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Travel, emotion and identity: an exploration into the experiences of students in post 16 education for whom studying in English means working in a foreign language and culture.

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Abstract

This paper involves an exploration into the experiences of students in post 16 education taking traditional academic subjects, in the UK, for whom studying in English means working in a foreign language and culture. The students who formed the sample were high achieving students aged sixteen and seventeen from China, Vietnam and Thailand who had come to study in the UK in order to proceed to a British University. In the first part of this paper I propose a conceptual framework suitable for this study. The second part of the paper consists of a summary of the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with the eight participants. In this paper a variety of issues are explored related to the experience of living and studying in England. Although grounded in the specific context of students from three nations studying in the UK. This paper should inform our understanding of appropriate teaching strategies and pastoral and pedagogical approaches for students in a range of multi-linguistic settings.

Introduction

This paper involves an exploration into the experiences of high achieving students in post 16 education (known as sixth form education, in England) taking traditional academic subjects, for whom studying in English means working in a foreign language and culture. It is a summary of a research project, for which the methodology adopted was a small scale, exploratory, case study. The students who formed the sample were high achieving students aged sixteen and seventeen from China, Vietnam and Thailand who had come to study in a private international school in the UK in order to proceed to a British University. These are nations from which the number of international students studying in the UK is high, compared to other nations, and increasing. The paper is divided into two parts.

The first part consists of the presentation of a conceptual framework in which I discuss research already conducted into the broad area of students studying in English speaking institutions, and for whom English is an additional language. Research into the experiences of university students and students of compulsory school age is used to contextualise this study, whilst critically acknowledging their relevance or otherwise for the specific context of students who are aged 16 to 18. In this section I propose a conceptual framework suitable for this study, whilst acknowledging that the specific area of such students studying within post 16, or sixth form education, in England is a largely unresearched field.

The second part of the paper consists of a summary of the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with the eight participants. In this section a variety of issues are explored related to their experiences living and studying in England. The data generated should inform our understanding of appropriate teaching strategies and pastoral and pedagogical approaches in what is a distinct area of education, lying as it does between school and university. There is significant evidence that although a deeply rewarding age

range to teach, for many teachers working in schools with an international or multi-cultural intake, there are specific and currently largely unresearched challenges.

In this paper I have used the term EAL, English as an additional language, as this is the broadest and most encompassing of the abbreviations commonly used in this field. I have avoided ESL, English as a second language, as it is simply inaccurate and is quite rightly falling out of usage. To most students with another first language English may be the third, fourth or fifth language they speak. Meanwhile EFL English as a foreign language, while a useful phrase does not accurately describe the context of this study, which has involved students who intend to live for a prolonged time in England.

Part 1: a conceptual framework

There is an almost complete lack of research into the experiences of students for whom English is an additional language who are aged 16 to 18 and who are studying in the UK. In this first section I therefore contextualise the experiences of post-16 students, via a discussion of studies into students of compulsory school age, under 16, and into the experiences of university students. This conceptual framework is in three parts: the first addresses issues of 'identity'; the second the concept of 'three fold risk', and the final section briefly summarises the relevance of some studies into university students who had recently immigrated.

Issues of identity

A significant amount of research into the experiences of students with EAL under 16 addresses the idea of a loss of or change in one's sense of identity that comes from studying in a foreign language and culture. This aspect of these students' experiences is discussed here in these next few paragraphs.

Working in a foreign language according to Leung (2000), if not fluent, infantilises us leading us to lose years of cognitive and academic growth. Her study focused on younger

children but it raises questions regarding whether to effectively lose years of development in your teens without the presence of family to support you is an even more profound experience. Primary language acquisition takes an entire childhood and students with EAL are in effect therefore always chasing a moving target in terms of their peers development (Leung, 2000). These are significant issues for the students themselves but they also raise further issues as regards pedagogy. Cummins (2000) builds upon these experiences described above to make a very significant claim with implications as regards teaching strategies. He claims, that 'instructional time through the minority language entails no academic cost at all' (2000, p.42) implying that this is the case at all age ranges and all ability levels. He even sees this as beneficial as it allows students to grasp ideas cognitively before returning to them in the second language and to value their own language as an educational vehicle. The implications of this are potentially profound. Perhaps, Sixth Form departments need to develop large libraries of texts in the students own as well as target languages. Also in many cases this could lead to a change in school or college policy.

