

## **L2 oral academic discourse socialization through group discussion in TESOL**

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Learning discipline specific communicative norms is crucial for academic success in higher education, especially for EFL students in institutions using English-medium instruction (EMI) as is becoming increasingly common in Asia. An emerging body of literature has examined oral academic discourse socialization in higher education. However, it focuses primarily on Western settings. Drawing on classroom interactions in a TESOL graduate course in Taiwan, this study examines students' socialization into group discussions. Informed by theoretical frameworks of language socialization and community of practice, this study uses qualitative and discourse-analytic methods to analyse audio-recordings of group discussions, interviews with students, and classroom observations. The students collaboratively facilitated discussions by asking open-ended questions, coupled with elaborate contextualization of the questions. In responding to questions, they linked self-experiences or knowledge of the world to the concepts discussed to establish epistemic stance. Discussion of how these discourse features are different from those used in another course is also provided. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications for EAP courses to prepare students for oral discussions in specific academic communities.

**Keywords:** group discussion; L2 oral academic discourse socialization; discipline specific communicative norms; EAP courses; Taiwan

### **Introduction**

Competent performance in oral activities (e.g., class presentations or group discussions) plays a crucial role in students' academic success in tertiary education. Important to that success is learning discipline specific communicative norms, especially for EFL students receiving English-medium instruction (EMI), which has become a trend in Asia in recent decades. These students have to learn the disciplinary way of speaking in a second language (L2), thus facing challenges in their academic discourse socialization (for more on the difficulties faced by such students in EMI courses see, Hu & Lei, 2013; Huang, 2012). An emerging body of literature on academic oral discourse socialization has found that students' abilities to communicate in a discipline specific way is more important for their academic success than their status as either native English speakers (NES) or non-native English speaker (NNES) (see, for example, Ho, 2011; Morita, 2000; Vickers, 2007). However, these studies have been conducted in Western settings. Little is known about oral academic discourse socialization in higher education in non-Western settings. Using data collected during a course offered by a TESOL master's programme in Taiwan, this study examines how the students learn discipline specific ways of speaking in and through group discussions.

Informed by theoretical frameworks of language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) and community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), this study uses

qualitative and discourse-analytic methods to analyse audio-recordings of group discussions, interviews with students and classroom observations. The students collaboratively facilitated discussions by asking open-ended questions, coupled with elaborate contextualization of the questions. In responding to questions, they linked self-experiences or knowledge of the world to the concepts discussed to establish epistemic stance. The study concludes with pedagogical implications for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses to prepare students for oral discussions in EMI courses in specific academic communities.

## **Theoretical frameworks**

### ***Academic discourse socialization***

The language socialization framework has been concerned with how children and novices acquire the knowledge and practice of social norms through language-mediated activities (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). An impressive body of literature has examined language socialization in L2, where L2 learners seek “competence in the language and, typically, membership and the ability to participate in the practice of communities in which that language is spoken” (Duff, 2012, p. 564).

In particular, L2 academic discourse socialization has received increasing attention (see reviews in Duff, 2010, 2012). Duff (2010) defined academic discourse as “forms of oral and written language that are privileged, expected, cultivated, conventionalized and, therefore, usually evaluated by instructors, institutions, and others in educational and professional contexts” (p. 175). A growing body of literature has examined L2 oral academic discourse socialization. Notably, this line of research has yielded important findings regarding L2 oral academic discourse socialization into various academic disciplines in higher education (Chang & Kanno, 2010; Ho, 2011; Morita, 2000, 2004, 2009; Vickers, 2007; Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

