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From language learner to language user in English-medium higher education: Language development brokers outside the language classroom

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Abstract

This article explores, from within the social constructivist paradigm and drawing on data from twenty-one semi-structured interviews with international postgraduate university students approaching the end of a one-year full-time taught Masters degree in the UK, the range of language development brokers that have had an impact on these students' trajectory from language learner to language user. Students from a range of first language backgrounds contributed insights about key people, outside formal language teaching contexts, who supported and resourced their language development. While existing research has tended to focus on formal language instruction settings, this article puts forward insights to inform the fine tuning of language development provision in English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts outside traditional language classrooms, and to contribute to EMI students' academic and professional success.

Keywords

International students, English-medium instruction, language development brokers

Language Learners, Language Users and Language Development Brokers

The assumption behind the concept of 'study abroad' (viewed either as one component of a degree programme or as travelling abroad to undertake a full programme of study based in the destination country) is that language development is an inevitable consequence, as a result of exposure to language both in and out of formal instruction contexts. Non-English-speaking students travelling to an English-speaking country for a higher education degree may experience pre-degree preparatory language classes as well as participating in language classes which run alongside specialist subject

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modules throughout the academic year. The latter, labelled in-sessional provision in the UK context, is unlikely to be resourced beyond two hours per week and varies across institutions in terms of (non) credit-bearing status, and (non) assessed format (Arkoudis, 2014; Dunworth et al., 2014; Murray and Nallaya, 2016). While traditional language instruction takes up a very small proportion of students' exposure to English while studying for a university degree in an English-speaking country, a variety of other contexts is available in which students are immersed in the language and can actively engage in and seek support for language development. Previous research into language acquisition in study abroad looks primarily at formal instruction (e.g., Pérez-Vidal, 2014) or general English for social interaction and leisure (e.g., Briggs, 2015), and an aspect that has not been explicitly addressed is how study abroad participants orient, as learners or users, to the full range of situations in which they are exposed to target language relevant for their academic and professional development, and what resources they draw on to maximise their participation in these situations.

The present article is part of a wider study exploring how non-native English speaker students in UK higher education negotiate the trajectory from language learner to (fully competent) language user. The focus of the article is language development brokers – sources of support that students drew on to build themselves up as fully functioning participants in an English-medium higher education context. In this study twenty-one postgraduate students were interviewed about their experience of language learning and use. The research design was partly informed by Coleman's (2013, p. 17) statement that: 'study abroad research can escape the narrow confines of cognitive second language acquisition (SLA) [which focuses on individual psychological processes] and see its subjects not just as language learners, but as rounded people with complex and fluid identities and relationships which frame the way they use the study abroad experience'.

'Learner' and 'user', the key concepts in this research, are not differentiated in terms of objectively measured proficiency level or language gain; 'learner' and 'user' are labels that the participants were invited to choose themselves, based on their perception of how effectively they were able to function in an English-medium academic context. Benson et al. (2013) seem to locate the terms, temporally and geographically, before, during and after the academic sojourn:

> Many of the Hong Kong students whom we have worked with, for example, return from a semester at an overseas university with the feeling that they are no longer "learners" of English. They feel that they have become "users" of English, who can best improve their competence not by studying, but simply by continuing to use the language in their everyday lives. (Benson et al., 2013, p. 3).

In the research on which the present article reports, it was anticipated that perceptions of learner/user status might fluctuate throughout the duration of the academic sojourn and might also vary depending on specific situations. The extent to which participants oriented to the setting as learners or users depended not only on their goals but also on experiences in the setting.

Second language acquisition insights that resonate most closely with studying abroad for a degree through the medium of English as a second or foreign language can be synthesized from Lightbown and Spada (2013). Academic language, Lightbown and Spada note, has a greater degree of complexity than day-to-day language and may need more explicit attention before it can be acquired. In other words, learners need many meaningful encounters with new language before they can use it and need to have explicit attention drawn to new language patterns. Another important point they make is that formal instruction does not immediately translate into ability to use language outside formal language classroom settings. Similarly, knowledge about language does not immediately translate into ability to use language. Lightbown and Spada also emphasize that language development takes place at a faster or slower rate, and is influenced by the interplay

between individual learner characteristics, opportunities for exposure to language and the degree to which exposure is framed by some or all involved as a (formal) learning opportunity. These insights could help further develop and contextualise studies such as those of Arkoudis and Doughney (2014), Knoch et al. (2015), Rochecouste, Oliver and Mulligan (2011) and Storch and Hill (2008), which evidence the complex dynamics of (un)successful language development in English-medium higher education contexts.

