

Learning English Literacy as an Aspect of Social Practice

Su-Jen Lai (Jane)

Chang Gung University, Taiwan

This paper aims to examine students' English language learning as an aspect of social practice. The focus is on two groups of undergraduates who studied in the English Department at a university in Taiwan. The research is ethnographic, combining intensive interviews, observation, and systematic collection and analysis of documents and students' assignments in English. The results reveal that English literacy learning was shaped by the institutional contexts, which include the course contents, the task requirements and the teaching approaches. These students seem to adopt a *low-level* or a *high-level* transmission model of learning, depending on the levels of their English language proficiency. Specifically, the process of individual students' learning appears to be *dynamic* and *ongoing* culturally embedded in the educational settings in Taiwan. Consequently, the paper proposes that teachers of English as a foreign language should consider the use of an ecological approach to needs analysis and encourage students to take an ethnographic stance towards their language learning. This may assist teachers in designing appropriate curricula and, in the long run, improve the quality of student learning both inside and outside academic institutions.

This paper, which examines students' English language learning as an aspect of social practice, is a revised version of my paper presented in the Asia TEFL International Conference.¹ The focus is on two groups of EFL

¹ Lai, S. J. (2003). An investigation of EFL undergraduate student learning and

undergraduate students who studied in the Department of English Language and Literature at the Day Division and the Evening Division of a university in Taiwan. It is an investigation of how the two groups of students make sense of their studies in the educational settings, looking at the phenomenon of their learning as well as the ways in which they utilize literacy practices. The primary objective of the study is to integrate both psychological and social conceptions, using a qualitatively practice-based methodological approach to EFL literacy studies.

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first section presents the rationale of the study. The second section focuses on the research contexts giving details of the sampling and the methodological approach. In the third section, I discuss the results of the study in the light of previous research on student learning, academic literacy, and ESL/EFL student writing. Some recommendations based upon the results of the study are also given.

THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Research on literacy learning in higher education has focused mostly on native speakers of English (see e.g., Lea, 1994, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984, 1997; Richardson, Eysenck, & Warren, 1987). Research on ESL/EFL student writing in school contexts has dealt with a variety of text types ranging from exposition, narration, persuasion and argumentation, with the research projects were mostly undertaken in English-speaking countries, particularly in the United States (see e.g., Kroll, 1990; Purves, 1988). An ethnographic methodological approach to second-language literacy learning in institutional contexts in Taiwan seems to have been rarely investigated by previous researchers (see e.g., Belcher & Braine, 1995; Dubin & Kuhlman, 1992).

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Accordingly, in this study, I adopt ethnographic research techniques, synthesizing theories of student learning and those of academic literacy together with cross-cultural issues. The theoretical framework is based primarily on the 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) which regards reading and writing as social practice (see Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995; Street, 1984). The New Literacy Studies in this sense does not focus on literacy itself, but on where literacy is culturally embedded and socially constructed in a particular situation. I draw on the work of Barton and Hamilton (1998, 2000) who make connections between literacies in specific contexts and broader social practices located in time and space. I connect it also with the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who situate learning in certain forms of social co-participation, developing the theoretical concepts of learning in communities of practice and examining adult learning in a variety of cultural contexts (see also Wenger, 1998). I juxtapose this with the work of Marton and his colleagues who address problems of student learning in higher educational settings in Sweden and Britain with theoretical positions informed by modern cognitive psychology (Marton et al., 1997). Besides these, I draw upon research on academic literacy (Lea, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998) and research on ESL/EFL student writing (Belcher & Braine, 1995; Kroll, 1990). The rationale behind the study is to adopt a *contextualized social practice perspective*, scrutinizing students' EFL literacy learning at a university in Taiwan.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXTS

The study was undertaken at a university in Taiwan where there are both a Day Division and an Evening Division. The subjects were selected from the two divisions of the university on the assumption that the orientations to studying in higher education of those who had no experience in any workplace might differ from those who had worked for a period of time. Whilst the former might come to study at university for the sake of learning,

the latter might study with their vocational ambitions in mind. My concern here was to compare the two groups of EFL undergraduate students who might engage different *roles*, *values* and *attitudes* in their learning. In this way, I would then identify the ways in which the students made use of their literacy practices, and thereby dealt with the academic demands. I would also be able to find out to what extent a social context could influence the approaches they utilized to their EFL literacy learning.

