Breaking The Silence and Coming out of the Shadow—
An Observation on Intercultural Construction of Interactive Norms in Second Language Literacy Events

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Drawing on a four-month ethnographic research, and focusing on the connection between intercultural literacy and empowerment, the study examines how, through arranging a series of literacy practices and events in which intercultural awareness was frequently encouraged, an ESL culture class instructor successfully facilitated a group of international students' (90% Asian students) adjustment to the host culture interactive norms. The study discusses that in order to prepare international students with appropriate interactive skills to gain equal membership in literacy practices, unsilencing, which helps students to actively participate in second language (L2) literacy activities, is a necessary process of education. Through scaffolding and facilitating, educators may empower international students with interactive skills needed for full participation in the host culture literacy events.

The last few decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the amount, quality, and intensity of communication among individuals of different cultural backgrounds. This trend of cross-cultural communication is especially conspicuous in North American educational settings. Coming from different cultural backgrounds, many international students' literacy-accessing mode, which tends to be deeply rooted in their ideological origins and cultural identities can be quite different from the North American norms situated in Western ethno-linguistic backgrounds and socio-cultural contexts. These differences can frequently lead to situations of misunderstanding, frustration, or simply feelings of inadequacy that may put international students' academic success at risk.

Since higher education is increasingly multicultural, research needs to be done to address issues on how second language (L2) learners' language and literacy practices and values are mediated by their culturally-based understandings; what cross-cultural literacy adaptation difficulties are encountered by international students; and what can be done to help them meet the literacy demands as they proceed through their education in the target culture. Drawing on an ethnographic research, and focusing on the connection between intercultural literacy and empowerment (Au, 1998; Cummins, 1994), the present study examines how, through arranging a series of literacy events in which intercultural awareness is highly encouraged, an ESL culture class instructor successfully facilitated a group of international students' adjustment to the host culture interactive norms. The study demonstrates how the instructor helped second language learners acquire appropriate participation skills in L2 literacy events and examines reasons for the success of this ESL culture class.

Literacy in Sociocultural Contexts

According to previous studies, literacy means much more than just an ability to read and write. Broadly conceived, literacy is a socioculturally organized act of control over certain

forms of language (Garret & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002; Gee, 1991; Heath, 1983). Meek (1991) regards literacy as a means of access, a way of getting to know what counts as important in the common sphere of our cultural and social life. Laib (1988) suggests that literacy is the ability to shape and reshape language, a "heightened form of a dialogue" and the means of transcending barriers. It embodies and transmits culture and is perceived as the end result of education (p. 286). From these perspectives, literacy practices and stances are grounded in interpersonal and social communicative events mediated by complex systems of spoken and written language. They are embedded in and constitute situational, institutional, historical, and socio-cultural contexts, and centered in construction of meaning (Elster, 2003; Graff, 1994; Heath, 1983).

Literacy Practices and Intercultural (In)Congruency

Situating literacy practices in socio-culturally sensitive contexts, researchers argue that literacy and culture have mutual impact on each other. Literacy is "the primary symbolic medium through which cultural knowledge is communicated and instantiated, negotiated and contested, reproduced and transformed" (Garret & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002, p. 339). Cultural practice and aspects of setting and interaction are the primary vehicles, which powerfully and necessarily affect language and literacy teaching and learning processes (Crago, 1992; Poole, 1992).

When learning a foreign language and its culture, a learner's cultural identity goes through an enlightening process in which the learner experiences a dialogue with elements of both the target language and the culture attached to it. This learning process cultivates learners' intercultural literacy and facilitates them to communicate effectively with members of a foreign language community.

On their way to become literate in their intercultural communication settings, however, international students are very likely to encounter hardships. Many researchers attribute the lack of school success experienced by many students of diverse backgrounds to their preference for forms of interaction, language, and thought that conflict with the mainstream behaviors generally needed for success in school (Au & Kawakami, 1994; Bell, 1997). These preferences are not inborn but the result of socialization practices in the home and community, which in turn reflect learners' primary socio-cultural values. Because school is a mainstream institution, instruction is carried out in ways following mainstream standards for behavior and reflecting mainstream cultural norms.