Although there is universal agreement that functioning in a second language, especially in an educational setting involves a loss of or a change in one's sense of identity (Scanlan & Lopez, 2014), interpretations of this vary illustrating the complexity of this idea. Alred (2003) takes a positive view. He turns the concerns of others on their head seeing learning a new language as 'liberating, allowing the shedding of emotional baggage and the forging of a more independent identity.' (p.23). It is important though to approach such positivity with caution, Alred was writing about relatively well off West European university students, travelling for no more than one year abroad to study. Bredella (2005) also accepts that there is potentially a sense of liberation that is gained from having two languages in which one can effectively be two different people with two identities (p.42). However she also cautions against the positivity of Alred. She sees cultural and linguistic fluency in a new language as involving a loss in the original without necessarily a full gain in the other, without becoming an insider at least in one's own perceptions.

In relation to the points made in the section above, it is clear that students with EAL need to feel that who they are is cared about (Cummins, 2000). From this it is also possible to state that a rigorous and inflexible use of the target language although often intended to accelerate and enable students may demotivate them, as language defines who we are and we all need to have moments in our academic work when we are enabled to be fully ourselves (Barwell, 2005; Byram 2003). Immersion teaching may well be a valid strategy in the foreign language classroom when a student is living securely within their own language and culture. However, when a student is living immersed in a foreign culture their original language needs to be valued as well.

Three fold risk

A particularly significant concept that encapsulates findings in this field is that of 'three fold risk'. This phrase first used by Gay (2010) has now gained widespread currency. This along with related issues are discussed in this sub-section.

The educational institution that a newly arrived immigrant student finds they are in will develop a deeper significance than for students from the host culture (Rothstein, et al., 2014). To students who have recently immigrated, school or college may be a place of relative comfort and to those without families in the host nation it may be the main place of social interaction. However, to students studying within an unfamiliar classroom setting and outside their first language the school or college may be a place of safety yet the classroom a place of risk. When a student from a foreign culture speaks in class they are effectively taking a two or even threefold risk. They risk making a mistake with subject knowledge (as all students do) but also with the conventions of classroom interaction and finally with the language (Gay, 2010; Banks, 2004). These pressures make it likely that the student will choose to withdraw, to become quieter and disengage. This especially may be the case with students where their own language is more distantly related to English.

In relation to the third of these risks the UK classroom or lecture hall in its dynamics, patterns of behaviour, rules and rituals is to someone brought up in most East Asian school systems baffling, disconcerting and overwhelming. (Hollie, 2014). For too many teachers their reaction to this is then to either push these students without explanation or guidance headlong into it, with the misguided view that equal education means treating everybody the same, or to allow the student to quietly withdraw fulfilling the expectation and stereotype of the quiet but diligent East Asian student who does not fully engage (Akazaki, 2001).This concept of three-fold risk is returned in the second part of this paper.

Studies into the experiences of university students

Although the first part of this paper has focussed on the experiences of school aged children, similar findings have been found regarding the experiences of university aged students. Specific similarities that have been found include the challenge of three-fold-risk and a related subsequent withdrawal and disengagement amongst some students.

However, there are other patterns that have been identified. These specifically include: initial feelings of euphoria on arrival in the new culture; later an increasing concern over their ability to fully express themselves either academically or socially or to be themselves in the classroom, and a marked tendency to only know and socialise with those from their own culture, despite understanding that this may inhibit their language development (Sawir, 2013). This latter tendency seems to be more marked than with younger students. Specifically in a study into Japanese students travelling to New Zealand, Ward found that cross national interaction was low' (2001) and more pointedly that it was lower than the students from abroad had expected it to be before they travelled. She also found that domestic students did not initiate contact but then would express the stereotypical view that those from Far Eastern countries tended to be emotionally cold. She found that after several months Japanese students on average would spend 88% of their study time and 82% of their social time with other Japanese students. Her overall

conclusion is that intervention is needed if interaction across nations is to take place. This is a conclusion also reached by Ryan (2011).

Part 2: the findings from the interviews

In this the second part of this paper I discuss the findings of six interviews that were conducted with two students from each of the following nations: China, Vietnam and Thailand. All were aged between 16 and 18 years old and all were studying A levels at a private international college in Cambridge, England between 2012 and 2014. All have now proceeded to begin degrees at British University. Three were male and three were female. The interviews were semi-structured interviews that were conducted in February 2014. They lasted for approximately 40 minutes each. The interviews focussed on the following issues identified in the conceptual framework above: challenges to identity, perceptions of risk, socialising as a community.

