

Narrowing the Gap between EFL and ESL: A Case Study of an International Graduate Student's Development of Academic Literacy in the U.S.

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Abstract

The sharp increasing number of international students in the U.S. has warranted more research into the academic literacy development of those students whose first language is not English. A great number of studies have found that how to socialize themselves into the new discourse communities at university remains a challenge for most international students because of language and cultural barriers. This case study examines how a graduate student from Korea developed her academic English when pursuing her degree in the U.S. The study demonstrated her strategies of surviving the academic life despite the language limitations and investigated the factors that influenced her language development. Implications for how to support international graduate students in improving English academic literacy are discussed.

Key words: international graduate student, English academic literacy, linguistic factors, discourse community, case study

Introduction

The sharp increasing number of international students in the U.S. in recent years has warranted more research into the academic literacy development of those students whose first language (L1) is not English. How to socialize themselves into the new discourse communities at university is a challenge for many international students who study in an English-speaking country. Although they have passed the Standard English proficiency tests before being admitted to the higher education institutions, most international students from EFL countries, e.g., China and

South Korea, feel academic literacy an obstacle for them to be completely accepted by their new discourse communities. No matter what kind of English training they have received in their home countries, they oftentimes find themselves forced to learn academic English all over again when entering university in the U.S. In other words, there seems a gap between learning the English language in EFL contexts and using the language in ESL contexts, which becomes a barrier to international students' academic achievement.

Spack (1997) defined academic literacy as “the ability to read and write the various texts assigned in college” (p.4), but it seemed to have only touched upon students' interactions with written texts. The scope of this term was expanded in Braine's (2002) description of advanced academic literacy for graduate students, which included building relationship with people in their disciplines and developing effective research, writing as well as social skills to be integrated into their academic community. Likewise, Casanave and Li (2008) argued that graduate students need to acquire advanced language skills and new cultural practices to socialize themselves into their discipline and become a professional members of the discourse community.

Unlike immigrant students, international students who learned English as a foreign language in their home country stay in the U.S. for a relatively short period of time only for academic purposes. Many of them find it challenging to adjust themselves into the new environment due to the insufficient preparation linguistically, culturally as well as socially. Shifting from an EFL context to an ESL context means more frequent and also more skillful use of the English language. Moreover, language use in the academic settings requires higher-level proficiency while the international students' native language and culture are often regarded as major impediments of their successful transition into school life in the English-speaking countries (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Lacina, 2002; Lee, 1997).

As a Chinese academic who has been studying and working in the U.S. for many years, I am very interested in how international students (especially those from EFL countries) develop their academic literacy in ESL settings (e.g., universities in the U.S.). Studies of nonnative English-speaking students' academic literacy mostly investigated undergraduate-level academic tasks (e.g., Braine, 2002; Horowitz, 1986) and rarely addressed international graduate students' unique needs to understand and satisfy the expectations from their disciplines and future profession. Drawing upon the acculturation model of second language acquisition (Schumann 1990), this case study examined how an international graduate student improve English academic literacy in her Ph.D. program at a research university in the U.S. The main questions drive this research are: 1) what are some difficulties an international student faced in adapting herself into the academic discourse communities in L2; and 2) what are some strategies she adopted to overcome the challenges? More importantly, the study aims to find out how a teacher might help this student improve her English academic literacy so as to achieve success in school. The findings will contribute to our understanding of the multiple factors influencing international students' language learning and thus help generate implications for graduate programs to better support their international students academically and professionally.

Case Study Design and the Language Learner

The primary method of this research is a single case study, in which I took the role as a teacher researcher. My participant was an international graduate student Jenny (pseudonym), who was from South Korea and had been studying in the U.S. for more than two years. I became her English tutor in a service learning course and she was happy to work with me for my research. Before we met, I was surprised to know that a third-year Ph.D. student like Jenny would need help to improve her English proficiency. I was also curious about how she survived

the first two years' academic life if her language ability was limited. In the meantime, I was eager to help Jenny and investigate what hindered her language development. My teaching in the tutorials was informed by Freeman and Freeman's (2014) book *Essential linguistics: What teachers need to know to teach*, in which they included second language acquisition theories and presented basic concepts of linguistics (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.). The study had also given me the opportunity to review ESL teaching methods by connecting linguistic theories with teaching practices.