Several studies investigated oral academic discourse socialization in TESOL. Some focused on oral academic presentations (OAPs) (Ariff & Mugableh, 2013; Morita, 2000; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). Morita (2000), for example, in exploring the academic discourse socialization of OAPs among graduate students in a TESL programme at a Canadian university, found that the NES-NNES distinction alone did not determine students’ success in performing OAPs. Rather, her study revealed that it was the presenters’ ability to negotiate their expertise through contributing different knowledge that made them take a shifting epistemic stance in the OAP discourse. Also, she found that the meaning-making in OAPs was socially and collaboratively constructed by the presenter, audience and the instructor, representing multiple roles, voices and levels of expertise. Other researchers studied group discussions in TESOL. For instance, Ho’s (2011) study on small-group discussion in a TESOL postgraduate course at an American university shows that the identities of a mixed group of NES and NNES students were constructed along the expert-novice continuum, not on the basis of language status. Expert status was constructed through demonstrating critical thinking (e.g., by analysing the causes of teaching difficulties) and through making intertextual connections (i.e., referring to concepts in the textbook to illustrate ideas). Expert abilities were also emphasized in Morita (2000) in relation to the academic culture of the TESL programme. The above studies on oral academic socialization in TESOL show that displaying critical thinking, negotiating epistemic stance, engaging in collaborative meaning-making and making intertextual connections characterize the discourse nature in the field of TESOL.

There are also studies on oral academic discourse socialization in natural science disciplines. Vickers (2007), for example, examined group discussions in an Electric and Computer Engineering (ECE) course. Drawing on observations of group discussions for a team project among five American students and one Indonesian student (Ramelan) in an ECE department at an American university, Vickers found that Ramelan finally gained confidence and shifted from the peripheral novice role to an expert role under the core members' (experts) scaffolding despite obvious difficulties contributing to the group discussion in the early stage. Vickers (2007) explains that "[e]fficiency, clarity, and engagement are highly valued in the ECE speech community" (p. 628). The abilities to contribute to the discussion by displaying technical knowledge precisely and confidently, and to efficiently solve the problems encountered during the process constitute the nature of oral communication in the ECE community which is different from that of the TESOL community.

Taken together, research on L2 oral academic discourse socialization has shown that the NNES status alone does not determine students' academic success. Rather, it is essential for them to master discipline specific ways of speaking. Although scholars have identified the nature of speaking (e.g., efficiency, displaying critical thinking), they did not point out the specific features of discourse that are connected with the goals of each academic community. In this study, we attempt to analyse discourse patterns in group discussions in TESOL. We also discuss how these features are distinct from those found by Vickers (2007) in group discussions by engineering students. In particular, our focal analytic point is to demonstrate how students of the two disciplines express their epistemic stance through using certain strategies and discursive patterns.

### ***Community of practice***

Integral to the language socialization framework is the notion of "communities of practice" (CoPs) proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) which Wenger (1998) defined as constituting three dimensions: *mutual engagement* involving a shared practice which "connects participants to each other in ways that are diverse and complex" (p. 77); *joint enterprise* which creates "relations of mutual accountability" (p. 78); and a *shared repertoire* of resources for negotiating meaning to facilitate "discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world" (p. 83) and express their membership and identities as members.

Research on L2 academic discourse socialization has fruitfully adopted the notion of CoPs to examine students' socialization processes in different academic contexts (e.g., Morita, 2004; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). As students progress in their studies, they learn to engage in the ways of speaking in their specific disciplinary CoP. Morita (2004), for instance, showed how the classroom became "an important locus where learners negotiate their roles and positions in various levels of the academic communities that surround them" (p. 577). She found that students' negotiation of identities was situated according to the different classroom contexts. That is, students' construction of various identities was based on their changing sense of competence as a member of this CoP.

This study considers L2 oral academic discourse socialization from the CoP perspective, in which the construct of a CoP draws on the mutual practices and shared values of academic culture within discussion groups in the TESOL course. The focal groups are viewed as CoPs in which students have specific task goals and thus develop shared practices within their CoPs.

***Epistemic stance***

Epistemic stance is an expression of a speaker's (or writer's) authority in their field (Ohta, 1991, as cited in Morita, 2000, p. 289). This concept is integral to the understanding of L2 academic discourse socialization, for it is important for novices to learn whether and how to demonstrate their competence (or lack of it) in a CoP (Ochs, 1993). Morita (2000), for example, found that TESOL graduate students learned that as presenters, they did not always need to be experts and that they used various ways to communicate their epistemic stance to show the audience the extent to which they were "a relative expert" or "a relative novice". In the present study, students' communication of epistemic stance in their group discussion is identified and contrasted with how differently experts are discursively constructed in natural science, using the case of Vickers (2007) as an example.