Being socialized to draw on their home and community literacy and socio-cultural repertoires, however, minority students' culturally preferred learning styles might block them from understanding a text in the mainstream ways. Such discontinuities may have important social and cognitive consequences for minority students in mainstream educational contexts. In intercultural language socialization, generally speaking, the "survival of the fittest" principle permeates various settings. While acculturation can facilitate learners' second language socialization, resistance to adaptation and significant socio-cultural discontinuities often times not only impede L2 learners' language and literacy practices but also mediate their learning opportunities, cultural obligations, and social identity establishment. Researchers have found that culturally incongruent classroom literacy practices tend to prevent minority students from participating effectively in teacher-planned learning activities

(Bell, 2000; Crago, 1992; Katz, 2000; Lantolf & Genung, 2002). They may fail to benefit from instructional activities not in line with their cultural practices, thus are often denied access to some important aspects of literacy development. Consequently, their motivation and incentive to learn can be reduced or victimized, which may lead to a vicious circle.

To avoid such "catastrophe," first of all, educators should be fully aware of the fact that while culturally congruent classroom literacy practices facilitate minority students' language and literacy learning, culturally incongruent practices hinder it. Based on such understanding, it is critical that teachers examine the issue of cultural discontinuity between home and school literacy experiences and be able to attend to, understand and address different discourse patterns and learning behaviors of minority students. When such understanding is developed, a more pragmatic approach should be followed to allow effective teaching strategies to facilitate literacy development of the minority student population.

Empowering Students of Diverse Backgrounds with Intercultural Literacy

For most international students, discontinuities between home and host country literacy experiences can be big obstacles against their literacy development. To alleviate such negative impacts, special teacher student interaction practices are needed to maximize the language and literacy learning of students from different cultural backgrounds. Measures need to be taken to promote specific problem-solving skills and orientations to prepare minority students for literacy practices endorsed in school. To achieve this purpose, educators need to create the possibility not only of helping students to become proficient in literacy through providing them with authentic literacy activities but also of empowering them through a considerable amount of instruction in the specific literacy skills needed for full participation in literacy practices in the culture of power (Cummins, 1986, 1994).

Empowerment (Cummins, 1986, 1994) can be regarded as both a mediating construct and an outcome variable for literacy education among students of diverse backgrounds. Empowered students recognize that both self-acceptance and the recognition of cultural others are of crucial importance when in contact with a target culture. They are confident in their own cultural identity, as well as knowledgeable of school structures and interactional patterns, so that they can participate successfully in school learning activities. Delpit (1988) argued that students of diverse backgrounds are outsiders to the culture of power and deserve to gain a command of conventions and forms of discourse already known to insiders. She distinguished between what she called personal literacy and power-code literacy. Although both are important, it is the latter that is needed for success in the larger society. Thus, teachers need to extend students' literacy efforts and encourage students to adapt to and interact with the target language and culture, which will help them to get empowered through acquiring the norms of power-code literacy in the L2 sociocultural contexts (Au, 1998).

The Study

The present study was situated in an American Culture classroom in an Intensive Reading Program (the IEP program) at a university in Texas. There were ten international students in the class. Nine of them came from Asia (3 from Japan, 3 from Korean, 2 from Taiwan, and 1 from Malaysia). Most of the students came to study in the IEP program in

order to get themselves ready (linguistically especially) for higher education in American universities. Every other day during the weekdays, the students had a fifty-minute culture class with Ms. J., an instructor with more than eight years of ESL teaching experience.

In the study, in order to capture the fluid, multiple and sometimes contradictory nature of L2 learners' literacy practices within their various sites of literacy activity and participation, ethnographic techniques - interview and participant observation - were selected as the research methodologies. The observation lasted more than four months, from the beginning to the end of the semester. During this period of time, I focused on observing students' interactions and communications in different literacy practices and events. Conversations were tape-recorded and transcribed, and field notes were taken; the instructor and six of the students were interviewed for two or three times; samples of students' writing assignment were collected and analyzed.

From Silence to Talk – Empowering the Students with the Target Culture Interactive Norms

In Ms. J.'s class, what was really impressive, or even unusual, was the relaxing atmosphere in the classroom and the active participation of the students. For many students of non-native-English-speaking background, especially for those from Asia, participating actively in classroom activities at English-speaking institutions can cause strong tension. Characteristically, L2 learners find it very hard to participate, and they typically respond to academic group discussions with silence and reticence.