I met Jenny for the first time at a café on campus. We had a casual chat during the first meeting and became friends immediately, because we are about the same age and share similar cultural background. In addition, Jenny was very nice and friendly. She appreciated the opportunity to have a tutor as well as conversation partner and seemed very self-motivated to improve her English. I observed from the first meeting that Jenny was not confident in speaking English, and she would always pause for a few seconds before responding to my questions. Later, I found that it was not because she was pondering the questions, but because she was doing translation for the answers in her mind – from Korean to English. Such a finding told me that Jenny was not used to thinking in English and her language identity remained Korean. Therefore, my primary goal for the tutorials was to help her build the confidence in speaking English and use the English language more naturally in various contexts.

Jenny was born and brought up in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea. She received typical Korean education until college, where she majored in early childhood education. Then she worked as a kindergarten teacher in Seoul for three years before coming to the U.S. for a Ph.D. degree in early childhood education. Jenny told me that it was her first time studying and living in an English-speaking country. Although she started to learn English since primary school, she

had not actually used that language until coming to the U.S. Neither her study at college nor the work at kindergarten required her to speak English. We discussed about the issue and both of us agreed that many English learners in Korea or China might be in the similar situation – they learn English for many years, just to pass the exams in school. There is no context in real life that provides them with opportunities to use the language for daily communication. In other words, the English language is not authentic to them. Additionally, the English education in public schools in China and Korea still relies heavily on the grammar-translation method. That's why Jenny tended to do the mental translation every time that she tried to output the language.

Another important point about Jenny in our first meeting was both her weakness and strengths in learning English. Jenny said candidly that she did not like English, which indicated her resistance to the language. Her strong linguistic-ego in L1 might be her weakness in improving L2 but she was out-going and very willing to meet new friends from different cultures, which on the other hand motivated her to learn and speak English. About one year ago, Jenny had a conversation partner, who was a native speaker of English and was interested in Korean culture. They met regularly for a year and visited many interesting places in town together. That experience helped Jenny with her oral English in daily life. Yet her native-speaker conversation partner moved to South Korea, so they had limited chances to talk after that. Moreover, Jenny wanted to improve her English in academic settings in particular, because she had a goal to become a faculty in higher education after graduation. Jenny realized that she had to speak fluent English to be qualified for that and she once failed in a job interview because of her low English proficiency. Therefore, I think her personality and goals for future life will be her strengths in improving English. Given that both of us are in the field of education, I especially hope I could help Jenny practice the discourse in our academic community.

Observations from the Tutorials

During our tutorials, I observed the language learner based on Freeman and Freeman's (2014) framework of the essential linguistic factors that an English language teacher should know to teach more effectively. Those factors had helped me better understand Jenny's challenges as well as strategies of developing her academic English.

Phonology

I observed from our first tutorial that Jenny had an accent in speaking English, although it was not strong. Her lack of confidence in speaking English can also be partially explained by her concern about the pronunciation because there are several phonemes in English that do not exist in Korean, which poses challenges for Jenny. For example, when she tried to pronounce the movie name "Avatar," I heard it as /æba:ta:/, and it prevented me from understanding her. I also tried the phonetics practice with Jenny and found that she had difficulties in pronouncing the word "fur" because there was no sound like [f] or [ɜ:] in Korean. That finding demonstrated the influences of L1 on learning of L2 phonology. Although she could pronounce [θ] and [ð] correctly, Jenny said it was the first time for her to notice that "th" in different words should be pronounced differently. I think such practices can be a good way for people to realize the importance of phonetics, even though Jenny's accent is not her main obstacle in communication.

I asked Jenny if she had ever worried about her pronunciation of English. Her answer was "always." However, when I asked whether she would mind a person speaking English with accent, she replied "no" and gave me an interesting example of her friend who spoke English with strong Korean accent. Jenny said that her friend's pronunciation was much worse than hers but everyone could understand him because he spoke English very fluently. Therefore, she thought accent or pronunciation did not matter that much in communication as long as one could produce English

sentences spontaneously and naturally. Actually, when Jenny noticed that I did not get her meaning even she repeated the word Avatar, she told me that the filming crew once went to China for a view shooting and also provided some background information of the movie. In this way, Jenny employed her strategies to help with the communication and it further proved to me that communicative competence is as important as (if not more important than) language abilities.

