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SOCIOLINGUISTIC PRESSURES ON POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS FROM DEVELOPING COUNTRIES STUDYING OVERSEAS

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ABSTRACT

Many adults in developing countries, such as Papua New Guinea (PNG), have the opportunity to pursue post graduate studies in developed countries. As adults, these students have the motivation, the desire, the educational background and independence to tackle this education opportunity. These students have overcome many educational stumbling blocks to achieve their level of education. They have a personal belief that further education is worthwhile and achievable. But learning is not achieved in a vacuum. There are social, cultural and linguistic factors that may either hinder or assist in their learning process. Dr Jillian Thiele, a senior lecturer at Pacific Adventist University in Port Moresby, PNG, interviewed ten returning scholars who had completed a masters or a doctorate in a developed country, such as Australia or the United States of America. Her findings demonstrate that some social issues, i.e., the students' previous learning practices, linguistic issues, etc., may be detrimental to their learning process. The rise of 'new' Englishes with their own pronunciation and accents caused initial problems along with their lack of exposure to "correct" language role modelling added an initial confusion at the beginning of the learning process. The students interviewed managed to overcome the initial hindrances, pass their courses and returned home with the desired degree.

KEYWORDS: Andragogy, post graduate students, adult learners

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INTRODUCTION

Education is the avenue of acquiring knowledge, in both formal and informal situations. It may be teacher-directed or self-directed. During the last thirty years, there has been a move towards more self-directed approaches to learning, where learners take greater responsibility for their own learning. This is one reason for the general acceptance of Outcomes Based Education. The "outcomes" enable students to track their own learning progress. This paper examines the social and linguistic factors that enhance or hinder post graduate students from developing countries who studied overseas in developed countries. Since the writer is resident in Papua New Guinea, her data has been collected from informal interviews with returning students.

ANDRAGOGY

As individuals mature and enter adulthood, they become increasingly independent and responsible for their own actions. They are often motivated to learn by a sincere desire to solve their own immediate problems. There is a sense of self-direction. Malcolm Knowles, professor of adult education at Boston University, introduced the concept of andragogy in his 1968 article *Adult Leadership*. He expanded this idea in his 1970 book, *Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy versus Pedagogy*. He argued that andragogy was a system of ideas, concepts and approaches needed for adult learning. It was the art and science of helping adults learn. He asserted that andragogy involves the creation of a situation where adults can learn effectively. Mature adult learners are often motivated to learn by a sincere desire to solve economic and social problems in their lives. Many adult learners have overcome inhibitions, behaviours, and negative attitudes about themselves, and have accumulated a reservoir of experiences that can be used as a basis on which to build, plan and evaluate their own educational needs. They have the self-confidence and independence to be involved in the planning and evaluating of their own instruction—which they are undertaking for their own employment benefit and/or personal enrichment. Knowles believes that if andragogy were applied correctly by skilled and dedicated facilitators, adults would embrace the idea of further education. He argues that adult learning is centred on problem-solving rather than on content. Finding adequate solutions to problems becomes the reason for acquiring new knowledge. Mature students want to know “why” rather than “what.” Knowles’ androgogical model assumes that all adult learners have a desire to take responsibility for learning. The basis of their self-concept has moved from dependency to independency or self-directedness. Their readiness to learn is associated with, and reflects their roles in society (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990). Brookfield (1984), a supporter of Knowles, assumes that most adult learners have sufficient self-confidence and self-motivation to be involved in the development of their own education. He believed that adults learn best when they are ready and motivated to learn. The ability to carry out individual learning long after the stimulation of an activity, class or workshop, derives from individualizing the instructional process through andragogy (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990).

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

As developing countries mature towards post-industrialisation, there are opportunities for adult learners to continue their post graduate education overseas. Sponsoring bodies are encouraging citizens to gain technical qualifications, masters and doctorates in specialised content areas. AusAid, for example, sponsors scholars to pursue further studies. Many bright young university graduates are offered scholarships to continue their education overseas by various commercial and academic organizations whose goal is to assist in the development of the academic and technical sectors in this country.

Students who are selected for further studies have already achieved a high level of literacy. They are able to concentrate on problem solving, and simultaneously consider an array of ideas that enables a person to have indefinite extension of an argument (Winchester, 1985:45). At the same time, these selected individuals are aware of their own cultural and personal biases and can filter the suitability of the new information through their cultural lenses (Cole & Keyssar, 1985:56).

METHODOLOGY

The writer of this paper, Dr Jillian Thiele, has been an educator in PNG for seventeen years. Dr Thiele interviewed ten returning PNG scholars who had completed a masters or a doctorate in a developed country, such as Australia or the United States of America. Five of these scholars returned to administrative positions at secondary schools and the other five returned to lecturing at various universities around PNG. She has informally confirmed her finding with national and international colleagues who have also studied overseas.