With such an assumption, two groups of Day Division and Evening Division undergraduate students who were enrolled in English Writing classes of Composition and Conversation I (C&C) and Composition I in the Department of English Language and Literature at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan were selected. This is because, more generally, Day Division students tend to be those who study 'full-time' at the university and Evening Division students tend to be those who work during the day and study 'part-time' in the evening. There were 15 students in the *C&C* class and 27 students in the *Composition I* class.

I first asked the two groups of students to complete questionnaires soon after I had observed the classes. This provided me with a general idea of the two groups including the ways they coped with the difficulties they encountered when they learned English as a foreign language. In order to understand their literacy learning practices more thoroughly, I later selected six volunteers (three from the Day Division and three from the Evening Division) for intensive interviews. In the interviews, I encouraged the students to talk about themselves, reflecting on their EFL literacy learning experiences, and also asked the students to read a short passage in English and to answer questions on it, followed by further interview questions with them in order to uncover the approaches they used to undertake the reading activity. The language of the interview, which was tape-recorded was Mandarin Chinese. I also interviewed the class teacher.

The study combined intensive interviews, observation, questionnaires and systematic collection and analysis of documents and students' assignments in English. Transcripts, field notes, documents, and students' assignments

written in English formed the database. The use of multiple methods, triangulating data collected from different sources, made it possible to check the reliability and the validity of the analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Mason, 1996; Silverman, 1993, 2000). The interview transcripts translated from Chinese to English were checked with the informants (Birbili, 2001). This in turn helped evaluate the validity of the data and thus the outcomes of the study. This approach helped answer the following research questions:

1. What did the students expect to learn from their studies at university?
2. What academic writing demands do the students deal with?
3. How do the institutional contexts affect the students' EFL literacy learning?
4. What literacy practices do the students utilize to assist them in writing?
5. What approaches do the students utilize when they learn and write in English?
6. What have the students learned and gained from the academic discipline?

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The results of the study appear to confirm the assumption that an individual's previous work experience might affect his/her orientations to studying in higher education, and these might, in turn, influence his/her approaches to EFL literacy learning. The three Evening Division students who were interviewed, Alice, Verna and Kim², had worked in different workplace settings before and while they studied in the academic institution. Their previous educational and work experiences appear to affect their determination to study at the university. In comparison with Jing, Joanna and

² These are pseudonyms

Harry who studied at the Day Division, Alice, Verna and Kim seemed to have clearer goals to study in the educational setting. The six students appear to have a complex mix of reasons for their studies at the university. Three main types of orientation are identified in the light of previous research into student learning in higher education – *personal*, *academic* and *vocational* orientations, along with *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* interests (see and compare Beaty, Gibbs & Morgan, 1997). Whist Jing, Joanna and Harry came to study at the university with their *personal* and *academic* orientations, Verna, Alice and Kim came to study with their *personal* and *academic*, as well as *vocational* orientations.

The interviews showed the importance of previous *educational* and *work* experiences as well as an individual's orientations. The study also showed the influence of institutional contexts, which include the course contents, the task requirements and the teaching approaches (see also Lea, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Ramsden, 1997). The students were assessed on the basis of both coursework and examination. The former refers to written assignments, which had to be submitted on time and which were collected in a 'portfolio' for each student; the latter refers to mid-term and end-of-term written exams. The portfolios seemed to enable the six students who were interviewed to reflect on actual language use and to think critically about the process of their writing during the academic year. According to Genesee and Upshur, portfolio is "a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates to students and others their efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas" (1996, p. 99). A portfolio, in this sense, can provide a *continuous* record of each individual student's language development whereby the student may receive constructive feedback on his/her performance objectives.

In marking written work, the teacher appeared to place emphasis on both 'content' and 'form' (see also Fathman & Whalley, 1990). The comments were written on a separate sheet of paper and in the margins of every student's composition, including an outline of what should have been written and how it should have been written. The comments balanced praise and criticism, and the teacher normally pointed out good qualities first and

drawbacks later. For the students, especially for Alice and Verna, this type of feedback was a source of inspiration, motivating them to learn (see and compare Ferris, 1995). The six informants appeared to take their teachers' feedback quite seriously and pay a lot of attention to it. They usually revised the first drafts of their compositions in accordance with the teacher's evaluative comments (see also Ferris, 1997).