**Methods*****Research site***

The context of this study is of the graduate TESOL programme at a university in Taiwan which offers on average five EMI courses each semester. Most are in the form of a seminar with group and class discussions as routine activities in which students' active contributions are encouraged.

The focal course was a sociolinguistics-related course with 14 students. The class met for three hours once a week for 18 weeks. There were usually two readings per week which were discussed by the class through 15-20 minutes of group discussion, followed by 30-40 minutes of whole-class discussion. For group discussion, the main focus of this study, students were assigned randomly to different groups every three weeks. Each student took up a different role in each session. These roles included a *director/facilitator*, whose job was to prepare questions for group discussion and to facilitate sharing among group members; a *decoder*, who was responsible for listing the definitions of important concepts in the assigned readings; a *designer/writer*, who analysed and critiqued the research design or the writing of the assigned readings; and a *connector/researcher*, who made connections between self-experiences and the wider world or found other related information to help the group better understand the theories or concepts discussed. Students were required to submit their written role sheets each week to the instructor prior to or immediately after the class.

***Participants***

The class consisted of 10 local students and 4 international students from America, Singapore, Vietnam, and India. The majority were students of the TESOL programme, except for two from other universities. The first author was a student in the TESOL programme and enrolled in the class. She observed two groups, of which she was a member<sup>1</sup>.

***Data collection and analysis***

Data were collected from six sessions of the group discussion. As a participant observer, the first author audio-recorded the group she belonged to each week with the group members' consent. The data also included the role sheets gathered from her group members, course materials (e.g., syllabus), fieldnotes of class observation, and audio-recorded interviews with three participants: May, Cathy, and Doris. Doris was a second-

year graduate student while May and Cathy were first-year students in the TESOL programme. The main themes covered in the interview were their perspectives on the discourse nature of the TESOL CoP; that is, their ideas of the discourse nature in the TESOL group discussions and their difficulties and strategies in accommodating to this discourse nature. Audio-recordings of group discussions were transcribed verbatim.

## **Findings**

The main findings of this study pertain to the conceptualization and expression of epistemic stance and are divided below into how experts are conceptualized and how experts are discursively constructed.

### ***Conceptualization of experts***

The data shows that experts were considered to be those able to link theories and concepts to self and the world. A very important aspect of the courses of the TESOL programme is their emphasis on the ability to link the assigned readings to self-experience and the wider world. The instructors in the programme often encouraged the students to think together about the meaning of certain key concepts in the readings and how they were related to students' teaching practices. In other words, class and group discussions were a collaborative meaning-making activity, in which students were expected to show their critical engagement with the texts by sharing their related experiences and articulating their views. Also, the expected goals of the group discussions were closely related to its general academic values, in which group members were expected to discuss the assigned readings to understand important concepts or theories in the field and envision the application of these concepts to teaching practices.

In fact, novice students might not fully understand this culture. For example, Cathy, a first-year TESOL Taiwanese student, experienced difficulties at the beginning of the semester. She recounted in the interview that she barely knew what to say during discussions and felt frustrated, since she had no similar experiences in her earlier education. Later on, through observing second-year students making links between concepts and their experiences, she gradually understood that "self-experiences are worthy of sharing in the TESOL discussion as long as linkage between experiences and concepts are established" and that the knowledge was constructed through collaborative meaning-making: "Originally I thought we had to fully understand the reading in order to discuss it. Then gradually I found it was not like that. It's more like you know some parts and I know other parts, and then together we understand the concepts as a whole."

### ***Discursive construction of experts and novices in group discussion***

This section explores how experts are discursively constructed in group discussions through ways of displaying content knowledge, and through forms and functions of questions.