Morphology

When we discussed about morphology in the tutorial, it was not surprising to me that Jenny was not familiar with the notion of morphology and had never realized the importance of morphological knowledge in learning a new language. I explained to her that morphology was the scientific study of words and it would help us build vocabulary more independently. Jenny recalled that her English teachers in Korea did teach her some strategies of learning new words, such as prefixes and suffixes, and irregular verbs, but that's almost all her knowledge of morphology and she seemed not convinced that morphology was crucial in learning English. One of the reasons may be that Jenny is already an advanced learner of English and now her major concern is speaking, rather than reading or writing.

Nevertheless, I shared with Jenny a short article "Becoming a Writer" written by Junot Díaz, a Pulitzer Prize winner. We discussed the meaning of the words with affixes and I also asked her to underline the idiomatic or slang words that she was not familiar with. Although Jenny was cooperative in the activity, she did not think those reading methods would work efficiently for her. Jenny said that when she read, she usually focused on verbs in the sentences first so that she could read faster. If she could not grasp the meaning of the sentence with only the verbs, she would then look at the nouns to help with the comprehension. I remembered Jenny once told me that in the Korean language, verbs were placed before subjects and objects rather than in-between, which

might explain why she emphasized more on verbs when reading. This also provides implications to teachers that international students would bring their cognitive skills embedded in L1 to learning in L2. Thus it is critical for teachers to recognize those skills as resources and guide students in making good use all the resources available.

Syntax

For Jenny, one of the biggest problems she had in speaking English was that the sentence structure of Korean is quite different from that of English, so it would take her longer time to translate the sentence in mind before speaking it out. Especially, Jenny said that she had difficulties in participating in class discussions, which to some extent prevented her from becoming a member of the academic discourse community. When Jenny wanted to express her opinions in class, she had to write down her response and translate it into English before getting ready to speak. That long process oftentimes caused her to miss the discussion because her peers had already moved on to another topic while she was still doing the translation. The frustration that Jenny experienced in the class discussion reflects the negative influences of the grammar-translation method (GTM) which Korean English teachers use on the learners. Celce-Murcia (2001) contended that the goal of GTM was to “get the students to analyze the language rather than to use the language” (p.6). Natsir and Sanjaya (2014) also claimed that different from communicative language teaching (CLT), students were not required to communicate in the target language in the GTM, but that would bring difficulties for learners who were expected to use the target language in authentic situations. Furthermore, accuracy is emphasized in GTM (Harmer, 2007) and it might prohibit learners’ language output if errors are not tolerated in the communication. Although the GTM has some advantages in teaching reading and writing skills by focusing on vocabulary and grammar, it usually neglects the other important factors of language learning such as pronunciation,

phonology, and real context of language use. Jenny's case serves as an illustration of the drawbacks of GTM, and I think it will take time for her to skip the translation process and communicate in English directly.

In addition to speaking, Jenny also had some syntactical problems in English writing. She once brought a draft of her academic paper to the tutorial and asked me to help with the revision and editing. When I read Jenny's paper, I found that she tended to use long and complicated sentences in writing. The problem was that there were often more grammatical errors in those long sentences. For example, one of her sentences in the paper was: "Children's well-being (CWB) is even more complicated to define because a child is an agent with potential capabilities (Sen, 1999), as general well-being is also a difficult concept." There were two conjunctions in this sentence, *because* and *as*, but the relationship between the two clauses was not clear. There were not only a few sentences in her writing that contained more than two clauses but the structures of the sentences were loose and the meanings remained vague. I suggested Jenny reading those sentences aloud and see if she could detect some awkwardness of the sentences. By doing that, Jenny realized the lengthiness of her sentences, especially when she could not read them in one breath. Then we revised the long sentences together, dividing them into shorter sentences or adding more appropriate conjunctions to indicate the logic progression between the clauses. Jenny told me that Korean people preferred long sentences in academic papers, and there were more transitional words within one sentence in the Korean language. However, few of those transitional words in Korean have counterparts in English, so sometimes she had difficulties in choosing conjunctions in English. Notably, Jenny said she would seldom do translation from Korean to English when writing, which was quite different from her speaking experience. One of the reasons was that the sentences in her writing were much longer and more complicated than those in her