In terms of pedagogy, the teacher appeared to employ different approaches when teaching the two English Writing classes. She adopted a *task-based* or *activity-based* approach to teaching in the Day Division class where the focus was on the classroom tasks, including role-plays, brainstorming activities, and the like. On the other hand, she adopted a *text-based* approach to teaching in the Evening Division class where a textbook and handouts were used as the primary teaching instruments. Despite the difference, the teacher seems to employ a *process-oriented* approach, along with a *product-oriented* approach, in the EFL classrooms (Dudley-Evans, 1995; Dudley-Evan & St John, 1998). Relating to classroom organization, the teacher tended to use a traditional teacher-fronted mode in the Evening Division class where there were 27 students, and a circle-like structure in the Day Division class where there were 15 students. As a result, there appear to be a number of factors making possible learning atmospheres in the EFL classrooms: the levels of students' English language proficiency, the teaching approaches, the classroom organizations and the class sizes.

With regard to the circumstances of student learning, in the questionnaires the students reported that reading 'textbooks' and writing 'compositions' tended to be one of the most common activities. In social contexts, the students tended to read English 'magazines' and 'newspapers' and write letters and e-mail messages in English. Some students, like Kim, read English 'novels' and some students, like Verna, wrote 'diaries' in English. Reading English novels appears to be one of the most common things these students did regularly, probably because it could assist them in meeting the academic requirements of the Department of English Language and Literature. Equally, keeping English diaries could, to some extent, help

them to think and write in English, and thus assist them in doing their academic work, which includes composition writing, journal writing, and the like. This suggests that everyday experience is inevitably intertwined with academic learning (Lea, 1998) and that reading and writing in social contexts are closely associated with reading and writing in academic contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

The study also indicates the influence of Chinese on lexico-syntactic forms used in English. In turn, this has reflected some linguistic problems the Taiwanese undergraduates encountered when they studied English at the university. Despite the linguistic problems, these two groups of students seem to find some effective strategies to help. Some students attempted to memorize English vocabulary, grammatical examples, or even the whole text; others tried to create English-like surroundings by making friends or pen pals with foreigners in their day-to-day lives. Specifically, the six students who were interviewed would make an outline of the composition before they actually started writing, and use one or two sentences to explain the particular word that they did not know, instead of making a word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence translation into English. They also recognized that a certain amount of reading helped them deal with the academic writing demands, and simultaneously, develop their writing abilities in English (see also Eisterhold, 1990).

The six individual students had different repertoires of *experience* and *knowledge*. Successful learning appears to take place when the students were able to understand the practices that they needed to master to become *core* members, rather than *novice* members, of the educational settings (see also Lave & Wenger, 1991). These findings in turn suggest that it is important for English language teachers to construct a reflective curriculum for literacy and, at the same time, encourage EFL students to take an ethnographic stance towards their language and literacy learning (Bartlett, 1990; Hamilton, 1999; Roberts, Byram, Barro, Jordan, & Street, 2001). It is likely that these sorts of language practices can help raise the students' consciousness, and thereby overcome some linguistic problems. This issue will be further discussed in

the concluding section.

Interestingly, from the study, the results indicate that the two groups of EFL undergraduate students tended to be cast into a relative passive, reproductive role. This is probably because of the traditional ‘cram-based’ style of teaching at school in Taiwan, whereby the students appear to learn to memorize individual words and grammatical patterns, and to practice them in contrived contexts. As such, I would assume that the students were more likely carried forward in the learning experiences by their teachers, and thus had few opportunities to use English outside the EFL classroom. In this instance, it is worth looking at what the teacher said.

I feel that, this academic year, students came to study in the English Department at the Day Division of the university by means of passing the new selective entrance examination system (which contains the traditional Joint University Entrance Examination Program, the Recommendation Screening Examination Program and the Entrance by Application Program. Accordingly, the levels of English proficiency of these students relatively differ from one to the other). Due to this, in the class, some students appeared to be more ‘responsive’ (to what I said or what classmates said). I use ‘responsive’ here but this does not mean that these students are actually ‘self-autonomous’. I feel that I could hardly find a self-autonomous student. I personally feel that this may be because Taiwanese students have long been appearing to absorb knowledge in a ‘passive’ way, and as a result, they were not really ‘active’. However, since some of the Day Division students had been brought up in an English environment, they appeared to be ‘active’ in class. But I don’t feel that they are completely active. Although, in the class, these students appeared to be very responsive, they might not learn actively. Their learning attitudes had not yet reached the ‘self-autonomous’ level. But, at least, in the class, they appeared not to adopt the traditional, passive way of learning.

