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'I understood the words but I didn't know what they meant': Japanese online MBA students' experiences of British assessment practices

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Abstract

We report on a case study of high Japanese student failure rates in an online MBA programme. Drawing on interviews, and reviews of exam and assignment scripts we frame the problems faced by these students in terms of a 'language as social practice' approach and highlight the students' failure to understand the specific language games that underpin the course assessment approach. We note the way in which the distance learning and online context can make the challenges faced by international students less immediately visible to both students and institution.

Introduction

International students are most commonly defined as students who have crossed a national border and moved to another country with the objective of studying (see e.g. UNESCO-UIS, OECD, EUROSTAT, 2013: 41-42). There is extensive literature on difficulties faced by international students (for a review, see Abdullah, Aziz and Ibrahaim, 2014). Much focuses on adaptation to the local setting.

However, with the very significant rise in online and distance learning provision there is an important different and growing category of 'international students' who study, in internationally mixed groups, in an educational institution in another country, without leaving their home setting. The issues faced by such students are much less researched. In this paper we contribute to understanding of these issues, especially in relation to assessment practices. We do this through a case study of difficulties with assessment practices faced by Japanese students engaged in online study of an MBA with a British university.

For international students travelling to a new campus in a new country there is a clear sense of dislocation, of crossing a boundary. Their status as outsiders is clear, both to themselves and the institution that they join. They may experience culture shock 'precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse' (Oberg 1960:174, cited in Griffiths et al., 2005). To quote Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, it is clear to them that they are *'not in Kansas anymore'*. They typically have a clear sense of dislocation and otherness, there are clear signals to them and the institution that they join that they have crossed a distinct boundary into a new community with different rules and practices.

Paradoxically, the very learning and culture shock that they experience (Griffiths, Winstanley and Gabriel, 2005) may create a realisation in both learner and community that they need specific support in engaging and aligning with the practices of the community they have joined. This may explain why, in the Griffiths et al. study, those identified as suffering significant anxiety also went on to perform well in exams.

By contrast, for an online student, continuing to live in their home country, interact socially with the same people, and work in the same context, study with an institution in a different country may present fewer clear signals of crossing a distinct boundary into a new community of practice. Likewise, for the institution; without the clear signal of students

physically present in the classroom and relying on course level statistics to identify systemic problems in the learning process, difficulties exhibited by international students may be picked up as individual student difficulties but not noticed in the aggregate unless there is specific monitoring in place.

The presenting problem

The Open University Business School, has a track record of successfully recruiting students onto its distance learning programmes from across Europe and has for many years attracted students from widely dispersed parts of the world. The School recruits about 600 students per year onto its MBA programme (across two start dates each year), with students studying in tutor groups of 16 students each with a dedicated tutor. Increasing concerns from a marketing agent in Japan led to an investigation of success rates among Japanese students, and the realisation that the large majority of these students were failing the end of year exam in the first year of this part-time, online MBA, despite often achieving reasonable grades in assignments.

Whilst only 11% of exams taken by Japanese students resulted in a pass over a three-year period (compared to 86% for other students), this was not initially recognised by the School; student numbers were low relative to the whole cohort and aggregate pass rates were left largely unaffected. Initially, individual Japanese students were often supported by a tutor with no other Japanese students and their difficulties were likely to be interpreted as individual difficulties. Although individual staff members started to raise some degree of concern, it took some while for the aggregate picture to emerge.

The authors, one with responsibility for the School's international operations, the other with experience of living, studying and working in Japan, conducted an investigation on behalf of the School.

Higher education in Japan

Literature on characteristics of the Japanese higher education system (e.g. Amano and Poole; Yonezawa 2002) describes an education system which from nursery to senior high school is dominated by a university entrance examination that values memorisation over critical analysis. For Trahar (2007), this may be understood as founded in the differences between a Socratic and Confucian foundation for educational practice. There is a strong tradition in the UK of the 'Socratic method'; teaching and learning through questioning your own and others beliefs. This tradition underpins a focus on experiential learning and critical dialogue with teachers. The Confucian tradition also encourages questioning and discussion but only after mastery of key concepts and knowledge. In HE systems influenced by this approach, there is a strong focus on according respect to the teacher (and key texts) and the knowledge they impart.

A social practices perspective on academic writing and discourse

The 'Academic Literacies' movement in education argues that there is no single academic literacy but a range of different social (writing and discourse) practices which constitute genres with distinct purposes (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006). Academic writing genres come with their own, often tacit, rules and practices (what Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak and Wenger-Trayner, 2014, refer to as regimes of competence) and these genres vary systematically between subjects but also between different institutional configurations of educational systems around the world.