speaking so she was not able to translate them perfectly. Instead, she would try to find writing samples first and learn from those samples in terms of sentence structure, wording, organization, and etc. I asked Jenny what she thought was most challenging when writing the paper. She said that the most difficult thing for her was to make the sentences fancy and academic. I understand what she meant by “fancy” was to increase the sentence variety and complexity. In order to achieve that, Jenny searched for a large number of samples before starting writing. For the key sentences that she felt especially important in her writing, she would go to those samples and look for sentence templates to imitate. Jenny admitted that it was quite time-consuming but she had to do it, otherwise she would feel her sentences too basic and “childlike.” I shared with Jenny the strategies of making verbs active and nominalization in academic writing, which I learned from Freeman and Freeman (2014). She said no one had ever taught her this before and she would like to have a try of those strategies when revising the paper.

Additionally, reading her own sentences aloud also helped Jenny identify grammatical issues in her writing. Most of the time, she would pause if she felt there were some problems in the sentence and then we would discuss and fix the problems. When editing the paper together, we had a brief discussion on grammar. Not surprisingly, Jenny felt learning grammar boring and the grammar instructions she received in South Korea involved rote memorization as well as many drills. She found the best way for her to learn grammar was to ask someone to edit her writing and to point out the specific problems she had. When I asked Jenny whether she would like others to correct her grammar errors in speaking, she thought for a few seconds and replied “no,” because it would make her nervous and embarrassed. Therefore, teachers also need to think about different ways to integrate grammar instruction and correction in writing and speaking.

Discourse and Pragmatics

In order to help Jenny improve her oral proficiency, I would prepare some topics in regard of her study and work for every tutorial so that she would get opportunities to practice speaking in different settings. One of our topics was Jenny's dissertation proposal, which she was working on. I asked Jenny to tell me about her research project and explain to me some of the theories that she was going to use. I thought it would be a good way for her to develop communicative competence in the academic community. It took Jenny some time to explain clearly about the rationale of her study and I found the major difficulty for her was to find alternative ways to explain certain complicated terms to someone who did not understand them. Jenny was more confident in using the words that she had been already familiar with to talk about her research but when she needed to explain some concepts in different ways to people outside her field, she could not come up with sufficient expressions to paraphrase them. That said, Jenny picked up my words and expressions quickly. Sometimes, her word choice was not appropriate but I could still understand the meaning, so I would suggest another word and she found it very helpful to her. It also reinforced the idea that linguistic inputs are essential for language learners to enlarge their vocabulary and relieve the language anxiety.

During the semester we worked together, I also helped Jenny prepare for a presentation on her research proposal. Jenny had little experience in making presentations or speaking in front of a large audience. Even this time the audience would only be her advisory committee, she felt very nervous and was eager to seek help from those who seemed more experienced in making academic presentations than her. Jenny brought to the tutorial a rough draft of the PowerPoint slides that she made for the presentation and wanted me to make some comments and suggestions. We went through the slides one by one while I pointed out some places that was not clear to me as an

audience. In particular, we had a detailed discussion on how to start the presentation. I am not an expert on presentation or public speaking but I think oral communications bear some similarities with written communications. Therefore, I shared with Jenny some tips of writing an introduction, for example, to take the audience into consideration and build rapport with them. Just as we need to arouse the readers' interest in our topic and include a thesis in writing an introduction, I suggested Jenny making clear the theme and her main argument from the very beginning and providing an outline of the presentation so that the audience could be well prepared. Jenny was happy to take my advice, but she would also like me to give her some sentence templates for starting a presentation and she wanted to make sure all her sentences in the presentation were correct and appropriate. Obviously, Jenny realized that such a presentation would be different from our daily communications, in which she talked casually. The presentation was more formal and public. Furthermore, her audience were experts in the field so she needed to be more cautious to make all the terms and expressions clear and accurate. I understood Jenny's concern so I asked her to first talk me through the PowerPoints slides informally. By doing that, she could know in which parts she was more fluent than in the others. We also made some minor changes in the contents as well as in the order of the slides to make the presentation flow better.

