Current Problems in the Acquisition and Research of Language for Specific (Academic) Purposes

Curating language within our academic endeavours

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For many years, in several academic contexts in the Netherlands and most recently in the UK, I have done a lot of thinking about the position of language in academic learning environments; its 'situatedness'. I am interested in the ways in which language, and choice of language, functions to enable or to block learning; to encourage or to limit participation; to foster perceptions of inclusion or exclusion. In a recent chapter, Haines, Kroese & Guo, 2020, we cite Mathilde, a Dutch student studying Business Administration through Dutch at a university in the Netherlands that prides itself on a proven 'internationalisation' strategy. Mathilde chooses to study in Dutch rather than English in order to avoid being "totally international". But when she joins the student-led study association, she needs to communicate with non-Dutch students through English and she reports "a notable success; not avoiding international students at parties anymore because of the fear to talk English".

In another recent study, I worked with Zimbabwean academic Joram Tarusarira to investigate the participatory experiences of academics from 'elsewhere' (such as Joram) who are teaching in English in an institution in which Dutch is used widely used beyond the classroom i.e. in which there is considerable explicit and implicit switching between English and Dutch. While these academics reported language to be 'an instrument of possibilities' and 'a vehicle for community', one academic explained that colleagues in the Dutch university whose native language is neither Dutch nor English "struggle because they are always at a disadvantage, it's never their native tongue and their voices are not always heard" (Haines & Tarusarira, 2021). So how do we ensure that everyone has a voice? The editors Thushari Welikala and Margaret Kumar responded to our chapter by saying: "it further highlights the fragility of the decade-old (western) habit of imagining life in terms of polarised realities. Rather, people continue to shuttle between Being insiders and Being outsiders, across the multiple professional and social contexts they inhabit." Despite her concerns about using English, Mathilde accepted that her use of English was "a way to learn about a different culture without having to go abroad", so we should understand that where language is concerned, complicated parts make up a complex whole, and our linguistic realities are less polarised and more of a 'tangled web'.

Let us think critically for a moment then about power relations in academia and the way that language, and in particular the English language, functions as both an opportunity (as Mathilde experienced) and as a potential barrier (as Mathilde also experienced) when we use language, and in particular the English language, to 'categorise' people within existing academic hierarchies; hierarchies which tend to favour certain groups of people with particular backgrounds and not others. This power play includes the ascription of identities to participants who may be designated 'Home' or 'International', 'Native-speaker' or 'Non-native speaker' and treated differently according to that categorisation. My position is that a home student can also be as 'international' as they

choose to be, and a so-called 'international' student may simply have crossed one border in order to study. The point I am making is that language is very much at the core of our identities within academia, but if language is ascribed uncritically as a major determinant of our identity - for instance when we are called a 'native speaker' or 'non-native speaker' – chances are that another valuable part of our identity will be underplayed or lost completely. After all, we are all 'native-speakers' of something, aren't we?

The difficulty is that while language always plays a fundamental role in our endeavours, its position in these endeavours is not always transparent, and it is therefore often entangled in unspoken assumptions or values. How many times have I been asked to support a lecturer whose students have made an issue out of his/her accent, only to confirm that the difficulties (and the solution to them) lies in the lecturer's teaching style or in the students' lack of intercultural appreciation. To extend this point, let's think about the way that the use of English can be conflated with the adoption of 'British' values and attitudes, and that this is ALSO far from transparent – for instance, in the UK context, where the language is embedded in often curious ways in both the academic domain and in the surrounding social environment. But this is not only the case in the UK but in any country where the dominant local language is also the dominant language used within the institution (although not necessarily in the classroom), as seen in the Netherlands for example. I do not know how far this is true of Latvia?

What does this mean for the professional practitioners who teach and research in universities? Well, we may participate knowingly or unknowingly in a process of acculturation or assimilation of students, in our desire to help our students succeed by making adjustments which are not only linguistic but also focused on their academic or disciplinary development – AND also on their identity. The danger is that we ask our students to 'check their identities in at the door', and that they are compliant because, as one student told us, 'they don't want to interrupt the tradition' (Haines, Kroese & Guo, 2020). Students and academics may therefore be encouraged to become insiders, but they may feel like surrogate insiders, like imposters or 'foreigners', or 'like a fish out of water' (Hofman 1989).

So what I am proposing here is that the cultural and linguistic identities of students and staff at universities is a resource which we can use as an asset that will be to the benefit of all. I am proposing that we support academics in a quest to step away from implicit and explicit cultural assimilation processes and to encourage students, while mastering the language they will need to succeed in their academic and disciplinary context, to bring their cultural and linguistic (and other identities) with them into the educational arena, and feel welcome(d), not as a temporary guest (or an 'international'), but rather as a fully-fledged member of the academic community. Let's put away the 'polarised realities' and engage in the more complex tangled processes of interaction that underlie the co-production and communication of knowledge within our academic disciplines. In this way, let's enable students to build and communicate international and intercultural identities which will provide them with a platform for their professional futures as global citizens able to function in diverse communities.

Just as the curator of an art exhibition needs to make choices of precisely where and how to position paintings in a given exhibition space, so with language we need to position it within the curriculum so that it works in relation to all participants. What I have been talking about therefore is the way we need to curate the context, the conditions and the circumstances within our academic endeavours through which language and academic communicative competences can prosper to the benefit of all parties in the process.

References

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