# International Graduate Students Socialization in Organized Tutoring Sessions at Writing Center

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**Abstract**

*The study presented herein entails the examination of academic socialization of international graduate students at a large northeastern public university. It explores how a socially organized activity by way of tutoring at the Graduate Writing Center (GWC) facilitates building respective students' linguistic, writing, socio-cultural skills and how this process helps in their overall academic development. Preliminary finding from the study suggest that academic socialization is a challenge to students, both in terms of access to information, language and socio-culturally. It was clearly observed nonetheless, that the students gained a lot from their interaction with the tutors at the GWC, thus increase their individual academic competence, development and social skills, all of which are crucial in academic endeavors.*

**Keywords**: Academic Socialization, Student-tutor interaction, Expertise/Power Relations, Graduate Writing Center

## 1. Introduction

Graduate students are expected to be active participants in their respective academic communities, and acculturate into the world of academia, by building and producing academic knowledge and relationships. Rigors of and expectations applied onto all graduate programs may be the triggers that enhance difficulties in transitioning into the academic world. Moreover, perhaps, linguistic or cultural differences may exacerbate the difficulties in academic socialization.

The purpose of the study is to explore how International Students in Graduate programs ata large northeastern public university, navigate and become academically socialized through academic skills acquisition and tools development through tutoring service at the GWC and how this enhances their respective academic development.

Focusing on students from the Arabian Gulf region in investigating the context of graduate programs where institutional transition may be just as important and play a greater role than the linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the study would shed light on pertinent issues of academic and language socialization especially understanding the importance of specific skill set in academic development and success. The absence of extensive literature that examines the extent to which the particular program environment and the extent of the effects of linguistic and cultural factors on academic socialization necessitate the undertaking of studies such as this. Specifically, the study will address the following questions:

a) What are the specific challenges faced by international graduate students in academic socialization?
b) How are the experiences international students in their academic socialization in pursuitof graduate studies reflected at the GWC program?
c) How effective are programs offered within the graduate school context and its role in graduate students' academic socialization?

## 2. Literature Review

This study is premised on among other, the theoretical concepts of socialization including language socialization as propounded by such scholars as, Och (1988) and Schieffelin & Ochs (1986). It draws from multi-disciplinary approaches as it applies to the study of social and linguistic competence which defines language socialization as the socialization of individuals "through the use of language and socialization to use language" (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; p. 163). Consequently, language socialization is perceived as a lifelong, interactive process that begins with the respective human being initial social contact (Hollman, 1994).Some other theoretical conceptualizations are presented in language socialization (Duff, 2007; 2010), literacy as social practice (Heath, 1983; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1995), socio-cultural theory (Lantof, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978) and critical discourse analysis (Gee, 1990; Ivanic, 1998; Seloni, 2008).

Among the various theoretical directions, perhaps the discourse that comes close to capturing the core of the proposed focus of this study –academic language socialization—is being viewed as a set of values and beliefs that appear in academic discourse (i.e., L2 academic writing) which the students encounter in their academic community (Seloni, 2008).

Kramsch (2002) proposes that language serves as a tool for gaining membership linguistically negotiated in a particular community of practice to immerse oneself into a community's systems, social-cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs. International students have to submerge themselves into the American culture as the cultural shock that many of them face diminishes, since they have to negotiate their participation, struggle with gaining legitimacy, and membership in English medium academic discourse communities (Barnawi, 2009). It can be a daunting task to academically assimilate into an academic community since socio-cognitive interactions become more complicated in a classroom setting where there is a population of linguistically and culturally diverse students (Hirst, 2007). It is worth noting that, the students' academic socialization and their linguistic and conceptual repertoires have been dampened since international graduate students are typically trained to use English-as-a-second-language for cognitive or academic functions within formal contexts only. They may lack informal contact with the social use of the language in culturally appropriate manners within the American college culture. Language difficulties cause a cascade of problems. For instance, informal, casually made remarks, the usage of slang and euphemisms, and a lack of English proficiency reduce the socio-academic acclimatization and international students often miss out on vital information.

The main idea behind my study is based on general socialization, entailing language socialization and more specifically academic socialization, a complex and situated process by which graduate students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds become socialized into academic settings and take advantage of the opportunities inherent. It is during the dynamic process of academic socialization, that the students gain competence and membership in their new academic communities. This view indicates that learning is a socially constructed process that the students experience with the peers and instructors while participating in the academic.

## 3. Methodology

Bogdan & Biklen (1992) refer to qualitative data as "rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying; they are the particulars that form the basis of analysis" (p. 106). Consequently, qualitative data takes a variety of forms including but not limited to artifacts, photos, audio and video tapes, computer generated material etc. This, nonetheless, does not reduce in any way, the importance of narrative or words, which forms the bulk of the material used by qualitative researches in the collection and analysis of data. The continuance nature of data analysis in qualitative research i.e. from conceptualization to data interpretation and onwards, provides one of the major hallmarks of qualitative research

In this study, the voluntary participation of a graduate student from the Gulf countries region as well as that of a tutor at the Graduate writing center facilitated observation of interaction between the two, in two sessions undertaken over a period of three months.

