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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research into the dilemma of how best to facilitate the access of academic English literacy among adult learners at an international branch campus in Vietnam. This focus was chosen as it was observed to be the area that caused students the most difficulties. A case study approach was used to examine the students' previous literacy practices as well as the areas that they felt were most problematic in accessing written academic English literacy. Finally, students that had successfully completed the university's EAP course were consulted on what difficulties they faced as course participants and what strategies they used to overcome them. The findings suggest that useful pedagogical approaches may include: fostering greater learner autonomy, integrating more vocabulary input in speaking tasks, (Nation, 2008), utilizing the corpus in the classroom, and providing explicit instruction in and of the language of collaboration to foster reasoning skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the changing climate of a more globalized higher education, the international branch campus (IBC) has become more prevalent as a means of offering undergraduate or post-graduate degrees from a higher educational institution from outside a student's country of residence. Lane (2011) defines an IBC as an entity, which is at least part-owned by a foreign educational institution of the same name and which offers some face-to-face teaching leading to a complete academic course or program that is then awarded by the foreign educational institution. These programs have been gaining significant popularity

among prospective students, and the production large pools of graduates able to function in English-medium workplaces is also seen as highly desirable by countries wishing to rapidly develop their economies or maintain positions of economic prominence (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). There are currently 188 such campuses worldwide (C-BERT, 2013).

As English is the language of instruction for the majority of IBCs (Lane, 2011), prospective students will have to pass certain standardised tests to show evidence of sufficient academic English proficiency to access these courses, which has presented a challenge in some contexts. For instance, Chambers and Cummings (1990) found that one of the main reasons all but one IBC failed in Japan, was the lack of students who could attain sufficient English levels to access the courses. Thus, entry into an IBC degree program is no mere formality. Pre-sessional courses can be of great benefit in improving student preparedness, but these too require considerable investment by both the operator and students for both to succeed, as demonstrated by experience in a Vietnamese IBC context, described as follows.

2. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The study took place at an IBC in Vietnam, where the age of learners on the pre-sessional course ranged from eighteen to thirty with the majority having joined directly after graduation from High School. The students were predominantly Vietnamese, with some Korean and Japanese students also participating. The course consisted of five levels, from Pre-Intermediate to Advanced, with students testing in at a particular level, progressing to Advanced-level, and, upon successful completion of the pre-sessional

English course, entering a degree program. Each of the five courses lasted ten weeks with each week containing twenty hours of study time devoted equally to the skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking with grammar and vocabulary covered explicitly in the curriculum. Each of the four skills was assessed individually and students had to receive a passing grade in each individual skill to progress to the next level of study. Learners produced two written texts on the topic of study in a given week, which both received feedback before requiring redrafting. Based upon lecturer's observations, the area which proved to be most consistently problematic for students in progressing to the next level of study was writing. As such, the focus of the present study was on the acquisition of written academic literacy.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The current discourse surrounding literacy no longer views it as merely an ability to read and write. Street (2003) contrasts the 'autonomous' view of literacy, a view of reading and writing to be learned as an end in itself, with a multi-faceted 'ideological' view, in which each type of literacy incorporates the sociocultural context in which it exists. This prevailing perspective within the discourse of language and literacy means that literacy is made up of numerous literacy practices, or literacies, drawn from the individual's sociocultural context. In an academic context Turner (2012) states that a course within an academic literacies framework can include different literacy practices (such as text or practice dimensions) that would be associated with reading and writing in a tertiary or higher education context. Although this study will focus on one particular set of academic

literacy practices, it is not intended to be viewed as isolated from the other practices found in this academic context.

In higher education, written literacy in the EAP context is typically characterised as requiring a linear and sequentially organized text that contributes to a perception in the reader of the order, symmetry and logical thinking that was used to construct it (Ha, 2009). Students also have to become familiar with different essay structures and styles in their L2 (Asaoka & Usui 2003). Institutions in this context also normally require students to be able to show critical thinking, questioning, and analytical and evaluative skills, as well as access to the 'written code' of grammar, lexis and spelling (Ha, 2009). As such the literacy practices associated with a university-level EAP course may differ markedly from those undertaken during study in secondary schools.

Looking at literacy in this way, and bearing in mind the academic expectations that institutions have of students, we see that if practitioners lack sufficient knowledge of the socio-cultural background of students' previous literacy practices, they may be unable to appropriately, meaningfully scaffold and facilitate development of academic English literacy. Previous studies in this area have focused on the problems student face in academic writing (Asaoka & Usui, 2003; Lee, 2008; and Raims, 1985), the process that writers go through (Cumming, 1990 and Stapleton, 2010), the problems of fostering critical literacy in ESL and EAP (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999; Kiely, 2004), as well as learner strategies to overcome problems (Baker, 2004; Oxford, 1990). Research focused on English writing pedagogy in IBC contexts is scant, however.