However, although the majority of the students (90%) came from Asian countries, the students in Ms. J.'s classroom appeared to be very talkative and very much ready to involve themselves in classroom activities. How Ms. J. managed to help the students break their silences and come "out of the shadow" (as mentioned by Ms. J. herself in an interview) formed the major research interest. In this study, I focused on exploring how the carefully arranged literacy practices and events in Ms. J's culture class empowered the students with the target culture interactive norms, which, in turn, equipped the students with stronger literacy capabilities to participate actively and effectively in cross-cultural literacy events.

Incongruent Cultural Practices in Communicative Norms

The international students in Ms. J's class were not really "unusual." They had gone through a developmental process before adapting themselves to the target culture communicative styles. The following data collected from an interview of a Japanese young woman very well represents the puzzlement and frustration confronted by these newcomers at the beginning of their American study, who found themselves suddenly plunged into a completely different educational setting:

Example 1
I was surprised about the different approaches that schools take to teaching. In Japan when I was in school only I had to do is just listening teacher whole class. But, here we need participation and it is included our grade. First I came here I could not participate even a little. For me it was so strange that students ask questions to the teacher or say opinion during the class. I remember teacher advised to me

participation more. But still I could not participation well. It was totally new thing for me and I had no idea how should I participate.

— interview data 04/12/2006

The difficulty the Japanese young woman experienced at the beginning of her American education can be better understood if we take into consideration the discrepancies in communicative norms between Asian countries and North American countries. Due to the deep-rooted Confucian ideology, Asians tend to value modesty, restraint and cooperation but frown upon aggressive displays, direct confrontation, and overt conflict in formal public speech. Influenced by such interactive norms, Asians tend to use a more indirect or elusive conversational style, which might be presented in the form of frequent silences, to save face or to avoid embarrassment either to those they are speaking to or to themselves.

As observed by Cook (1999), in Japan, "attentive listening" is cultivated and socialized through "empathy training" in early childhood. Jones (1999) finds that in frequently teacher-centered Asian classroom settings, the teacher, like the parents, bestows, transmits, and commands, while the student, like the child, receives, accepts, and obeys. Actually, silence rather than communication, obedience rather than argument play a crucial role in the individuals' moral disposition and in maintaining the harmony of the social order, especially in case of showing deference to a person of higher status. In typical classroom interactions in Asia, students are expected to remain respectfully silent and speak only when spoken to by the teacher. To volunteer answers frequently may be perceived and interpreted by peers as being aggressive or "showing off." These can explain why a Korean young woman in the class felt reluctant to volunteer her answers, even though she was "sure 100%."

Example 2

… When I was in school (in Korea), we used to take notes and listen to the lecture by teacher. We did not have much participation in class. Participating well in class far from being good, it looked to act big like a self-important fellow. So I am not familiar to participate in class. Even though I know the answer and I am sure 100%, I do not say anything. — from a Korean student's writing sample

From the young woman's comments, we can get some sense of the salient cross-cultural communication gap the international students must face up with when the target culture communicative norms are quite different from those in their home cultures. Most of the students reported feeling out of place when they found that in America, rather than respectful reticence in class, vigorous classroom interaction, casual atmosphere of solidarity and informal student-teacher rapport are valued and promoted. To get themselves accustomed and socialized to the literacy practices in the American educational settings, every student experienced double disadvantages to different degrees at different stages. On the one hand, coming from a culture where "face-saving" ideology is deeply-rooted (Scollon & Scollon, 1995), the Asian students tended to be very self-conscious about their level of English proficiency, which seriously restrained their participation, because they dreaded becoming objects of ridicule by making face-threatening linguistic mistakes. On the other hand, coming from a culture where talkativeness is not very much encouraged and appreciated in classrooms, the students might find themselves not fully socialized to the public

communicative competence required in the target culture literacy activities, which might very well result in disorientations and frustrations at least at the initial stage of their American education.

Empowering the Students with Participation Skills in Literacy Events

Many native speakers may just stop at misunderstanding or even discriminating international students for their silence and reticence. The instructor in this American culture class, being equipped with intercultural communication awareness, however, understood and then embarked to empower the students with the target culture literacy skills in order to help the students walk out of the shadow.

The Culture and Literacy Practices in the American Culture Class

The culture and literacy practices in the American Culture class were carefully arranged to parallel with the contents and activities in the textbook used in the class. To help the students absorb and reflect upon each chapter in the textbook, the instructor was observed to arrange the learning activities, quite routinely, in the following procedures: (a) Preview; (b) In /out of class activities; (c) Review; (d) Extension of the cultural practices (always in the form of oral presentations or written research reports).