A qualitative approach employed facilitated of data gathering over the three month period. The data collection methods adopted included:

 (a) Preliminary open-ended interview questions
 (b) Video-recorded observation sessions
 (c) Researcher's fieldnotes of the sessions, and

(d) A collection of written documents (i.e. handouts, brochures, and website information).

It is evident that qualitative research basically speculates whilst searching for meaning thus making new observation necessitating collection of additional data (if need be) and derive patterns. Goertz & LeCompte (1994) refer to this recursive process as "analytic induction' (p. 179); reviewing data for categories of phenomena, defining sets of relationships, developing hypothesis and refining appropriately. This was evident in the study as the two sessions provided a myriad of data, necessitating going back and forth into field notes to take note of patterns of phenomena.

The data was analyzed following a variety of approaches including conversational analysis (Sacks et al, 1974), and identification of major and minor themes by going over the data iteratively (Bogdan & Biklen ,1992).

Following Huberman and Miles' (1994) suggestion of identifying patterns, themes and clusters that emerge from the data, the researcher went through the data, to look for specific repeat themes. Noted also were issues though not repeated, may serve to put a specific point across. Having identified the themes, and going through the data over and over, the researcher noted data overlaps, and a realization that data could fit into more than one theme, a typical feature of the first step, according to Bogdan and Bilken (1992). The researcher then repeatedly returned to the transcripts or other documentation. The researcher thus presents theme categorization accompanied by quotes from narrative and descriptions in order to enhance credibility.

In the analysis, the researcher captures the relevant themes as they emerge in the interviews, specifically participants' negotiation, taking turns, examining verbal discourses and identification of relevance. Of interest as well, is individual's social experiences and how contextualization informs participation of different parties in the conversation. In the analysis, making out meaning in the interaction becomes important in context as participants draw on background knowledge (Collins, 1999).

## 4. Results and Discussion

In this undertaking, the researcher identified major clusters and themes emanating from the observations, namely: Expertise/Power relations via student-tutor interaction, student responses, and student questioning, as well as Access to information.

### 4.1. Expertise/Power Relations

Power relations and Expertise can come hand in hand and are dependent usually on one another. Often, the person with greater expertise has greater power over another. Therefore, expertise and power relations were examined through two measures; one is with knowledge, and the other, on explicit, socially constructed hierarchical systems. Knowledge deals with the ideas of Expertise. Here, the researcher focuses on lack of knowledge or knowledge inadequacy. The researcher examined the idea of expert knowledge related to the topic, and to language proficiency. The researcher noticed that the student perceives the tutor as the expert in academic writing and she lacks that knowledge as shown in the excerpts below.

**4.1.1. Student-Tutor Interaction**: tutor talks more than the student. The tutor mostly provided some detailed instructions to the student.

As shown by examples presented in the table hereunder, the interaction appears to be in a-matter-of-fact, driven by the tutor's experiences and the student's anticipation of what the tutor knows about the subject matter. There seem to be an anxiety on the part of the students who approaches it with a take-it-as-it-is manner.

| Action | Response Narrative |
|---|---|
| 14:11:10 The student was writing down the tutor's suggestions on her laptop on a word document. | Tutor: "Whenever I write an abstract, I start with the introduction. You can rip out some of the introduction and use them and most of your abstract from that.It may be a good place to start to look at the research questions. And even you can start the abstract by saying: this paper will address whatever question". |
| 14:12:32 | Student: "so we can start with…?" |
| 14:13:04 It seemed that the student was waiting for the tutor to tell her the exact introductory sentence she can write.The student was busy typing as the tutor was saying this to her. | Tutor: "You can start with an introductory sentence." Tutor: "And then you can introduce the problem. Just say the paper will answer the question blah blahblah. And then you can lay out the sections". |
| 14:13:24 | Student: "okay; so I can start with that and…" |

**4.1.2. Students' responses**: mostly affirming the tutor's suggestions and recommendations. The responses are very short. It seems the student is agreeing with everything the tutor puts forth.