Such a learning style of these EFL undergraduates seems to correspond to the ‘transmission’ model of learning (Nunan, 1999). In this circumstance, I would assume that an individual student would adopt a *low-level* or a *high-level* transmission model of learning, depending on his/her English language

proficiency. In my field notes on observing the two groups of students' learning in the English Writing classes, the Day Division students tended to adopt a *low-level* transmission model, whereas the Evening Division students tended to adopt a *high-level* transmission model. In view of that, I would presume that the two groups of undergraduate students would have to *strategically* adopt the *reformulation approach* to their EFL literacy learning, in order to deal with the assessment requirements (see and compare Lea, 1998; Marton & Saljo, 1997; Ramsden, 1997).

Here, it is also worth pointing out the work of Jin and Cortazzi (1996) who found that Mainland Chinese students "had strong conceptions that the way to acquire knowledge was to listen to their teachers" (1996, p. 210). From the students' points of view, teachers were expected to be moral leaders and to provide knowledge, guidance about methods of learning. Besides this, Jin and Cortazzi identify that, among the Chinese students, 'face' played an important role in academic interaction, as they put it:

Having regarding to face, they [Chinese students] will not wish to interrupt others and may consequently miss turn-taking opportunities in seminars. Similarly, they will be reluctant to be seen making mistakes, so that they may only say things in seminar groups if they are quite sure of their ground. ... they prefer to listen to the teacher, and, if they have understood the point, they see no need to talk about it any further.

(Jin & Cortazzi, 1996, p. 213)

A similar circumstance is also found in interview transcripts:

Joanna: ... But, in the class, I don't dare to raise my hand and ask the teacher...

Jane: In the class, the teacher used English to explain [theoretical concepts], could you understand what the teacher said?

Joanna: I could roughly understand, and yet, sometimes I could not really understand. In fact sometimes I could not understand, probably because my listening ability is not very good. I know that the teacher tried to use simple sentences to explain, and yet there have still been some words I could not understand. ... But, in the class,

I don't dare to raise my hand and ask the teacher: 'Teacher, what does the word mean?' Such a way of asking question is very odd! It seems like all of my classmates know the answer of what I want to ask. So, I feel that it's okay to just roughly understand it.

In this instance, it would seem that the learning style of the Taiwanese student (i.e. Joanna) and the group of Chinese students appear to be quite similar – having been affected by their academic cultural background. In fact, a similar learning style has been found in Kohn (1992) and Schneider and Fujishima (1995). Kohn (1992) focuses on literacy strategies for Chinese learners, pointing out the influence of the traditions and literacy in China on the learners; Schneider and Fujishima (1995) focus on a case study of a graduate student from Taiwan, pointing out the academic problems of this student in the United States. Nevertheless, I would consider such a learning phenomenon is founded on each individual case, rather than on a whole group of the students (see e.g. Lai, 2003 for a discussion of the six case studies). In my view, there are a number of elements, which may affect EFL student learning. In addition to the level of English language proficiency and academic cultural background, an individual's previous experience, age, personality, interest and motivation may also possibly determine the styles of his/her learning (see also Lightbown & Spada, 2001). And this in turn provides the rationale in the study for focusing on the two groups of EFL undergraduate students in general, and the six students in particular.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have discussed the learning circumstances of the two groups of EFL undergraduate students who studied in the English Department at the Day Division and the Evening Division of a university in Taiwan. The results reveal that the two educational settings of practice, which include course contents, assessment requirements and teaching approaches, shaped the approaches the two groups of Taiwanese undergraduates adopted to their