FINDINGS

There are social and linguistic factors that may help or discourage students from pursuing post graduate studies in a developed country. These findings outline the major factors that confront the adult learner who wishes to pursue further studies:

SOCIAL FACTORS

1. Teaching and learning practices

The first impediment to adult learning is the influence of the strongly pedagogical, teacher-focused education in most students' previous education experiences. Most adults had attended secondary schools where the teachers were responsible for all the teaching methods, learning strategies and the construction of the entire subject matter. This was usually necessary due to the class size. Even at the university, many lecturers present their material by the chalk and talk approach rather than implementing problem solving and self-discovery methods of learning. By the time post graduate students have the opportunity to study overseas, many feel comfortable in the pedagogy approach and feel threatened by the methods of andragogy, self-discovery and self-directed learning. The interviewed post graduate students reported that they were initially very confronted by their lecturers' direct questioning and the expectation that they would contribute to classroom discussions. Fear that their answers would be wrong made them hesitant to contribute. Only as they became aware that all answers have a degree of acceptability were they prepared

to volunteer comments and answers. Most interviewees reported that it took them about six months to begin to feel comfortable enough to actively contribute to group work and peer discussions. This is not to say the students do not have the ability; however, their cultural norms and previous educational experiences had emphasized practical skills and lower levels of thinking. Higher levels of education are concerned with why a concept or idea is important. Such learning entails posing a problem and using lateral thinking to find a solution. This is a model for effective learning used in most modern universities.

One of the interviewees related that his greatest initial linguistic obstacle was to know what was expected of him in terms of linguistic performance and behaviour. He did not know when to speak, when to remain silent and when to argue with the lecturer. He was unsure of how to talk to women because in his culture you did not talk directly to a female that was not in your immediate family. However, in the university setting, gender issues were ignored. He experienced confusion with the ethnography of communication (Wardhaugh, 1998: 243), ‘cultural know-how’, a common problem for people moving from one linguistic group to another.

Interviewees claimed that if they formally paired up with another more educated student, it took them less time to adapt to new university life. This person assisted them in two ways. First, the ‘helpers’ gave hints on how to cope with the new culture and social expectations; and, secondly, they helped them organise their ideas and created scaffolds for future learning in a fair and unbiased manner. A sense of group responsibility for each other seems invaluable in encouraging the learning process.

2. Use of technology

In the current environment of technological revolution, post graduate students have increased opportunities to pursue educational opportunities. E-learning offers unprecedented opportunities for students to participate in and contribute to the learning process. Students can use the internet to access a huge variety of documents, as well as to participate in on-line discussions with their teachers and fellow students. E-learning provides a “real-life” feel to distance learning, because students can participate in a true exchange of knowledge and ideas (Creedy & Hand, 1994). On-line communication has become global, thereby enriching and expanding the students’ knowledge base.

In a University setting, there are often shared group responsibilities for learning, even if the assessments are individually marked. Group activities require mutual respect and equality from the participants, as they interact and learn from each other. Androgical teaching in a University setting promotes the virtues needed for this interaction to be effective: respect, responsibility, and active participation leading to increased knowledge. All students can benefit from the use of technology, if they know how to use it!

One interviewee gave an example of her first assignment. She was asked to prepare a PowerPoint presentation of the information found in an online library catalogue and selected online journals and to send the assignment by email to the lecturer. The student's reaction was, 'What's an online library catalogue? How do you make a PowerPoint?' She had only ever seen a card catalogue. What was an online journal? At Teachers' College, the student had to request a journal and then stay in an allocated room before returning the journal back to the librarian. At her previous secondary school, electricity was only provided for a few hours a day, so her exposure to PowerPoint construction had been limited. The light bulb in the school's one data projector had blown and there was no replacement. The student was forced to concentrate on the process, rather than on understanding the content of the assignment. Each interviewee mentioned technology as being an initial problem to their learning process. As technology access improves, these situations will become very rare, but it does illustrate that not all post graduate students have the technology know-how to satisfactorily complete their academic requirements.

LINGUISTIC FACTORS

Linguistic competence in communication involves a mixture of factors: situational issues, language input, learner differences, learning processes and opportunities for linguistic output (Ellis, 1985). Linguistic variability between the student, the peers and the teacher can lead to misunderstanding and language confusion (Wardhaugh, 1998:204). Communication is an interpersonal enterprise involving a social structure context (Fondacaro & Higgins, 1985:74). If a teacher is not aware of this context and is not aware of linguistic hurdles faced by students, the education process can be distorted (Jones, 2003:118).