Trust as evidenced in the student response, is an important aspect of social interaction that created the learning context (Collins, p.107). Is it possible that this also culturally influenced? Is it because of the nature of this particular learning environment that the situation evolves as such? i.e. time limit; need to get the most within a short span etc.

| Action | Response Narrative |
|---|---|
| 14:12:32 | Student: "so we can start with…?" |
| 14:14:01 looking up and then typing. | Student: O.K.; so, we will summarize each section. |
| 14:14:50 typing.. | Student: ….okay. |
| 14:16:18 | Student: Yes, this will be for the one I told you about "Learning in Society". |

**4.1.3. Questioning Pattern**: noted are the accompanying vivid facial expressions. Theyindicate excitement or surprise at learning a new thing or confirming an observation, as a response to a question is offered. The tutor was confident and reassuring While the questioning seems specific and assured, the facial expressions on the other hand, give away a 'how could I have missed it' or 'is that so; did not know about it, wow!' These are basically contextualization cues the researcher is capturing to inform the intent on the part of the student. Goffman (1959) asserted that gestures and bodily orientation and physical movements be considered as such.

| Action | Narrative response |
|---|---|
|  | Student: The other question is……… to think about the dissertation; maybe we can go to the website? |
| clicking on the keyboard, looking at the screen | Tutor: Absolutely! |
| Student seeming dazzledas she peeks into the tutor's screen. | Tutor: It should tell you like…… specific structures for the chapters; really. Tutor: Have you……. Have I shown you the electronic thesis site? |
| puzzled look. | Student: No! Tutor: It is a fantastic resource. |
|  | Student: What is it called? If you could send me the link please! |
| with assurance. | Tutor: Definitely, definitely; it is the electronic thesis and dissertation database. So you are in the Curriculum and Instruction program, right? |
| peeking into the screen again | Student: Yes. |
| indicating for the student to look onto the screen. | Tutor: So, you go here…..this is the place I recommend people to start whenever they first begin to think about their dissertation; because as you can see…….they have all the theses and dissertations. |
| looking a bit perplexed. | Student: So they put theirs here? It is a requirement? |
| nodding. | Tutor: So will you too….whenever you finish. …..you find every dissertation and thesis that has been submitted and accepted in your discipline. You can find how the topic sounds. You know, like something you are interested in, what you are doing. You can also see they all have committees, so click on a few and try to find your advisor. |
| with excitement. | Student: Any advisor? |

**4.2. Access to Information**

From the above analysis it would appear without a doubt that access to information is problematic in so far as the student is concerned. This brings to the fore a number of possible explanations, most of which revolve around the respective programs organization and student preparation and acclimatization as well as its effects on academic socialization.

Access to information is thought to derive from different areas—who and where the information is derived from. Both will assist in helping to differentiate how the students, depending on their academic status (Masters or doctoral program), initiates in their process of finding information on the program. Access to information entails the students' questions to gain information from the tutor about research, conferences and phases of graduate programs as shown in the excerpts below.

| Action | Narrative |
|---|---|
| The student went on to ask about a number of things including the IRB; whether or not it is needed for a conference presentation | Student: And for the conferences; if I collect data, do I have to have the IRB or it can be like a course project? |
| | Tutor: Actually that came up in Prof. xxxx class last week; cause there is a big conference coming up this summer, that a lot of us might be presenting. |
| | Student: What is the name of the conference? |
| | Tutor: I think is it Global Englishes. Yeah, it should be really good. It will bring a lot of people from all over the world,that work on Global English. |
| | Student: Will it be at our university or somewhere else? |
| | Tutor; It will be here. You should come check it out. It will be really cool. |

Through students' responses, the researcher noticed that some key words were repeated frequently in the discussion between the tutor and students as shown in the table below. The researcher thinks that the students consider the writing centre as a source of accessing information. The table hereunder analyses some key words reflecting the student's quest for information:

Key words analysis

| Word | Occurrence | Word | Occurrence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Conference | 20 | Workshop | 8 |
| Abstract | 24 | Research-literature | 6 |
| Dissertation | 22 | Findings-analysis | 5 |
| Proposal | 10 | Symposium-presentations | 3 |

## 5. Conclusion

In narrative analysis what provides meaning and outcome is event location and data (Collins, 2008, p. 209). In this work the researchers noticed meaning deriving from the interaction between the student and the tutor as the researcher makes interpretive links to understand academic socialization of international graduate students at a northeastern public university using the GWC as a case study.

By capturing contextual feature themes in the interaction between the tutor and the student, my central objective in this study to document an organized activity by way of skill acquisition and specifically the tutoring program at the GWC was met effectively. Noted have been the challenges faced by graduate students, reflection of experiences toward academic endeavors and evaluation of effectiveness of programs, in academic socialization. In so doing, the researcher tries to contribute to the understanding of the importance of academic socialization skills in graduate school for international students especially aspects of access to information.

This study is definitely a springboard upon which future research can emerge from. For instance, there is a potential to look into ethnic group differences, to examine whether ethnic differences among international student groups (given respective groups social capital) have different experiences or struggles in the academic socialization process. Likewise, among different groups, one can further examine gender differences. Lastly, researchers can also study whether difference in program preparatory initiatives among same international student groups have an effect on the ability to acclimatize to a doctoral program.

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