Learning/acquisition of English language by non-native speakers in English-medium instruction contexts can be explored through the lens of literacy brokering. The concept of literacy brokering has been applied to academic writing by Lillis and Curry (2010), who explored the trajectories and histories of texts written for academic publication in English by scholars in Eastern and South European countries. Lillis and Curry adopt a social practice approach to writing and identify, within local and transnational networks supporting written production, two categories of literacy brokers: language and academic brokers. The former comprise trained professionals as well as friends and family members; the latter work mainly in Anglophone settings and may or may not be subject and discipline experts. Language brokering 'centres predominantly on sentence-level language corrections and modifications' (p. 100). Language brokering resonates with aspects of international students' academic experience but in order to fully explain the experience captured in the research on which the present article is based it was necessary to reframe the concept as language *development* brokering. Language development brokers intervene not to shape written texts but to prompt and support a qualitative increase in students' ability to function linguistically in an English-medium education environment. While language brokering is 'a significant dimension to the production of academic texts' (Lillis and Curry, 2010, p. 93), language *development* brokers work with learners of English in academic contexts to facilitate their successful performance as language users in these settings. However, as most of this activity is private and difficult to document systematically without altering it in some form, it remains largely invisible. The time and effort available to expend on the transformation from learner to fully competent user impact on the extent to which development occurs.

Research Design

To gain an in-depth understanding of key aspects of journeys from language learner to language user, semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with twenty-one postgraduate students who had completed the taught component of a one year Masters degree in a UK university and were conducting research for their dissertations or final projects. The research participants spoke East Asian, South Asian, European and African first languages (Chinese, Vietnamese, Hindi, Malayalam, Marathi, Gujarati, Persian, Yoruba, Dutch, French, Italian, Romanian and Czech), thus having a broad range of previous contexts of language learning and learner histories. Eighteen were in their mid- or late twenties, the remaining three above thirty; only one had family commitments. The students were studying courses with a visual and/or creative design component (e.g., photography, graphic or product design, fine art, interior architecture), fashion-related management content or a focus oriented towards the built environment (e.g., civil engineering, construction or property management and development). In inviting students to participate in the study, the choice of subject areas was in line with the aim of the research to explore synergies between the verbal and the visual and also to tap into past and potential experience of students using English in workplace settings, before coming to study in the UK and beyond the postgraduate degree.

Key questions asked (see Appendix 1) covered research participants' views and attitudes towards English, their experience of learning English prior to starting the postgraduate degree, methods they were currently using to develop their English, their experience of successful and less

successful communicative encounters in the UK, and anticipated use of English beyond graduation. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each and were audio-recorded with participants' permission, on university premises, in classrooms booked specifically for the interviews. Ethical clearance was obtained from the institution where the students were enrolled. Participants were assured, both in the initial invitation letter and at the start of the interview, that they could withdraw from the research at any point during the interview or up to ten days after the interview took place. The initial invitation also contained the core interview questions, to help secure fully informed consent.

The names of research participants used in the present article are pseudonyms and do not reflect their nationality or first language. At the beginning of each interview participants were asked if they would like to pick a name that could be used when disseminating the research. Some of the names used in this article have been chosen by the research participants themselves, others by the researcher if no preference was expressed.

Findings

Of the experiences shared by interviewees, one that was repeatedly highlighted – and is therefore the main focus of the present article – was access to people who could offer support with using English. The sequencing of interviews and the methodological approach (constructivist grounded theorizing, Charmaz, 2014) enabled an in-depth exploration of language development brokering. Named sources that research participants primarily drew on during their academic sojourn in the UK were not trained language professionals, with formal responsibilities to provide English language instruction (although these were available in the university where the research participants were enrolled); the chosen sources included subject academics, library staff, peer students on the course (both native and non-native speakers of English), colleagues and supervisory staff in internship contexts, research participants' family members, partners, housemates, friends not participating in the course, or 'language partners'. These 'beyond the classroom' language development brokers, to use Benson and Reinders' (2011) phrase, which problematizes the distinction between classroom and out-of-class language learning, provided support with any type of language that impacted on research participants' perceptions of themselves as competent language users within the context of their course or course-related work environment. They did not focus on narrowly defined academic English (or university English, as defined by Jenkins, 2013). The brokers were either actively sought, as the examples in a later section of this article will demonstrate, or took up this role inadvertently due to their position within the course context or the students' support network. They provided either direct language correction or opportunities for meaningful language use. They were not necessarily more proficient users of English themselves. The length of time that brokers spent in their broker role varied, according to the research participants, from a one-off encounter to sustained support over the duration of the taught postgraduate course. The following section illustrates research participants' experience with language development brokers.