A complementary perspective, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a paradigm for the study of language which insists on the importance of context and draws on the sociology of knowledge as a foundation for understanding how meaning is constructed through language in texts and discourse. However, whereas the Academic Literacies

approach has a primary focus on social practices, SFL has a greater focus on how those practices are expressed in text and on analysis of those texts. Like Academic Literacies, SFL draws attention to the role of genres as a categorisation of language adopted for specific social purposes, in specific social contexts (Coffin & Donahue, 2012). This is complemented by the construct of 'register'; the linguistic choices made within genres to achieve specific social purposes.

Students coming new to a subject need to learn new genres of academic practice; not just academic practice in a general sense but the practices of academic writing situated in a specific subject in a specific context as well as develop genre appropriate register (including knowledge of context appropriate vocabulary and grammar).

Much of this learning is implicit rather than explicit; acquired through example and feedback. Nonetheless such genres and registers do not stand alone, but bear family resemblance to others rooted in the same traditions and social and cultural contexts. This implies a greater learning challenge for students whose exposure to similar writing practices has been limited. The Academic Literacies field tends to focus on the problems created by institutional assumptions of genre accessibility for non-traditional students (Lea, 2004), but the point equally applies to students from other countries with different educational cultures. Expectations about form of argumentation and what counts as evidence vary significantly between say a course on Financial Accounting and one on Creative Management; but, equally, will vary significantly within subject areas between different national educational culture settings. International students often share much less of the tacit knowledge required to engage successfully in the particular genres of academic writing required in UK higher education. In particular, as we discuss below, terms like 'critical' or 'reflective' are freighted with tacit meaning in certain academic genres and characterise practices which are signalled by specific choices of register in academic writing.

Language and social practice

The idea of genre in Academic Literacies and SFL owes much to the concept of what Wittgenstein (in his later work) termed ‘language games’: patterns of interaction regulated by social custom (Kopytko, 2007: 795). Different communities use language in different ways that are embedded in social and cultural life. These language games are the taken-for-granted patterns of communication that underpin our formal and informal interactions. This view of language stands in contrast to the idea of language as a neutral and context-free carrier of meaning. Rather, the meaning of language is embedded in social practices and cannot be understood in isolation from the language game it is part of. Understanding a term such as ‘critical analysis’ in an essay question is not simply a question of consulting a dictionary, but requires understanding of the relevant academic writing genre, including tacit rules and register evoked by a particular academic field and cultural context.

Methods

Following an initial review of the problem and prior research on international students’ experiences, we conducted a review of pass statistics on assignments and exams and a review of a sample of past assignment and exam scripts. We then arranged to visit Tokyo (where the marketing partner and many of the students are based) to gather further data. We held discussions with the marketing partner, with a senior employee of the British Council in Tokyo (as an expert on local educational issues) and conducted interviews with 13 past and current students (6 students who had taken the first year exam and 7 currently studying towards it). Interviews were conducted in English, with the option to switch to Japanese[1] if needed. Interviews lasted around 60 minutes. We conducted four supplementary interviews

[1] The second author speaks fluent Japanese

with online tutors with recent experience of tutoring Japanese students on this MBA. We followed a semi-structured interview format. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Each interview started with a brief explanation of the research and taking informed consent. We opened with general questions about the interviewee's background and motivation for online study with a British university, then asked participants to talk about their study experience of the MBA module and assessment.

As well as encouraging interviewees to talk about the experience in their own words, we prompted for their experience of: studying in English, the pedagogic focus on critical analysis and reflective practice, expectations of and preparation for the exam, tutor and peer support. We finished by asking if the student had any advice to new Japanese students or to the School in supporting Japanese students.

The first set of raw data was the full transcripts of all interviews. The second set of raw data was a sample of 10 failing exam scripts from our Japanese students and a comparison sample of scripts from students living in the UK for matching exams (4 fails, 4 low passes and 8 higher graded scripts). We were particularly concerned to compare the failing Japanese scripts with UK student scripts across the mark range. Sampling of scripts was restricted by both the small size of the Japanese cohort and the exams office practice of destroying older exam scripts (after expiry of an appeal period) to maintain storage space for new exams. Nonetheless we have no reason to doubt the representativeness of the chosen scripts.

