,... we just don't know... what sort of reaction.... you say hi... how are you ... and I say good thanks,... but I don't know... what to say next. . . how to continue.

Dara: How to keep going, . . . we don't know. . . . that's the problem, yeah, we can talk about our problems, sometimes we talk about our study and also sometimes family problems, but. . . we don't know what sort of topics to speak with local students.

(interview)

English teaching and learning in Asia is mainly focused on the formal contexts of English use rather than informal conversations (Sawir, 2005). This situation is more or less similar in Iran. In addition, in most contexts of English use in Iran, there is no face-to-face interaction with native speakers. This makes Discourses of casual conversation with native English speakers quite unfamiliar to most international students. Dara's point is in line with Gee's (2004b) argument that second language learning is not a holistic process but an acquisition of infinite social Discourses shaped and emerged in different social settings, including academic discourses or tearoom conversations. The conclusion that can be drawn here is that a second-language learner may be proficient in certain Discourses but not proficient enough to engage in several others. The degree of proficiency depends on the amount of exposure to particular Discourses. In line with Gee's remarks, other international students we have studied agreed with Dara, that they feel much more proficient and comfortable in engaging in academic discussions than tearoom casual conversations. This, they explain, is simply for their lack of previous exposure to Discourses of casual tea-break conversations.

Being a Legitimate English Teacher

NESB English teachers struggle to prove themselves as legitimate professionals in English-speaking countries (Miller, 2004). The criteria of native-like English fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation for English teachers place a great amount of pressure on NESB English teachers to be native-like. This pressure makes their English interactions, particularly with native speakers, very stressful. As Dara pointed out, they feel their professional legitimacy is being judged, and they may choose to avoid interactions with native speakers to avoid exposing themselves to judgements:

Dara: The most difficult thing for me is that. . . you know. . . because I am an English language teacher. . . you know. . . I feel I expose myself to a lot of evaluation, I mean they say, oh you are an English teacher and your English is like this!

Saba: [laugh] Yeah, they say, you are an English teacher! Really!

(interview)

Saba also pointed to the same feeling of being afraid to speak in English among native colleagues. She mentioned being aware of her native listeners' concentration shifting from her message content to the message form when she speaks with them.

When I am teaching in classroom to all international students I feel confident in my English and comfortable and I think I concentrate only on the point I want to teach. . . the content. . . but when I am in staffroom talking to native English teachers I feel very uncomfortable. . . always watching my pronunciation . . . stressing . . . you know. . . and this even makes me make more mistakes.
(interview)

Although feeling confident may have no direct correlation with English proficiency (Miller, 2004), most international students who are themselves English teachers declare that they feel uncomfortable speaking with native speakers who know they are English teachers.

Dara: I don't think I'm uncomfortable in a bad way. . . but sometimes. . . I'm afraid I will be evaluated. . . that's the thing that makes me uncomfortable, but. . . this could be just my thought.

Saba: Yeah, we are just very conscious of whether we make mistakes or not, you know. . . because English is not our native language.

(Dara & Saba, interview)

The expectation of having native-like English makes NESB English teachers very conscious about their English and turns what can be a friendly casual chat into a stressful situation, which they tend to avoid. As Gee (2005) points out, newcomers to a community always feel like outsiders who are under pressure to do the right thing, say the right thing, and behave in the right way to help them get inside the circle.

Getting into the Circle

Both participants reported the sense of not being part of the community, feeling like outsiders, and lacking a sense of intimacy or belonging. Dara pointed to her unwillingness to engage in the inner-circle Discourses, which she thinks is partially because of her inability to understand the content of local discourses. But Saba is a different case. She seems to be very sociable and willing to get close and enter the circle. She is willing to spend time learning the language of the inner circle and consciously invests in strategies that can help her get there. She says,

Saba: I am actually a sessional English teacher at Melbourne College, so most of my colleagues are local people. . . but we don't talk to each other often, it is very different from Iran, in Iran we like talking to each other, but here. . . they don't talk in the break time or lunch-time, we just get in to the office, and just say hi . . . very different from our culture, basically I really... really want to find close friends from Australia, but so far, I couldn't. . . I mean I talk to some of them, but they are not really close friends.

Dara: Why? What do you think is the barrier?

Saba: I don't know... sometimes. . . I don't understand them, . . . when they make jokes, it is very difficult to understand their jokes. . . what I am doing now, I'm learning now to understand their jokes. . . how to make jokes with them . . . how to respond, you know. . . just to response with a very sharp answer, like oh no that's good, really great . . .