Research participants' experiences

Jahan, a relatively confident user of English for general and leisure purposes, kept a notebook, which contained drawings and notes: some in his handwriting, some written by one of his subject lecturers in one-to-one tutorials. The written record of meaning negotiation (in the context of a technical subject) helped Jahan develop his ability to talk knowledgeably about professional topics. Jahan also received feedback on his writing style and guidance on the importance of writing from a reader's perspective, which he then successfully incorporated in subsequent work. Because

attention to language was not framed as formal language instruction and was viewed as 'business as usual' on the course by subject lecturers who offered some guidance on language themselves instead of referring students to language tutors, Jahan was more readily able to benefit from and engage with it.

Delia, meanwhile, had misgivings about her accent and was worried it would stop her from securing a job in her field. However, she recounted a situation in which, in dialogue with a lecturer and other students on her course, she was able to intervene and contribute to the discussion on a professional aspect. The contribution attracted praise from the lecturer; this affirmed Delia's professional knowledge and skills, and increased her confidence. Another example of validation from a lecturer was provided by VJ. Feedback from a lecturer on her work included some specific language that VJ was then able to integrate into a presentation she led in a subsequent session. This use was noticed and she was praised for her ability to speak professionally and knowledgeably about her topic.

Anna sought a range of different sources of support with her use of English. She discussed her writing with a library-based student mentor, and her listening comprehension difficulties on the course with a librarian. She was able to make friends with students on another course who shared a module with her, and having discovered that a British colleague had a similar undergraduate background and career route, was able to exchange professional knowledge with that colleague.

Lillian had explicitly asked for accommodation in a houseshare with someone of the same nationality who had been in the UK for five years. This provided a reassuring micro-environment from which Lillian could then branch out into socialising in English with course colleagues speaking other first languages. Similar to two other research participants, Lillian was part of an active, multinational study group, with whom she was able to share ideas about the topic of her course and from whom she could develop her subject knowledge. She was also using other out-of-class opportunities for language development, such as learning appropriate email style from the emails received from her lecturers (an example she gave was ending emails with 'kind regards').

Language development brokers were not necessarily more proficient than the students they were supporting. Antonia was initially apprehensive about her ability to use English but her confidence increased when she realised that some of her colleagues on the course had less command of English than she did. Interacting with others with a lower proficiency level gave Antonia the opportunity to use her English more freely and to worry less about grammatical mistakes, whereas when speaking with an 'English person' she would usually monitor her speech very carefully and feel less fluent as a result. Laura indicated that she felt more comfortable interacting with non-native English speakers. Maria, on the other hand, noted that she preferred to 'hang out with students who can speak English' and felt that she herself had been given a brokering role ('sometimes lecturers ask us to explain to [less proficient] students if [lecturers] feel they have not made themselves understood').

Leila, on the other hand, commented that she felt she could not learn anything by speaking about the subject with colleagues who spoke less English than herself. She relied on a native speaker colleague for course-specific interaction and on a housemate for language correction. She had booked an appointment with the Language Centre, but felt that her housemate was available more readily and for longer periods of time.

Harry, a more proficient language user, asked native speaker colleagues on the course to correct him (as did another research participant, Jim) and noted that they were 'really cooperative'; Harry was actively trying to develop his English – his strategy was to 'listen carefully, make assumptions, confirm with friends' – and felt that he was also benefiting linguistically from his paid internship: his boss openly encouraged him to speak, used a very supportive communication style himself in a multicultural workplace, and the banter in the office was inclusive rather than alienating. Anita noted that she had frequent opportunities to exchange ideas with practitioners in her field.

Carla had completed an undergraduate degree in the UK. She had a part-time job which capitalised on previous professional experience in her home country and involved some travel to different parts of the UK, as well as interacting with a mix of nationalities. She also had a 'language partner'; someone who wanted to learn Carla's language and who was helping her with English in return.