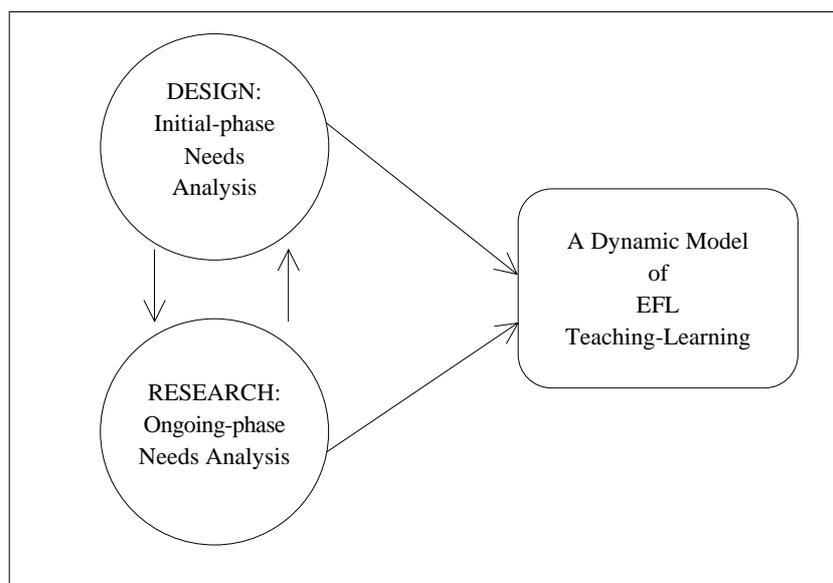
English language learning. More specifically, the results reveal the six individual students' different repertoires of experience and knowledge. The process of these students' English language learning appears to be dynamic and ongoing culturally embedded in the specific academic communities in Taiwan. In this sense, students' EFL literacy learning should be regarded as "an interplay of experience and competence" (Wenger, 1998, p. 50). The notion of 'competence' here "is not just linguistic, but also incorporates socio-cultural or everyday scientific/technical knowledge, and the ability to apply cognitive processing strategies" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1984, p. 110). The approach adopted in the ESP course, which includes the English Writing courses in Taiwan, should be 'learning-centered' which "implies taking into account the needs and expectations of all the parties involved in the learning process when designing courses and selecting methodology" (p. 108; their emphases). To understand 'learning needs', Hutchinson and Waters suggest that:

... the whole ESP process is concerned not with *knowing* or *doing*, but with *learning*. It is naïve to base a course design simply on the target objectives, just as it is naïve to think that a journey can be planned solely in terms of the starting point and the destination. The needs, potential and constraints of the route (i.e. the learning situation) must also be taken into account, if we are going to have any useful analysis of learner needs.

(Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 61; their emphases)

Here, it is also important to note that "ESP is primarily an *educational*, rather than a linguistic, concern" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1984, p. 111; their emphasis), and that "[l]earning needs should be considered at every stage of the learning process" (Hutchinson 1988, p. 75). In connection with the results of this study discussed in the earlier section, I would suggest, in terms of course design, that teachers of English as a foreign language take a 'dynamic' view of needs analysis into consideration – using an ecological approach to needs analysis (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
An Ecological Approach to Needs Analysis



I use Figure 1 to illuminate two main stages of ‘needs analysis’ for the design of teaching materials and classroom tasks: initial and ongoing (see also Braine, 2001; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Holliday, 1994, 1995; Nunan, 1999). Initial-phase needs analysis is required in order to plan preliminary course materials; it can be done by administering pre-course information questionnaires, which are concerned with students’ goals, social roles, interaction patterns and language proficiency (see e.g. Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Ongoing-phase needs analysis is normally carried out after learning has begun; it can be done by either administering in-course information questionnaires or using the in-course information derived from classroom activities, such as pair and/or group discussions, individual conference meetings, mini research projects, and so on (see e.g. Nunan, 1999). In this ongoing-phase needs analysis, objectives are modified in the light of

feedback from students. With such an approach to course design, integrating the two stages of needs analysis, learner needs will be considered at every stage of the process of their learning (see Hutchinson & Waters, 1987).

Besides this, encouraging EFL students to build up everyday practices in the community, which may include home, school and workplace, will help the students create English-like surroundings whereby the students can make use of their practices to learn English in their day-to-day lives. This sort of language practices, in my view, can help facilitate EFL students to become critically aware of not only their learning per se but also the context of their learning. In the long term, it may help improve the quality of student learning both inside and outside academic institutions.

THE AUTHOR

Su-Jen Lai is Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language Education at Chang Gung University in Taiwan. Previously, she taught Business English at National Taipei College of Business and Nursing English at Chang Gung Institute of Technology. Her research interests include EFL/ESL literacy learning and TEFL/TESL theory and methodology.

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