(interview)

The fact that Saba is an English teacher at a college in Australia shows that her English level is adequate for teaching in a formal classroom context. However, she is still unable to connect to her local peers because of her inability to understand their break-time conversations. Saba's attempts to sound like her local colleagues and enter their social circle have failed because her English is too formal or boring for their conversations. She says she is learning how to respond "with a sharp answer, a quick joke, a quick reply to their jokes" to avoid sounding different. Being able to exchange inner circle jokes, compliment, short quick comments, creates a sense of belonging to the circle for her. This is exactly what Saba is unable to do and exactly the reason why she does not feel a sense of belonging to the circle.

The nature of workplace relationships in some countries like Iran is very formal. Probably what Saba and other nonnative English users who come from a background of years of using English in such contexts need to practice is this casual tone in the workplace. However, the problem here is that sometimes getting used to exchanging these words or speaking colloquial English may not match with the identity of some of adult students. Even if they are conscious that in Australia it is quite common, coming from a background of speaking English in formal contexts, they may feel very uncomfortable about adopting this tone.

The risk of marginalization was higher for Dara despite the similarity of her background with Saba's. Saba was generally more outgoing, sociable, and willing to get involved in social interactions, while Dara tried to avoid social interaction with her local peers and limited her communication to minimal formal interactions. In other words, Dara's avoidance strategy was impeding negatively on her social integration within her academic community and ultimately on her professional identity.

Conclusion

Iranian-educated English teachers in Australia value social interactions within their workplace as the major channel for integration and networking. They feel the need to get connected to the "local" community, which they perceive as a "source of information." Newly arrived international postgraduate students majoring in English are conscious that they can improve not only their English but also their "Australian way of life" through close contact with Australians. However, they complain either that they have no opportunity to mix with the local community or that their interactions are superficial and limited to "hi and bye." They feel isolated and not integrated within the community and suffer from isolation of working on their own and lacking contact with their local peers and staff.

Some of the factors that were highlighted in this study as playing part in such disenchantment were:

1. Unfamiliarity with "tearoom" conversations

Gee (2005) distinguishes between primary and secondary discourses. He argues that primary discourses are acquired in the family during childhood while secondary discourses are acquired once the person starts to interact with society. In the context of this study, casual workplace interactions are the secondary discourses which international students find difficult to engage in. This problem is due to their lack of exposure to "tearoom conversations" and the mismatch between students' beliefs about the English language and their actual need for socialization in English.

2. The issue of face in a new environment

Gee (2005) describes newcomers to a community as "authentic beginners" as opposed to the "old timers." Authentic beginners constantly feel the pressure of doing and saying the right thing. Newly arrived international students in this study are authentic beginners who sometimes prefer to be evasive and avoid interactions with the local community until they find the time to explore the interaction norms in the new environment. Newcomers avoid interactions with old timers to save face and to avoid being misjudged as being rude or talking inappropriately.

3. Cultural gaps

Participants in a related study, despite the variety in their background, mentioned that aside from the language problem, they could not engage in conversations that were culturally loaded. Jokes and local Discourses are among the most challenging Discourses for them to engage in.

4. *Difficulty in engagement in local Discourses*

Gee (2005) argues that “old timers” in a community are privy to the local discourses, while “authentic beginners” find them difficult to understand. Newcomers find it difficult to engage in many tearoom conversations about current local themes.

5. *Asymmetrical power relationship and legitimacy*

Newcomer NESB English teachers feel uncomfortable speaking with local teachers for fear of having the legitimacy of their professional identity as English teachers judged. They constantly imagine that native speakers are listening to their pronunciation or grammar mistakes in English and questioning their legitimacy.

Despite the similarities in their backgrounds, the two participants in the study selected different strategies in their struggles to be recognized as English teachers in Australia. Dara chose to avoid social, informal, and—in her opinion—redundant interactions with her local peers to avoid the risk of making mistakes and losing face. Her avoidance strategy led to her further isolation within her workplace community. Saba, on the other hand, showed herself to be a risk taker. She tried to engage in interactions. However, she also admitted that she finds engagement in tearoom conversations much more difficult than her formal interactions with her supervisor. Both Saba and Dara admitted that their Discourses for tearoom lunch-time conversations are less developed than their formal English language Discourses. The reflection of this mismatch could be observed in their struggles to be heard as legitimate English teachers among their native peers and to survive as nonnative English teachers in an English-speaking country.

About the Author

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