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Academic literacy socialization of first year doctoral students in US: A micro-ethnographic perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study reports findings from a micro-ethnographic analysis of the academic literacy socialization of six multilingual students in the field of education as they progressed through their first-year of doctoral education. The main purpose of this study was to investigate the academic socialization processes that these multilingual students underwent while building academic knowledge and social relationships, and to gain an understanding of disciplinary knowledge in a second language. Data came from videotaped outside class discussions and student interviews over 1 year. This study's results suggest that socializing into the practices of academic discourse is a complex and multilayered process in which students collaboratively construct meaning and engage in interactive dialogs outside of their classrooms in order to learn how to become legitimate participants in their academic disciplines. The findings suggest that academic socialization in the first-year of a doctoral degree occurs in multiple spaces: in *initial contact frames* and *institutional academic spaces*, and within an *academic culture of collaboration*. These socialization spaces, in this study, provided students a 'safe house' in which they were empowered to challenge the academic practices they encountered in their first year and attempted to become reflective participants of the doctoral communities of their disciplines.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the field of ESP/EAP has witnessed increased attention to the academic needs of the multilingual graduate student population, not only because the numbers of international students participating in North American doctoral programs are increasing due to various globalization trends of the 21st century, but also because there is a burgeoning need to understand the multiplicity of texts and plurality of academic practices of ethnolinguistically diverse newcomers in disciplinary discourses and communities (Hyland, 2000; Prior, 1995). Graduate programs in North American institutions are unique educational contexts where cultures and texts merge, creating alternative and diverse academic literacy practices. In this context, doctoral programs, which could be identified as being 'peopled environments' (Casanave, 1995, 2002), include multiple spaces and ongoing social interactions between people and texts. When students enter academic communities, interacting with various actors and learning the academic spoken and written discourse, they acquire common characteristics of talking, believing, acting and interpreting (Swales, 1990). During this process, as the present study demonstrates, students make use of various spaces and actors in order to construct an understanding of what it means to produce an academic text in their L2.

While many ESP studies at the doctoral level focus on classroom activities to investigate academic socialization, the present study sheds light on multiple aspects of socialization by examining student's social interactions mainly outside the

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classroom context. More specifically, drawing from theories of sociolinguistic ethnography (Gumperz, 1981; Hymes, 1974), second language socialization (Duff, 2003; Watson-Gegeo, 2004) and microethnographic discourse analysis in educational settings (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Green & Wallet, 1981), the study argues that social uses of language, especially oral interactions in a variety of spaces, can contribute to students' academic socialization and illustrates how socializing into academic writing environments is not an isolated and individualized activity, but a communal one. This is especially realized at the doctoral level where there is a high emphasis on academic and social interaction across time and space (e.g., Casanave, 1995, 2002; Casanave & Li, 2008; Seloni, 2008).

In what follows, I begin with a review of literature about literacy socialization in post-secondary contexts, specifically focusing on the scholarship that examines the impact oral interactions have on how students learn to 'do graduate school'. By doing so, I will also point out the lack of discourse analytic approaches in the scholarship and call for an in-depth analysis of students' narratives and oral interactions that occur in multiple social and academic spaces. I then provide the context, methodology, data analysis, which is followed by the results and discussion of this study.

2. Second language literacy socialization in graduate school

Multilingual students engaging in academic discourse at the graduate level constitute a unique population, as they need to "adapt smoothly to the linguistic and social milieu of their host environment and to the culture of their academic departments and institutions" (Braine, 2002, p. 60) while they shuttle between their home language and culture and the standard academic language and culture they are expected to use as international graduate students. The line of research focusing on multilingual students' disciplinary academic socialization has dominantly explored such issues as acquisition of genre (e.g., Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Swales, 1990), voice and identity in L2 writing (e.g., Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Camps, 2001), or rhetorical differences in academic writing (e.g. Connor & Mayberry, 1995). While the majority of these studies focus predominantly on students' second language writing and identify the kinds of rhetorical complexities they experience as they seek membership to the new academic community they are about to enter, the connection between oral and written discourse in post-secondary education has been a less explored area of interest. Given the importance of oral discourse in newcomers' academic socialization and writing development, investigating the impact of oral interaction on students' academic socialization has become a focus of more recent studies that concern second language learners' academic socialization (e.g. Belcher, 1994; Casanave & Li, 2008; Connor & Mayberry, 1995; Connor, Nagelhaut, & Rozyciki, 2008; Duff, 2002, 2003; Kobayashi, 2003; Lee, 2009; Morita, 2000; Weissberg, 1993; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). These studies have investigated students' oral academic discourse and the kinds of academic struggles they face as well as the strategies they develop to successfully engage in academic literacy practices in English, which could be their second or third language. In such studies, dialog and talk have been recognized as crucial elements in bridging literacy skills of second language learners (Weissberg, 2006).

Weissberg (1993) specifically examined the graduate seminars as speech events in the fields of agronomy and animal sciences by observing 10 nonnative English speaking (NNES) graduate students' academic presentations and conducting post-presentation interviews with these students about the role of oral performance in their academic socialization. As a result of this study, Weissberg found a difference between the professors' and mentors' expectations regarding the style students use in their presentations, on the one hand, and the actual presentations of students, on the other hand. Instead of using language from scientific texts, professors preferred that the NNES students use more audience friendly speech in their oral presentations. However, most of the participants of Weisberg's study reported that they resisted adopting extemporaneous speech while giving their academic presentations. As evidenced in their interview data, this rejection mainly came from students being less confident in the use of linguistic moves required in extemporaneous speech and their overreliance on previous English learning experiences. In his study, Weisberg suggested an inclusion of an oral component in ESP curricula through which NNES students learn how to contrast the written and oral component of a scientific inquiry. The present study, like Weissberg's (1993), highlights the importance of oral discourse and collaborative interaction in students' academic literacy learning and discourse socialization in a post-secondary context.

Another study that specifically focused on graduate students' oral participation was conducted by Lee (2009). Through the use of interview data, Lee looked at various factors that impeded six Korean graduate students' oral participation in classroom settings. The study also problemitized the myth that all Asian students are reticent in class discussions due to their lack of linguistic competencies. The results demonstrated that students' lack of participation is not always related to their lack of linguistic capital; rather it involves a wide range of social and cultural reasons. The author emphasized that Korean graduate students display distinct characteristics of participation compared to other Asian groups. Although the students' participation greatly varied, the recurring factors that led to the Korean students' reluctance in participation included students' "perceptions of their language level, differences in sociocultural values and educational practices, individual differences, and the classroom format." (p. 152).

The importance of oral discourse and students' academic socialization in the form of spoken interaction were also discussed in the context of the Canadian education system (e.g., Kobayashi, 2003; Morita, 2000; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). In these studies, we see a recurring theme that documents the inseparable nature of speaking and writing activities in post-secondary contexts, and the importance of oral tasks in students' successful academic socialization. Drawing on a language socialization framework, Morita's (2000) study focused on both NS and NNES graduate students' oral academic presentations in a TESOL graduate program. Exploring how graduate students negotiated the instructors' expectations, prepared, observed and