All of the students interviewed identified a feeling of 'loss of identity' and 'change in identity', phrases that I presented to them, as something that they related to, although they interpreted this in a variety of different ways. All found this 'change in identity' to be in part a positive experience and all expressed that they were able to re-invent themselves following their move to the UK. They also each defined this in different, concrete ways. Two stated that they had changed their way of dressing "I felt the confidence to dress in a way that if I had been meeting my old friends every day would have been difficult. I know that isn't directly related to language but clothing is a form of expression, so to me that links". Other statements more specifically related to language included: "I find I am better at discussing concrete things in English, politics things like that. I just feel more comfortable doing this." However, all also admitted to challenges in expressing themselves with confidence. "I find that I am searching for the right words and I am quiet in class. I think I was quiet in class in Vietnam but there that perhaps wasn't noticed. Here the classes are very small and I am expected to talk more especially in things like

history and I find this difficult." The most explicit expression of this, one that related to a fear of generating stereotypical perceptions, as mentioned in the conceptual framework above, was this: "I don't want them to think I am a shy Chinese girl but I do think I am like this in class, which really isn't me."

Perceptions of the usefulness of using people's first language varied. All except for one student admitted to using their first language when seeking information for topics that they were finding challenging and four stated that they would check their understanding with others in the group in their own language. Only two were actually aware that the official college policy, for their college, was that they were not allowed use their own language in the classroom. Two even described a teacher who already openly let them use their first languages in the classroom during group work and pair work activities. It could then be that lack of concern about this related to the fact that they were already being allowed to use their first language and that their teachers tended to approach this issue in a pragmatic way. All except one agreed that a rigid interpretation of an English only policy is not one that they would find beneficial. As has also been described above and in relation to this, all but one also felt that some of the ideas that they had expressed in essays had come across as naïve because of their difficulties in finding the right words. Interestingly there was one interviewee who claimed that English was "their best and strongest of the world's formal languages". They felt that that their Chinese was weaker than English in terms of formal language and therefore although they spoke their dialect well that English was already "my first language in purely academic terms". This could perhaps be related to the idea discussed above regarding how a gain in one language may lead to a loss in another and not full confidence in either.

When the concept of three fold risk was explained all the interviewees could relate to this closely and expressed agreement with comments such as "oh yes that is exactly as it is". These issues have already been referred to in the paragraphs above. However, the implications of this for teaching came out even more clearly when this was directly addressed during the interviews. Statements made included the following "I can often put

something really well in an essay but not necessarily in the lesson"; "sometimes teachers need to understand that finding the answers and the words is difficult", "we have one teacher who gives us time to find our answer, our thoughts." It seems therefore that good practice such as take up time is perhaps even more important for students for whom English is a second language.

Finally, it was also reinforced that institutions have a particular significance for international students as do relationships with teachers. In all cases these were clearly appropriate and professional but there was still an enormous valuing of those teachers who would find extra time to help or even just to talk. As for the issue of socialising primarily with students of their own nation, this came across less sharply than with studies of students working at university level. However, it was still present but in perhaps a more nuanced way: "well all my friends are international students but they are various international students so not just my own nation." "Most of my best friends are Vietnamese but this doesn't mean all my friends are but yes I don't have any British friends but all the students here are international." "Yes, I really hope I make more British friends at university but we will see. Actually my closest British friends are my teachers".

Conclusion.

There is a large degree of similarity between the conclusions reached by researchers into the experiences of students studying in English Language institutions and who come from foreign cultures and the experiences of the students who were interviewed, perhaps a surprising number considering that the majority of studies referred to in the first part of this paper relate to children rather than young people on the cusp of adulthood. There were also commonalities with university aged students. The interviewees expressed frustration at the challenges faced when interacting in the classroom. These feelings it seems are often multiplied in classroom settings because classroom systems and cultural

values that the teacher probably does not even perceive as culturally specific can be confusing and alienating. This makes it potentially difficult for the student to engage.

It is important of course having written this to acknowledge that travelling to study is not an entirely or even predominantly negative experience. It was also consistently described as being exciting, even euphoric and as providing students with the chance to re-invent themselves in positive ways. The privilege of being a teacher or lecturer in the multi-linguistic classroom, teaching students working at a higher level is one of the most rewarding experiences in the field of education. However, it is also challenging. Most teachers have not themselves been through the experience of living and studying in a foreign language and culture while young. They therefore do not have that experience which enables them in other contexts to empathise with and understand the experiences their students are going through. Thus, while most would want to create an equal and caring classroom via their practice, this gap in their understanding of the emotional experience of their students makes this even more difficult than in the mono-linguistic classroom. Hopefully this paper and other ways in which the research from this project is being disseminated will be one small step in filling this gap in understanding and ensuring that the experience of both teachers and students is a better one.

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