We used a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Working from our engagment in the interviews and rereading of transcripts we identified key themes, in relation to their importance relative to the focal research question (reasons for higher failure rates among Japanese students). Prevalence of a theme was used as a factor in determining the relative strength of our individual findings. All transcripts were read individually by both

authors and open coded, individually, then in discussion. Common statements were identified and used as the basis for a first, tentative, set of thematic categories which were refined and consolidated. We sought to identify relationships between themes and, as analysis proceeded, between themes and the extant literature, modifying themes iteratively.

In working with the exam scripts we first read all scripts in their entirety, then compared answers for failing Japanese scripts with answers to the same paper by UK based students at fail, pass and highly graded levels.

Themes were thus both emergent from the interviews and exam scripts and drew on constructs identified in the literature relevant to emerging themes. As we analysed the data and drew tentative conclusions we explicitly sought disconfirming evidence to test the robustness of our emerging insights, debated emerging themes between the authors and iterated between data, analysis and literature.

Key emergent themes

It is common in studies of international student experience to identify language skill as a key predictor of success (see e.g. Andrade, 2006). We too identify language as central, but not in the narrow decontextualized sense of adequacy of vocabulary and understanding of grammar, to support general communication and comprehension. Rather we identify the central issue as a mismatch between the Japanese students' prior educational acculturation and the expectations of a particular genre of academic assessment including knowledge and skill in using appropriate language (register) to signal criticality.

Indirect effects of Language

Language did have very important indirect effects; effects on workload and speed of writing in exams; and effects on ability to engage with tutors and other students when colloquial language was used. As we discuss in later sections, the culturally and socially embedded

nature of language practices can also be seen to underpin barriers faced by these students in engaging with the pedagogic approach of the course and with understanding appropriate strategies to succeed in examinations.

Workload and time

An important impact of working in a different language (and an alphabetic rather than ideographic script) was to significantly increase the time needed for engaging with reading and writing tasks. This was aggravated by difficulties finding the appropriate register under exam conditions with no access to notes or dictionary. As one student explained

> 'It can be very hard for me to express complex ideas in English. I don't always know the right words for the idea, and what I express can seem simpler than it really is'.

Another talked about not just needing to translate an idea into English but into an English way of thinking. Those with experience of taking the exam felt that a lot of time was taken with getting the language right and thinking about what they referred to as, proper '*English style*' essay structure, but which we interpret as appropriate register (field appropriate terminology, syntax and tenor) within the particular genre of exam answer required of them. Thus, several explained, they lacked sufficient time to think hard about ideas and frameworks. The consequence was that often their answers would be very superficial.

A strong theme in interviews was the need to spend much longer than suggested on coursework assignments. However, in exams the time limit and the need to write by hand without access to a dictionary was experienced as a significant handicap.

> 'The difficulties are performing three hour writing exams. That was unexpectedly difficult because, okay, I've been using English at my workplace, I have been studying throughout, you know, at school. I was sort of confident about my English. – But with pen-writing an essay, that's the first experience of my life. I always use computers.

The much shorter answers to exam questions, often relying on writing in note form or bullet points, given by Japanese students seemed consistent with them having difficulty with writing in expository form within time constraints. By comparison, (non-time-limited) continuous assessment assignments were generally of a similar length to those of other students.

Academic and colloquial language

Several explained that they felt comfortable with English in a business context but found the language in the course very academic and unfamiliar. They also found it very hard when tutors or fellow students used colloquial expressions. Thus unfamiliarity with a colloquial register and with associated social norms (e.g. relating to turn-taking) created a barrier to engagement with other learners and with tutor support. We discuss the more complex issues of language in relation to pedagogy and assessment in more detail below.

Pedagogic approach

One of the most consistent issues which arose in interviews was students' unfamiliarity with reflective practice approaches and with being asked to take a critically reflective approach to theory and practice. Several were quite articulate in explaining the great difference between this approach and their experience of Japanese higher education in terms of criticality.

> 'In Japanese university our class style, there's no debate or discussion. Just learning from the teacher's guide and write down the report.'
> 'So all the exams I took, I have never studied abroad, this is the first time, but all the exams I took in my student period had a right answer; one right answer.'

There is evidence that most students find critical thinking and critical analysis difficult and that educational institutions have trouble assessing it, partly because it is not consistently defined. (Braun, 2007). However, the focus in this course and in the assessment on critical

thinking and on critical reflection about the application of theories to practice was especially difficult for these Japanese students. Their prior educational formation had little focus on critical reflection and the course focus on critical application of theory to their own practice contexts was very unfamiliar to them.