In the following tutorial, Jenny brought a complete script she had written for her presentation, which included every sentence she was going to say. Before we met, she had been reading and trying to recite the script for three days. Nonetheless, she found it hard for her to memorize every word in the script, which actually made her even more stressed. I told Jenny that a good presentation was much more than just recitation. It should be a two-way communication between the presenter and the audience, so I encouraged her to practice in front of me. During the first practice, she held the script in hand and most of the time she just read it through. Although

Jenny spoke quite fluently with the script, she kept looking at the script with only a few glances at the PowerPoint slides, and she seldom made eye contacts with me. When listening, I wrote down the sentences that sounded awkward or unclear to me. The problem about those sentence was not the grammar but that they were too long or too complicated for oral communications. Therefore, I pointed them out to Jenny and asked whether she could express the ideas in some other ways that were easier for the audience to comprehend. Jenny admitted that most of those sentences were taken directly from her writing. It was also hard for her to memorize those long sentences but they were usually imitated from the writing samples that she found for her paper, so she thought they would make her sound more professional and academic. Even though she realized the awkwardness to recite those sentences in the presentation, she was not confident in rephrasing them without my help. Thus we worked together to paraphrase them by changing the vocabulary or the sentence structure. Jenny agreed that dividing those sentences into shorter and simpler ones helped her present more naturally. When practicing the presentation for the second time, she referred to the script for fewer times and managed to make more eye contacts with me.

This incident suggested to me that Jenny was not yet capable of using various sentence structures flexibly while presentations requires more skillful use of the language to achieve communicative purposes. Another thing that caught my attention in our discussion was that Jenny seemed to be more comfortable with writing rather than speaking in English. Thus, I encouraged Jenny to apply her strategies in learning English writing to improve her English speaking, for example, to look for some good samples of dialogues on a certain topic and intentionally imitate the sentences structures, wording, and expressions involved in the dialogues. In that way, Jenny might be able to compose English sentences spontaneously when speaking rather than relying too much on translation.

Sociocultural and Affective Factors

Sociocultural factors also have impacts on Jenny's language development. For instance, Jenny said that in many of her classes, professors liked to discuss the topic of diversity in education because it was an important issue in the context of U.S. Nevertheless, in South Korea, especially in the city she lived, there was very little cultural diversity. South Korea in general is a mono-cultural country and Jenny had little experience of dealing with the issues of cultural diversity in her previous work and study. Therefore, she could hardly participate in the class discussions due to her unfamiliarity with the topic.

Jenny brought up an issue that many international students might encounter when entering a new discourse community. They might not be familiar with certain discourses regarding a particular cultural topic in the specific context. Especially, if they do not have similar experience before, it will be hard for them to feel the relevancy of the topic to their life, not to mention taking a position or making an argument. My suggestion to Jenny was to open herself for the new topics and think about how she could apply what she learned from exploring the topic in her own context. For example, although South Korea is a mono-cultural country, there are still many immigrants living there with their kids. Jenny could imagine teaching those immigrant children in Seoul and talk about how she would deal with the cultural issues. She can also transfer the knowledge about cultural diversity learned from U.S. to her study and work in Korea. Jenny seemed to have been inspired and this suggestion had motivated her to read more about cultural diversity in early childhood education in order to understand the topic in her own context.

Besides those sociocultural factors, Jenny and I also had a discussion on her anxiety about her oral proficiency. She often told me how she was desperate about her oral English. For example, Jenny had a job on campus and her supervisor was also a multilingual speaker. She thought the

supervisor was nice because she understood the difficulties that Jenny had in oral communication and were quite patient when speaking to her. Once the supervisor wanted to discuss an issue with Jenny, so she asked Jenny some questions. However, the topic was unfamiliar to Jenny and she had never thought about the issue in English. As could be expected, Jenny was not prepared and she failed to respond efficiently. Although she understood the questions and had the answers in her mind, she did not know how to effectively express them in English. What was worse, when she found that she could not find appropriate ways to express herself in a formal setting, which demanded her English proficiency to show professionalism, she became more nervous and even gave up trying to clarify herself if misunderstandings were caused, because she was too embarrassed.