#### ***Ways in displaying content knowledge***

In order to link self-experiences or the wider world to the theories in the assigned readings, the communication among students in the TESOL CoP tended to be richly contextualized. For example, Excerpt 1 below occurred one day when the students were discussing the assigned reading (Duff's (2000) article on Asian ESL students' reticence

in mainstream classrooms in a Western setting). Sam, a Taiwanese student with seven years of education in Canada, used his experiences abroad to argue that sometimes the quietness may not be attributed to language barrier, as suggested in the reading, but to the topic under discussion. It is notable that Sam contextualized this experience to make his point, and also that the first author contributed to Sam's narration by asking for more contextual information.

## Excerpt 1

- 1 Sam: Yeah, I mean just based on social study class - I mean - uh - I think - (*unclear words*) my personal experience that the worst experience during my - uh - English class was when we are going, it was about three or four weeks when the theme we're reading literary works about the sexual awakening of women and novels.
- 2 Author: (laughs)
- 3 Sam: And, hmm - so basically for those few weeks, hmm, I was almost quiet. (laughs) Because it's very difficult for me to talk it in class because
- 4 Author: because content-related
- 5 Sam: content-related and, I'm like...I don't - I don't have
- 6 Author: So even if you have something to say, you would not say it (laughs)
- 7 Sam: No, but I don't, I don't...okay, some of the classmates they are, ah, I think, maybe they already have sexual experience, right? So, so...
- 8 Author: You guys talked about the, this in class (*in a surprising tone*)?
- 9 Sam: (smiles) Yeah! yeah
- 10 Author: In - America?
- 11 Sam: Canada, yeah, so
- 12 Author: (laughs) of course. We don't do it in Taiwan.
- 13 Sam: (laughs) But I was like...(laughs) okay...uh
- 14 Author: (laughs)
- 15 Sam: It just looking very awkward and so straightforward. Hmm...
- 16 Doris: Yeah
- 17 Sam: I think...um, in schools where...because I was actually only, uh, new immigrants from Taiwan, uh, in our school, so, uh, when other schools where there are, uh, more (*unclear word*) you know, for my understanding that's the same, uh, situation is the same for both, uh, male and female from Taiwan, because usually when I talk about physical (*unclear word*) like (laughs) you know
- 18 Author: Yeah
- 19 Sam: But, yeah, so...
- 20 Author: (laughs) Thank you for sharing, I hope you can share it with the class - later. (laughs) Because I think (laughs)
- 21 Doris: It's interesting! (laughs)
- 22 Author: Yeah! It's interesting. Uh - for example we will not talk about (laughs)
- 23 Doris: Because we have different bac - cultural background
- 24 Sam: Right
- 25 Doris: So we hold different view - toward the issue

In making his point, Sam embarked on the narration of his experience in Canada about how he kept quiet during several weeks of discussion about "the sexual awakening of women and novels" in an English class (Turns 1 and 3). He then added details about how his classmates "may already have sexual experience" (Turn 7), to which the first author expressed her surprise, "You guys talked about the - this in class?" (Turn 8) and assumed Sam's story happened in America (Turn 10). Sam told her it was in Canada, to which the first author laughed and replied, "Of course, we don't do it [talk about it] in Taiwan." As the first author did not know about Sam's foreign experiences, her question elicited essential contextual information from Sam to understand Sam's point for his story. Sam then resumed his storytelling in Turns 15 and 17 about how very awkward and straightforward the discussion was to him as a new

immigrant from Taiwan, adding that other Taiwanese immigrant students had similar experiences. Also, inferring from Sam's story, Doris concluded that people from different cultural backgrounds held different views toward certain issues (Turns 23 and 25). In a sense, the three participants co-narrated this story, with Sam acting as the main narrator, and collaboratively Sam got his point across linking his story to the assigned reading.