For the preview activity, the instructor encouraged and sometimes required the students not only to read the textbook about certain cultural phenomena in America, but also to reflect upon or to do small-scale literature research on the counterpart cultural issues in their home countries.

To deal with each chapter in class, the instructor always started from encouraging the students to volunteer their understandings on the cross-cultural differences they found between their home countries and America, based on the students' preview activity. To encourage the students' participation, the instructor, sometimes, brought some colorful sticks, which were used as facilitating tools to stimulate students' involvement. For example, at the beginning of the class, each student was allotted six sticks. Every time when they volunteered their understandings, they would be rewarded the honor of putting one stick on their desks, the total number of which would be recorded by the instructor at the end of the class as a record to add credits to their scores on participation, which constituted 80% of their total grades. As expected, after using the stick-prompt for several times, nobody in the class felt comfortable to keep silent and have no stick or fewer sticks on their desks at the end of each class. Thus, the students were motivated to participate in one way or another, and Ms. J. applauded their participation by allowing them to put a stick on their desks even when their comments or answers were not very much acceptable.

After collective discussions on cultivating students' awareness of cross-cultural communication or miscommunication, the class would be divided into several groups. Each group was supposed to have a discussion to figure out 5-6 questions they wanted to know the most from native speakers about the cultural issues they were reading and talking about. They could raise questions to check the validity of the texts, or to check their own cross-cultural understandings and concerns. The instructor collected the questions (in written form) at the end of the first class, and took care to reorganize them into a brief open-ended questionnaire.

At the beginning of the next class, the instructor divided the students into three groups. Each group was given 20-25 minutes to go out of the classroom to interview 5-6 Americans. From the interviews, the students were supposed to get native speakers' answers for the survey questions they raised.

During the semester, the instructor had organized the students to do such fieldwork research through face-to-face communication with native speakers for eight times, and the students had collected data on Americans' expectations and values on friendship, family relationship, age, popular culture, sport, education, etc. After each survey activity, the students were either asked to conduct group discussions and give brief oral presentations in class, or were required to hand in written-form reports about their research outcomes.

The above procedure of culture and literacy practices was performed very routinely in the culture class, so much so that the students had been gradually socialized to acquire the "format" of the activities. Through the carefully arranged culture and literacy practices, the students had come to see the merits of teamwork and begun to feel safer and more comfortable to communicate with peers, native speakers and the instructor. These helped the students break their silences and gradually become adaptive to the target culture communicative styles.

Helping the Students Come "Out of the Shadow" through Multi-level Scaffoldings

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociohistorical approach to individual development emphasizes the function of social practices in the process of one's learning activity, which suggests how classroom contexts and interactions may be more supportive and growth-enhancing for students. In this study, in the process of the second language literacy events as described above, the international students were gradually empowered to acquire the target culture interactive norms, and begin to contribute and participate in the culture and literacy practices more or less at ease. To interpret the promoting power behind such improvement, a key concept from Vygotsky's theory – scaffolding – can be very informative. As Gaffney & Anderson (1991) explain, "scaffolding" refers to "support that enables a learner to complete a task or achieve a goal that would have been unattainable without assistance" (p. 184). In this study, the students had received multi-faceted scaffoldings, from the instructor, peers, and other native speakers, which challenged, encouraged and stimulated the students to take part in the target culture interactive activities.

Scaffolding from Peers. The following example shows that the students could be encouraged to break their silences by peers. From the data collected at the beginning of their first time survey activity, we can see that the students indeed had to struggle with and to overcome certain psychological barriers before they could summon up their courage to communicate with native speakers.

    Example 3
      M: It is scary.
      P: Yeah. What if they say no?
      (Overlapping sounds): Yeah…
      F: M. You go first.
      M: Noooo... O.K. I go first. But everybody has to interview one or two persons. O.K.?

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(Overlapping sounds): O.K.
F: M. Go.
M: (laughed nervously) O.K. One, two, three… Let's go.
            --- observation data, 01/23/2006

Although feeling nervous and unsafe to go forward and ask native speakers questions, the girl M. finally determined to "go first." In this case, the urge, encouragement, and support from peers, the expectation of having to "interview one or two persons" sooner or later, and the sense of safety she could elicit from going forward together with the other two team members scaffolded her to take the first step to go forward and break the silence.