Academic writing genres come with their own, regimes of competence. International students often share much less of the tacit knowledge required to engage successfully in the particular genres of academic writing required in UK higher education. Our interviewees explained that they were often highly confused about what was expected in assignments and exams. For example: -

> 'I read the words 'reflect on your work' and understood them in a way but I really didn't know what it meant to do this, what depth I would really be expected to go into'.
> 'I think there is a "missing the point" for Japanese students. I don't know what is the missing point yet, but maybe there is some – I still feel so.'

Others talked about how unsure they were of what was expected of them in response to exam questions and of falling back on the familiar approach of explaining a course concept. Paradoxically, many also expressed the view that this need to '*step outside a Japanese mind-set*' was a significant motivation in studying a British MBA and felt that the cycle of critical reflection on their own work practices was genuinely helpful in improving their work performance.

Comparison of the exam scripts of the Japanese students and UK students reinforced this picture of failure to understand what was required when asked for 'critical analysis' or a 'reflective account'. Japanese students' answers typically focused on a descriptive account of relevant course theories and frameworks without consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of these theories. Comparison of failing Japanese scripts with those of UK students with a low pass grade was particularly informative.

Phrases which indicate critical thinking

In high scoring scripts of UK students there were clear accounts of strengths and weaknesses of theories, consideration of the contexts in which they were developed and applied and reflection on what they helped illuminate and what they tended to obscure in the contexts in which they were applied. The (failing) Japanese answers primarily focused on descriptive accounts of the relevant theories and/or uncritical descriptive accounts of the application of theory to a work context.

However, the differences between these Japanese scripts and 'low pass' graded UK scripts were subtler. We describe an illustrative comparison of two such scripts below. The first (compulsory) question on the exam paper (worth 40% of the marks) asked the students to draw on evidence from a project (evidence based initiative or EBI) they had conducted in their workplace. The answers we compared were from a Japanese student (graded 6/40) and a UK student (graded 20/40).

> 'Q1. How can managers best use academic ideas in their practice? Critically analyse this question and provide examples from the work you did on the module and in your EBI.'

The Japanese student provided a clear (although concise) account of the project they conducted in their EBI and to a reasonable extent demonstrated their reflective and appropriate use of theory in this project. What they did not do was to draw on this account to answer the general question as posed. Rather they tacitly answered the more specific version 'What have I done as a manager to best use academic ideas in a specific context' They finally drew some conclusions from their own learning out of this specific experience of using academic ideas as a manager.

The UK student also produced a fairly brief answer with rather less detail of the project they were drawing on. They too provided some description of theoretical frameworks they used. However, a crucial difference was that they discussed strengths and weaknesses

these frameworks may have. This was done in a fairly formulaic way with certain key phrases serving to demonstrate ‘critical analysis’.

These included, ‘a manager must have sufficient understanding of the ideas to judge when they can be of benefit’, ‘understanding of when the idea or concept was created’; ‘[the theory] must be taken in the context of its original design’.

Answers were expected to include an account of reflective practice. Whilst the Japanese student to some extent demonstrated how they themselves had engaged in reflective practice in their project, the UK student explicitly used key phrases about reflective practice ideas such as ‘Kolb’s learning cycle’, ‘’the art of reflective practice’; ‘double loop learning’.

While this UK script was by no means an exemplar of critical analysis nor a perfect demonstration of reflective practice, the use of these key phrases was clearly enough to persuade the script marker that the student had sufficient understanding to be given a pass mark.

This was a common pattern when comparing Japanese scripts with lower graded (but passing) UK scripts. The UK students’ scripts more commonly included key phrases which signalled that they were taking a critical stance or describing reflective practice although often lacking depth of analysis.

This pattern was echoed in an interview with one of the tutors who, talking about exam preparation for students, said:

> “I was asked a question a year or so ago about ‘how do I know when I’m being critical?’. . . And what, I did was, I pulled out a range of English language which may indicate that you’re starting to be critical. You know, phrases like “on the other hand”’ …or phrases like, “another view, another way of looking at this” … and there’s five or six, no there’s probably eight or nine different phrases that indicate that you’re moving to talking about something that’s not perfect ...or is in contradiction’