1. Rise of 'new' Englishes

Most developed countries expect their post graduate students to be competent in English, but the English in the developing country may not be the same English that is required. In second Diaspora English speaking countries (Kachru, 1992:234), many have undergone two major linguistic changes, nativization and acculturation. Nativization is language readjustment and approximation of an imported language to the linguistic and discorsal characteristics of local languages and usually occurs in countries, desperately needing to use English for political and economic stability. Acculturation is the reflection of sociocultural identities in the languages that are used in a given society. As these processes intensify and lexical diffusion occurs (Aitchison, 1991:81), local varieties of English emerge, often called 'New Englishes.' The communicative functions of this new form of English are the same, but the structures and forms of the language may deviate from standard use. 'New' English has its own characteristic features and communicative styles (Romaine, 1992:254) which reflect and express local identity (Crystal, 2006:101). The differences between Standard English and the local version of English can create linguistic confusion.

2. *Pronunciation*

Another interviewee said, “Unfamiliar pronunciation caused me the most problems. I recognised the written word, but it took me a while to understand the spoken word. When I understood the spoken word, then my comprehension greatly improved.” In countries where post-colonial English is still used as a language of politics, business and the judiciary, the pronunciation of English words can be radically different from that of native English speakers. This is easily illustrated with word stress. For some, the word *research* is acceptable while many others say *research*. The same can be said regarding *distribute* and *distribute*. For example, in the Pacific Islands, *research* and *distribute* are the common forms, where the first syllable is stressed. This is very different from the Received Pronunciation where the second syllable is often stressed. Crystal (2006:186) predicts that the highly praised Received Pronunciation monopoly is “slowly [being] lowered into its coffin,” as new pronunciation systems emerge.

Growing multilingualism has often resulted in greater respect for traditional languages and deeper appreciation of their corresponding phonetic systems. The mother tongue (its sounds, structures and vocabulary) can cause interference with a new language. Although many schools in developed countries have reduced the time spent on pronunciation exercises, developing countries, such as PNG, still include pronunciation activities in their English syllabus. There has been an emphasis on practising the ‘correct’ pronunciation. The problem is that the ‘correct’ pronunciation is not necessarily the model used on the street or applied outside the classroom. Without any conscious effort, a new form of pronunciation has arisen, basically reflecting the phonetic languages and word stress of the local languages, rather than reflecting classroom instruction. Students struggle to see the relevance of pronunciation activities in such a context.

The system of pronunciation that speakers use is called their “accent”. This involves the way sound segments – vowels and consonants – are produced. It also involves the speed, as well as the rhythm, stress, pitch and volume of the utterance. For example, many people in the Pacific replace [f] with [p], and [θ] with [d] or [t]. Many students in the Pacific are aware of phoneme shifts that occur under the influence of their mother tongue, but are not aware of how to change their pronunciation patterns. For example, students need to be made aware of the more common phonetic changes, such as the shift from [s] to [ʃ]; [f] to [p]; [l] to [r] (i.e., *curriculum* vs. *culliculum*); [i:] to [i], etc. Often, the final [-id] is not pronounced or is substituted with a [t]. In many local dialects, there is a process of sound shifts. Even in English, there has been a shift from a strong [r] sound after a vowel. In most varieties of English, the [r] sound after vowels is not pronounced (Thiele, 2003).

Sometimes, these social accents are accepted, valued and regarded as standard, while in other societies, they are regarded as incorrect, ugly, lacking in aesthetic appeal, and speakers are stigmatized as lazy and imprecise (Freeborn, 1986:73). If a person's accent is regarded in a negative way, they could also be treated negatively. It is important that there is an awareness of individual phonetic alphabet.

Pronunciation should not be regarded as right or wrong, just different. A couple of interviewees said they had been embarrassed by their pronunciation of words.

3. *Language role modelling*

In all societies, but particularly in multilingual societies, communication is embedded within a sociolinguistic environment. Written communication with its emphasis on 'correct' construction influences the social cognitive environment (Fondacaro & Higgins, 1985:77, 95). The written form of the construction is remembered and regarded as standard (Chafe, 1985:107). Continual exposure to an incorrect form will become embedded in the subconscious as correct. Billboards, the media and correspondence offer display messages using incorrect forms of English, especially in places where English is only one of the languages used. Usually, English syntax has been simplified and applied generally. These incorrect forms are often accepted as the correct form, as the less well educated majority are unfamiliar with the proper forms of grammar. In a sense, these incorrect forms become entrenched and fossilised in the linguistic framework. There is a sense that the general population are partly incipient bilinguals, with a partial knowledge of English, rather than balanced bilinguals, knowing languages at their disposal equally (Baker, 1993:7-9).

CONCLUSION

Even though many post graduate students struggle when they first attempt university study programs, they quickly adapt and learn the cultural and learning norms. Even though self directed learning seems riddled with difficulties, it does not take long for these determined post graduate students to overcome their initial fears and quickly become active and motivated learners. They embrace new technology, begin to understand the problems associated with their pronunciation and quickly adapt to the new situation. These students are aware that education is the avenue of acquiring knowledge, in both formal and informal situations.

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