I think Jenny's problem in speaking English involves many affective factors. When talking to me, although she often had to pause to search in mind for words or expressions, she seldom felt nervous and could always find a way (even not a perfect way) to express herself. Probably it was because she took me as a tutor as well as friend and was not afraid of exposing her weakness in oral English to me. On the contrary, as a doctoral students studying in the U.S. for more than two years, Jenny wanted to show her English competence to others, especially in the working and academic settings, and she would become anxious if she failed to do so. Moreover, Jenny was very self-conscious and did not want to make errors in front of others when speaking, so her process of outputting the English language was comparatively long – she had to find the vocabulary or expression, do the translation and even practice in mind first before she actually spoke it out. Especially in front of her Korean peers, Jenny was always worrying that they would judge her by the English proficiency. Nevertheless, she felt much more relaxed talking to me in English because both of us are multilingual speakers and I don't speak Korean. This suggests to

me that teachers should take into consideration the affective factors of language learners when pairing them with conversation partners and we cannot assume that people feel comfortable talking in English to the others who share their first language or culture. I am glad that I can provide an authentic and less-stressful context for Jenny to practice English speaking.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, Jenny and I enjoyed working with each other and we had built up good working relationship as well as friendship through the tutorials. Jenny said she enjoyed talking to me every week, not only to improve her oral English, but also to share questions and concerns in study and work. In fact, Jenny did not use much English in daily life because most of her friends here were Korean and they never used English to communicate. As have mentioned above, she also felt reluctant to talk in class and participate in group discussions where she had to speak in front of many people. Rather, Jenny preferred one-to-one conversations, as what we did in the tutorials. She regarded it as a safe place for her to practice speaking where she could check with me whether her expressions were comprehensible or appropriate. In addition, she would not become nervous even when she was not able to find a good way to express herself since I always attended to her carefully, trying to understand her and would provide suggestions for expression. Other benefits Jenny thought she got from the tutorials include my substantive comments on her writing and presentation.

Jenny's case may represent many language learners, in particular international students, who are inclined to hang out with people who share their first language and culture when going to a foreign environment. However, that will inhibit their L2 acquisition due to limited language input and output. Jenny told me that she found it not a necessity for her to use English on a daily basis even in the U.S. That's why her oral proficiency was developing very slowly. I asked

Jenny whether she had some other ways to improve her English besides our tutorials. She said that she loved Disney movies and often took them as learning resources. Since Disney movies are supposed to attract children, the language use in the movies is comparatively simpler and clearer. Jenny would imitate the expressions used by the characters in the movies, as well as their pronunciation and intonation. She thought it was fun and would not make language learning a burden for her.

Gass and Selinker (1994) argued that, “[a]cquiring a language is a creative process in which learners are interacting with their environment to produce an internalized representation of the regularities they discover in the linguistic data to which they are exposed. This internal representation is their interlanguage competence. So long as learners continue to learn, this internal representation is changing and developing” (p.20). Like Jenny, international students often have their own strategies to survive in the foreign environment as well as to improve their communicative skills. One of the limitation of this case study is that I did not pay much attention to the role that Jenny’s L1 played in her learning and acquiring of L2. Jiang and Kuehn’s (2001) study had proved the positive transfer of prior linguistic and cognitive skills from L1 to L2. Especially for students with higher L1 Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), most of them can adopt strategies that facilitate their development of L2 CALP. The implication to me as well as to other teachers is that we need to be aware of international students’ repertoire of linguistic and cognitive skills. More importantly, we need to help those students realize the resources that they can draw upon from their L1 and make good use of them when developing L2. For example, Jenny had received college education in Korea, which means she had already achieved a certain level of CALP in Korean. For future studies, it is worth looking into the students’ previous learning experiences in their native country and

discussing how to effectively adopt and adapt some of the academic skills learned in L1 settings to fit their needs in L2 settings.

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