Bella's proficiency level was fairly high and she had access to a language development broker in her immediate support network. Her older sister was also based in the UK and worked in a field related to Bella's course; Bella was about to participate in work experience on one of her sister's projects. Bella described her sister as follows: 'she reads a lot. If she comments on a picture she uses words like "prowess". She sounds educated.' The father of another research participant, Ella, had professional links with the UK (though based in Ella's home country) and Ella occasionally sought his guidance on her project. He was a proficient language user in her immediate circle who served as a model for Ella.

Being in a relationship in which English was used as a medium of communication offered additional opportunities for language development. Xanthe's friend had a British partner, and Xanthe had noticed a marked improvement in her friend's fluency as a result. Martha's partner spoke a different first language from her, and they used English as a medium of communication. As a language learner himself and, according to Martha, a more proficient user of English than herself, he provided guidance on clarity in her spoken and written output. Martha supplemented this with support from a teacher of English to young learners, who was one of Martha's friends.

Independent of their proficiency level, participants differed in terms of the extent to which they emphasized the need for language development as a priority, or viewed their time in the UK primarily as an opportunity for overall academic and professional development. Lillian's response to the question 'Would you describe yourself as a language learner or a language user?' was 'I want to be a [language] learner but, firstly, a learner of my course'. Being a 'learner of my course' did not automatically translate into language development. Vivian commented that 'My language has not developed but my content knowledge has'. Vivian's undergraduate course in her home country (in her first language) was in a subject area different from the one on which her (UK-based) postgraduate course focused, and her priority was to identify a small number of colleagues who could help fill gaps in her specialist knowledge. A similar strategy was adopted by Beatrice.

The majority of research participants offered examples of supportive and enabling brokers, who had a positive impact on research participants' ability to communicate. A small number of less supportive encounters recounted by research participants, however, helped to provide clearer contours to the concept of language development broker. Audrey hoped she could befriend a colleague on her course who had both a higher level of English than she did and extensive experience of multinational work environments; however, that colleague left the course at an early stage. In some lectures, Anna felt that she was not able to participate actively because the lecturer presented content too fast and Anna did not have time to process the information and formulate questions. Another research participant, Cassandra, had a British partner, who happened to be a language teacher; however, Cassandra did not feel she learnt a lot from him because he could understand her regardless of the mistakes she was making, and sometimes did not give her the opportunity to complete her sentences because he could anticipate what she was going to say. Cassandra felt this did not give her the opportunity to correct herself. Xanthe noted that on her course there was far less emphasis on using specialist language and more attention paid to visual elements. While this was justified as a way of enabling less fluent speakers to showcase their specialist skills, it meant that, in contrast to colleagues from other courses, Xanthe received less exposure to language and substantially fewer opportunities to produce and receive feedback on her language output. Xanthe had weekly group tutorials to talk about individual creative projects students had been developing in response to a common brief, and receive feedback on these from the tutor and peers. However, a combination of peers not wanting to offend by asking problematising questions and the tutor

placing more emphasis on visual over verbal language meant that tutorials were not the language-rich environment that could support Xanthe's growth as a language user. Additionally, at the end of a series of group tutorials about their projects, when students were expected to deliver a formal presentation on the project outcomes, Xanthe felt she was being asked 'like a monkey, to show myself', because her colleagues and her tutor were already familiar with the development of her project and she was mainly repeating information they already knew. Martha did receive occasional direct error correction from the subject lecturers on the course, although she also noted that sometimes it was quite clear to her that lecturers could not understand her but politely pretended they could and did not take the time to ask Martha to elaborate on her reply.

Discussion and Implications

For non-native English speakers studying in an English-medium higher education context, the language acquisition tenets highlighted in the introduction to this article mean that a number of conditions need to be in place for language development to occur. While study abroad contexts offer opportunities for repeated exposure to relevant language, the quality of that exposure and the extent to which exposure is accompanied by formal attention to language patterns need to be carefully planned and/or reflected on. Potentially, misalignment can arise between formal language support available during students' academic sojourn and the situations in which language is meaningfully used for academic or related communication.