Scaffolding from the Native Speakers. When the students finally mustered up their courage to go forward and ask native speakers questions, the kindness of the native speakers provided them with great relief and maybe confidence to further break their psychological wall of uneasiness. This helped the students to see the possibility and even the merits of communicating with native speakers.

Example 4
Y: I am afraid of they refuse, but, um, they …very nice. They all answer my questions. I like going out and ask them question now. I like talking to them.
            --- interview data 03/26/2006

Scaffolding from the Teacher. The major resource of the scaffoldings derived from the instructor. In Ms. J's American Culture class, participation was explicitly required (80% of the total scores) and participation methods and some salient social norms in the target culture were briefly introduced at the beginning of the semester. In daily classroom activities, the instructor managed to stimulate students' participation through verbal encouragement or game activities (e.g. the stick-prompt). The benefits of group interactions were fully recognized and actively promoted by Ms. J in her classroom. As she put it,

Example 5
"It is much more comfortable participating in a small group than it is in a big class. So group them." --- interview data 04/26/2006

Facing with the most taciturn students, she didn't give up by simply ignoring them. Instead, she tried to take measures to stimulate their participation. She said:

Example 6
"Give the least participatory student, the shiest student, the role as leader. And… *just watch that people coming out of the shadow a little bit*" .
                                                        --- interview data 04/26/2006

The most powerful scaffolding force permeating Ms. J.'s classroom, however, stemmed from the carefully arranged intercultural literacy events, in which the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness was constantly encouraged and emphasized. In her class, Ms. J. often encouraged the students to research and make comparisons between their home and host

cultures. She believed that cross-cultural sensitivity can "break up stereotypes and develop tolerance" (interview data, 04/28/2006). As such, besides creating and providing the students with chances to communicate with peers and native speakers in authentic language practices outside of the classroom, she organized students to conduct in-class discussions on intercultural communication issues. This forms a rich zone of media- contexts, which scaffolds the students' mindful self-reflexivity on their home and host cultures.

By employing the learners' home culture life experience as "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 2000, p. 16), the cultural literacy practices in Ms. J's classroom led the students to recognize and respect the social, cultural, and political roots in their primary culture, in addition to identify, reflect upon and negotiate the intercultural discrepancies between their home and host cultures. By drawing on the intercultural experiences personally meaningful to the students of diverse backgrounds, the L2 learners may constantly construe, validate, and reformulate their value systems. On the basis of the reevaluation and repositioning, learners may gradually expand their repertoire of language and socio-cultural resources, became more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating in cross-cultural perspectives.

By the end of the semester, eight students in the class reported that they felt quite at ease participating in classroom activities and they gained more courage to communicate with Americans. Through various scaffolding cultural literacy practices in and out of class, the students became socialized and accustomed to the target cultural participation patterns, and began to take part in cultural literacy activities with higher motivation and better self-perception. As a Korean student mentioned,

Example 7
"I am trying to participate a lot this semester and it works. It gives me more motivation to enjoy the class." —interview data, 05/06/2006

Conclusion

To sum up, in this study, it is confirmed that the way in which literacy is constructed in education is culturally constrained. With quite discrepant cultural backgrounds, international students' experiences reflected in their literacy events may depart significantly from educators' expectations, which can jeopardize the students' academic success. To avoid such problem, it is crucial for teachers to accept students as cultured beings.

Meanwhile, it is important to realize that cross-cultural communication awareness is both important to teachers who need to introduce cross-cultural resources into class to promote literacy activities, and to students with diverse backgrounds, who may strengthen their literacy participation skills through understanding both the home and the host cultural interactive norms. In order to prepare international students with appropriate interactive skills to gain equal membership in literacy practices, as the socio-cultural links or mediators between the L2 learners and the society, institutions and educators need to mediate deliberately. They can take measures to create L2 interactive opportunities for the L2 students to challenge the marginalization of minority groups and to maximize the students' chances of literacy practices. Also, they can take care to build up the learners' interactional skills and their command of the discourse norms in the host institutional and social systems through

deliberate mediations and scaffoldings during the whole process of the students' second language socialization.

To facilitate L2 learners' intercultural socialization, un-silencing in second language literacy events is a necessary process of empowerment. Through acquainting international students with the ethos in the classroom activities and through building up their interactive skills in target culture, educators can not only help students become more proficient in L2 literacy but also raise cross-cultural sensitivity to operate in different intercultural literacy events with flexibility, effectiveness, and meaningful performance.

<div align="center">References</div>

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