Intervention

Since the data collection two cohorts of Japanese students have been through the module and assessment. One cohort has been provided with additional support. This support has involved first a briefing on student support needs for the relevant tutors, second, briefings from an alumnus of the course in Japan (who achieved high grades and who understands the challenges students face). She focused on approaches to critical and reflective writing for assessment together with feedback on practice exam answers, third pre-exam support from an experienced tutor focusing on understanding the expectations of exam questions. Prior to the study the pass rate among Japanese students was 11%. For the post-study cohort with no additional support, of 12 sitting the exam three passed (25%). For the post-study cohort with additional support, of 10 sitting the exam, 8 passed (80%). Future cohorts will also receive tailored induction sessions which focus on clarifying pedagogic approaches. The programme is also considering whether systematic changes to assessment practices might reduce the disadvantages experienced by students' from markedly different educational cultures. For example, the university is currently piloting approaches to allowing the use of computers in exams. We are also in discussion with the programme about the potential to reduce time pressure in exams and to make the requirements of exam questions more explicit and less tacit, either through the form of exam question or more explicit attention to the requirements of the assessment genre in prior course work.

Discussion

It is commonplace in studies of international students' experiences to note the importance of language. Our case study supports the central importance of language, but not in a simple decontextualized sense. As the anthropologist Robert Schrauf (2002) notes in his account of language acquisition among immigrants: linguistic, communicative and cultural competence

are acquired differentially in different life domains and in relation to differential engagement in these domains (such as home, work, school). Language competence is situated in social contexts. The implication is that entering a new community of practice always involves acquiring new language skills and language practices. Whilst formal measures of (decontextualized) English language competence have an important role in ensuring preparedness for study, they do not eliminate the need to understand the learning process as including continued language acquisition.

Assessment may be understood as a particular set of language games, with its own tacit rules and constraints. As with early language acquisition, we learn language games by mimicking the form before progressing to full mastery, what Whitehurst and DeBaryshe have called observational learning (Whitehurst & DeBaryshe, 1989). Within this frame we can understand the lower-scoring UK students as mimicking language games of critical analysis and reflective practice, in contrast to higher scoring students who demonstrate some mastery of the game. Nonetheless this mimicry is sufficient to gain a passing grade; something recognised by the tutor who helped his students with a list of key phrases which indicate ‘criticality’. By contrast, the Japanese students, in our study, whilst often demonstrating the ability to make sense of academic theories in work contexts, failed to use language forms which signal criticality or reflective practice.

The Japanese students we interviewed had a strong sense of this need to learn through observation, expressed in the frequently voiced suggestion that what would help them most would be the availability of multiple worked examples of exam answers as well as clear guidance on criteria for passing and good grades.

Conclusions

The Japanese students in this case study face multiple barriers to success that relate to

language. However, we have argued that the learning of international students should be seen through the subtle lens of language as embedded in social practice rather than as primarily affected by simple deficits in generalised and decontextualized English language knowledge and skills. They are at a disadvantage, compared to many UK students, in acquiring the tacit rules of the assessment genre of the course. We note that they must also engage in assessment which penalises them for the significantly lower speed, at which they can write and craft exam answers, because of the cognitive load involved in selecting genre appropriate register without their usual supports such as dictionaries and notes. Finally, we observe that if assessment is a language game then the strategic mimicry of language, which indicates criticality and reflective practice (typical of low passing UK students), is less available to Japanese students. They are not working in their mother tongue and have less experience of educational practices that require a critical stance. Developing mastery is even more challenging.

This suggests the need not only for greater clarity about what is expected of students, but also the opportunity for them to see annotated examples of good practice in writing assignment and exam answers and to have greater opportunities to practice the genre specific literacy skills they will need in the exam. The School has always placed great emphasis on the role of proctored exams in ensuring the identity of distance learning students (where necessary arranging for exams in a wide range of international locations). However, a consequence of this approach has been the need for students to handwrite lengthy exams. In consequence, international students (especially those whose native written language is not alphabetic) suffer a serious handicap in the speed at which they can work under exam conditions. This suggests a need to redesign exam processes to avoid grades being dominated by an unintended tacit learning outcome: the ability to handwrite in in English at speed.

The challenges experienced by the Japanese students in this study are not absent for others just less marked. It seems likely that the study findings will generalise to other key groups of international students and a further investigation is currently going on into whether Russian students face similar issues. Finally, we suggest that whilst the themes which emerge in this study are by no means unique to the online setting, the online setting does create a distinctive set of problems for both international students and institution, in recognising the challenges that these students face. Both students and institution may have difficulty in noticing the gap in cultural expectations and academic language practices. Distance learning students continually cross the boundary between the practices of their course and those in their work and everyday life. The challenge is to render that boundary crossing both more visible to student and institution and to make it a site of learning (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2015).

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