To richly contextualize speech, the speaker needs to provide sufficient details from experience before explaining how this experience is related to the concept studied, thus resulting in a speech style that is more elaborated. In Excerpt 1, Sam had elaborated speech with many details to narrate his experiences in Canada (Turns 1, 7, 17), and when sensing gaps in details, the audience asked for more. As Doris put it in the interview, "You have to gradually elaborate so you can express ideas or thoughts in depth. If you talk too fast or too less, then it's very likely that not everyone can clearly understand you." In short, rich contextualization and elaborated speech were necessary in making the text-world connection clear to the group. This discursive style thus constituted one key element for becoming a relative expert on the topic under discussion and an able communicator in the TESOL CoP.

### Questioning

As the purpose of discussion was to better understand the concepts studied through collaborative meaning-making, questions were usually long and contextualized. This is especially evident in the facilitator's questions. Instead of simply reading aloud the questions they prepared on the role sheets, the facilitators tended to establish a situation or elaborate on details of questions to prepare group members for in-depth discussions. For example, Excerpt 2 below illustrates the contrast between Beth's question on her role sheet and the expanded question during the discussion on personal preference for individual work or collaborative work.

#### Excerpt 2

- a. Beth's question written on the role sheet:

*"Do you think if graduate students can collaborate with each other their academic discourse will improve quicker? Or you think it won't help any?"*

- b. Beth's question in group discussion (bolded words were in English, other words were in Mandarin<sup>2</sup>):

For the second question, well, the article talked about that some graduate students are used to work independently while others enjoy working in group. I think it may be [affected by] the different - characteristics of different graduate programmes. Then I want to ask that, for the article itself also mentioned that with **collaborative work**, there will be more chances between **student** and **student** to like...ok, for example, when I meet problems in understanding the assigned **reading**, we can work them out together. Or [group work] could also strengthen our understanding of certain new **academic** terms. That is, we can **practice** and **rehearse** these concepts before we **present** them [in class]. Yet, if it's **individual work**, you have to do all these on your own. That is, you have to remember the **term** or to understand the **article** all by yourself. So that's why I want to ask you guys that, in your opinion, do you prefer doing these things mentioned above individually and **practice** them alone, or do you prefer doing them though **group work** so you can discuss [any difficulty you meet] with others? Also, do you think that through **group work** students can improve their abilities in [their] **academic** world?

Beth started her question with a long monologue about her analysis of the advantages of collaborative work, and even cited her own experience as an example before she asked the question written on her role sheet. After her question, a heated discussion ensued with each member expressing their preferences and debating the

advantages and disadvantages for individual and group work. This example illustrates that the ability to form an expanded question for fruitful discussion constitutes part of the communicative competence for members of the TESOL CoP.

Moreover, in the TESOL CoP, opinion-eliciting questions establish the questioner as a relative expert. In Beth's example (Excerpt 2), through the rich contextualization of the question, she communicated her epistemic stance as a relative expert in expressing her insider knowledge of how collaborative work can function among graduate students in the TESOL community; in doing so, she linked self to the empirical study under discussion, while also preparing the group with essential contextual information to engage in the discussion.

In addition to the strategies used in Beth's example, questioners also establish a specific context to lead the discussion, as in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

- 1 Author: My first question is that, many definitions are provided to define speech community, which is very important - uh - items in talking about this - what - the ethnography of communication, on page fourteen. So, I - I wanna - I want you to discuss which one is - sounds like more closer to yours, and why - page fourteen - when - when he talked about - uh speech community.
- 2 May: Close to my experience?
- 3 Author: Uh - like - because there are a lot of - definition here, so I wonder which one is more like closer to - like your previous experiences or to what you think about what is called speech community. Like - for example, if we - hmm - China and Taiwan are of the same speech community or not, why? Why not? So who wanna start first? Speech community to you.

In Turn 1, the first author invited the group to discuss their understanding of the concept "speech community" appearing in their assigned reading. However, May expressed her confusion about the wording "*closer to yours*", which made the author further contextualize her question by establishing a specific context about Taiwan and China for the discussion. By linking to a concrete example in the wider world, the author successfully led the group to discuss the concept of speech community in depth. Moreover, in doing so, the author also demonstrated her understanding of the complexity in defining this concept, as the assigned readings suggested, and thus took a relatively expert stance.