Informal or non-academic networks on and off campus which provide opportunities for language development complement formal provision. Daisy, a participant in Benson et al.'s (2013) research with Hong Kong students studying abroad, travelled to the UK to study a postgraduate degree in applied linguistics. Daisy did not, however, find the course sufficiently complex or challenging, as her undergraduate degree had focused on the same area. A change in Daisy's financial circumstances led to her securing a part-time job as an interpreter in hospitals and clinics, a job which 'gave her a chance to travel around the city and she enjoyed walking around ordinary places, instead of tourist spots' (p. 98), as well as contributing to an improvement in Daisy's spoken English. Given that Daisy was preparing to be an English language teacher, she perceived this experience as beneficial. Daisy proactively identified a complementary context in which she could use her English and integrate into a professional setting in which ability to transition across languages and cultural backgrounds is a valuable asset. This was also the case for some of the participants in the research interviews which underpin the present article. Other international students, however, would benefit from having access to these experiences formally facilitated by the university where they are enrolled.

Montgomery (2010) draws attention to the value, for international students, of being part of a network of such students; while Montgomery does not focus explicitly on language, the data in the present study support the view that the quality of the international student experience is enhanced, for the great majority, by students having access to other non-native English speakers. Partly this is due to international students becoming involved in what Montgomery refers to as the 'social fabric of the university' (p. 55); in other words, through participating in conversations that build up their fluency in the English language and their confidence in articulating a range of viewpoints, informed by a range of experiences in diverse linguistic and cultural settings.

The present research has identified a range of language development brokers who were highlighted by research participants as playing an important role beyond the language classroom, and the factors which impact on research participants' choice of brokers. It has also identified research participants' own evaluation of these brokers' contribution. To integrate the concept into a more fully articulated theory of language development, further research will need to be conducted into

the quality of interactions and ways to measure their impact on linguistic performance, the latter a rather complex task. Self-perceptions of development may not be an accurate reflection of reality: language users may under- or over-estimate their performance, and different contexts may trigger different performances. Commercially available tests measure only general proficiency, and objective/formal instruments for assessing language gain in EMI contexts are notoriously difficult to design, given that they need to capture individual development, with different starting and end points and interim milestones.

The research on which this article is based did not set out to evaluate the linguistic performance of research participants during the interview; however, it became apparent that a large number of the research participants used language not substantially above the minimum entry requirement for postgraduate level. The extent to which the research project itself is an opportunity for language use or development could be further explored, in line with Holliday's (2016) call for researchers to reflect on how they themselves and their research participants 'capitalise on the complexities of their presence within the research setting' (p. 146). In a study by Copland and Garton (2011), the authors noted that at least one participant volunteered for the study because of the opportunity it provided for them to use English, and in the project on which this article is based one interviewee recorded the interview on their phone, so that they could later analyse and request linguistic feedback on their own performance.

A final – and probably the most important – question that needs to be asked is how to ensure that research of this type has a practical impact, beyond its contribution to an academic body of knowledge. Lightbown and Spada (2013) cite Norton and Toohey's (2001) caveat that 'language acquisition may not be successful if [learners] do not have access to social relationships in situations where they are perceived as valued partners in communication'. The extent to which such relationships can be engineered in EMI contexts is one to reflect upon. A complementary view is put forward by Kinginger (2015, p. 13) who argues that 'it is incumbent upon educators to develop explicit pedagogical strategies to assist students in developing awareness of the identity-related challenges involved in language learning'. It could be argued that the responsibility to facilitate mutually enriching communicative exchanges and positive identity work lies with all stakeholders in EMI contexts, and that these stakeholders should be sensitised to the importance of language development brokering in supporting non-native speakers in English medium higher education contexts.

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Appendix 1

Core questions and additional prompts for semi-structured interviews

Question 1

What does the English language mean to you?
(Additional prompts: definitions of language to identify what underpins approaches to language development; past, now, future – language learner/user trajectory; comparison to main language;

instrumental/emotional engagement; thinking more broadly about the study abroad experience; not language learning but language development, as the latter starts from an already existing basis).

Question 2

Tell me about your experience of learning English before you came to [university name].
(Additional prompts: type of context, teaching methodologies and learning approaches).

Question 3

What methods are you using this year to develop your English?
(Additional prompt: broad functional/specific purpose areas and the way in which past experience informs present practice).

Question 4

Describe a situation related to your course at [university name] in which you were able to use your English language skills successfully. Compare this to a situation in which you felt you would have benefited from more language-related preparation.
(Additional prompts to identify types of communicative settings in which students engage and what strategies they use to manage the situations).

Question 5

What would you like to be able to do using the English language when you finish your course at [university name]?
(Additional prompts: explore what students believe they need to do to achieve that and what opportunities/support should be available to them).