It is important to note that not all questions in the data are for eliciting views or experiences. TESOL students also use clarifying questions during group discussions, such as "You guys talked about the - this in class?...in America?" (see Excerpt 1) when the first author tried to elicit essential contextual information from Sam.

This shows that TESOL students can take a stance along the expert-novice continuum depending on the topic under consideration, as also illustrated in Morita (2000) and Ho (2011). For instance, the first author constructed her identity as a relative expert in Excerpt 3, whereas in Excerpt 1, the author took a relatively novice stance to clarify more details of contextual information with Sam since she had not studied in Western countries. Importantly, even though clarifying questions do position the questioners as relative novices, those questions help to move the discussion along, as part of a collaborative effort for meaning-making. In Excerpt 1, when the first author tried to clarify whether the experience happened in America, this interjection helped Sam point out the cultural differences towards the issue in question. It also reminded Sam to supply the necessary contextual information on his identity as a "new immigrants from Taiwan" within that context (Turn 17).

## **Discussion**

Building on recent research on L2 oral academic discourse socialization, this study has examined how graduate students were socialized into ways of speaking in group discussions in a TESOL programme in Taiwan. It was found that the discourse culture of TESOL speech community was collaborative meaning-making, instead of truth-seeking. Also, in line with the findings in Morita (2000) and Ho (2011), this study found that in the TESOL CoP, experts were those with the ability to think critically and analytically, as demonstrated in the ability to make strong links between self and the society to the important concepts or theories in the field. In addition, this study identifies the discursive patterns in which TESOL students display these abilities; that is, the communication in the TESOL CoP tended to be richly contextualized. This feature resulted in TESOL-specific discursive practices such as elaborated speech and rather long and contextualized questions. Even the shorter clarifying questions may help contextualize the discussion in the TESOL community of practice.

It is important to highlight that the discursive patterns identified in this study are discipline specific. These features are distinct from those of natural science where according to Vickers (2007), the expert stance was taken by those possessing specialized knowledge and the ability to display technical competence linguistically. Thus, in Vickers' (2007) data, students taking the expert stance tended to use short yet efficient speech without much contextualization. That is, they efficiently solved problems to complete the designed device, which was the goal of their group meetings. They used relatively direct and short questions like: "Can you put like lithium?" (p. 630) or "Just connect it to the phone line right?" (p. 634), and these questions anticipated a definite correct answer from the group. Also, their questions were rarely for collaborative meaning-making, but for seeking information about technical facts or knowledge the questioners lacked. These questions contrast strongly with the clarifying questions in the TESOL CoP which tended to be part of a collaborative meaning-making effort. Thus there are clear differences in the discourse features of the two CoPs particularly in terms of level of contextualization in displaying knowledge, making questions and types of questions.

## **Conclusion**

Learning discipline specific communicative norms is crucial for students' academic success in higher education, because they have to learn how to speak appropriately and effectively to become competent members of their academic community. This study extends oral academic discourse research beyond the Western setting to look at a group of students in the context of an EMI course in a Taiwanese university. Students need to learn not only the discipline specific norms of speech but also to deliver their competence in a foreign language (English). This dual challenge can be daunting to novice students in TESOL.

The findings of this study provide pedagogical implications for EAP courses in higher education. Discipline specific features of speaking can be explicitly presented to students to enhance their confidence in speaking in ways corresponding to the norms of the relevant disciplinary CoP in EMI courses. Future studies could investigate discipline specific communicative norms in other disciplines to better prepare students for oral discussions in their own academic communities.

## Notes

1. The group members in one group included Sam, Doris, May, and the other group included Beth, Cathy, and Mina. All of them were TESOL students except for Mina, who was from another university. All names in this study are pseudonyms.
2. Since this excerpt occurred on a day when students were grouped according to their nationality and were allowed to choose language of communication freely, Beth's question was delivered primarily in Mandarin with words in bold in English. She wrote the original question on the role sheet in English.

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