In addition, the participants in the above studies were mainly required to choose a topic on which to research and write. Students at the IBC engage in in-class writing on the

subject matter of the course. Due to such differences in nature of the tasks, some of the difficulties highlighted in the studies investigating student problems (Asaoka & Usui, 2003; Lee, 2008; and Raims, 1985) such as finding a topic to write about will not be relevant in this context. It may also be that as a pre-sessional course differs from undergraduate language study, some of the problems students face maybe context-specific. The writing process investigated by Stapleton (2010) was that of a post-graduate student's electronic writing, and the author stated that there were differences in the cognitive resources used for electronic writing and writing with a pen and paper, the latter being used by students on the IBC pre-sessional course. As such there is further scope for research in an IBC context. The studies by Hammond and Macken-Horarik (1999) and Kiely (2004) may be of benefit to practitioners in this context but it is first pertinent to determine if students found the acquisition of critical literacy to be problematic. Finally, the strategies outlined in both Baker (2004) and Oxford (1990) may be of value, but there may also be strategies adopted by students to deal with context specific problems (assuming they exist), which are of equal value.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

As the researcher had previously observed students' difficulty with negotiating the written aspects of academic literacy in their pre-sessional courses, the study set out to answer two research questions:

1. What problems did students feel they faced when writing academic English?
2. Did students who had successfully completed the course have the same problems and if so how did they overcome these problems?

The project was designed as an action research study, wherein it was hoped that the answers to these questions would inform and improve the practice of the researcher through better facilitation of the access of this particular literacy practice in this context.

As each level of the course was ten weeks long, and progression to the next level was determined by an examination, the research had to be carried out in a short space of time. A longitudinal study would not be possible as students from one class after a ten-week-course may disperse into different classes at different time slots or possibly leave the program. Thus, just as with Asaoka & Usui, 2003; Cummings, 1990; Stapleton, 2010 and Raims, 1985, a case study approach was used to examine this area of writing. However, as the writing process was not the focus of the research, the think-aloud protocols used by Cummings, 1990; Stapleton; 2010 and Raims, 1985 did not form part of the data collection. Similar to Asaoka and Usui (2003), surveys and interviews were conducted, but students were not asked to keep writing journals, which were deemed intrusive. The subjects were recruited from two of the teacher-researcher's classes (N=20).

The initial data collection was a survey of previous L1 literacy practices and the students' perceived problems with academic writing in English since their entry into the institution. The questionnaires consisted of a mixture of multiple choice and open-ended questions to gain a greater response rate than if all questions were open-ended (Hammersley et al. 2001). The multiple choice answers were also deemed to aid student comprehension of the questions by offering example answers, and as the questionnaires were given *in situ*, any student comprehension problems could be addressed by the researcher.

The questionnaires were followed by interviews with two small groups of students one from each class selected according to their willingness to participate. It was decided that the first group would be asked about previous literacy practices and the second would be asked about perceived problems rather than conducting two lengthy interviews. The final stage was to survey students who had successfully completed the course on the perceived problems they encountered and the strategies adopted to overcome them.

Although surveys were the initial data collection tools, the study was predominantly carried out qualitatively in that data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection (Hammersley et al. 2001). The multiple-choice answers and lack of responses to several open-ended questions meant that the need for coding was limited, thus the inclusion of a second rater was deemed unnecessary for the survey results. The analysis model followed the three stages of qualitative analysis, initial analysis, formulation of categories and concepts followed by the generation of theory as outlined by Hammersley et al. (2001). This method was adopted to shape the further stages of data collection in the study and allow the researcher to conduct concurrent triangulation of the data through the subsequent interview stages and investigate emergent categories of data and concepts

5. FINDINGS

In the surveys students were able to select more than one answer for certain questions meaning that the number of responses exceeded twenty.

5.1 *Previous Literacy Practices*

The students that were surveyed had experienced a wide variety of different educational contexts (some students had studied at international schools) and some students had been schooled in different countries. The initial findings (see Appendix A) showed that the students had engaged in rich and varied previous L1 literacy practices in various different subjects and many had had written essays as formal assessment tasks.

The most common forms of L1 literacy practice were found to be a response to a book or article, a geographical description and an historical account. In the subsequent interview the subject of the response was actually found to usually be a poem. It was also felt pertinent to enquire about the nature of how students were previously taught in the acquisition of written literacies prior to entry into the IBC program and the method of preparation was largely through textbook exercises, direct instruction or the presentation of models. The writing took place largely in Literature, History, Geography and Social studies classes, with most students also having written an essay as part of an exam. This essay based examination was most commonly undertaken for literature classes.

The results show that students had undertaken a written component in a wide variety of different subjects, writing essays similar in style to those commonly used in EAP program, or producing other texts according to previously determined structures. In the first interview the students elaborated on the nature of written tasks in literature classes.

Student A: Yes it's similar for us, we had to explain the meaning of the whole poem and especially some special words in the poem.

Interviewer: Okay, and then did you have to write an essay?

Student A: Yes with an introduction body and conclusion."

As such, IBC students actually may not require the same level of familiarity with L2 writing tasks commonly found at university level, as stated by Asaoka & Usui (2003). The results also show that students were prepared for written tasks mainly through textbook exercises and direct instruction. This on the surface would appear similar to how students would be prepared in an EAP classroom. However, in the same interview, participants mentioned as well that some of the literacy practices specifically in literature involved the use of decoding vocabulary that was no longer in use, writing a biography of the author, and that this practice often involved a great deal of memorization.

Student A: Actually in Vietnam the students don't prepare too much. The teacher just give us the information to memorise, we don't have to research or anything. We just have to memorise it, the paper, the worksheet.

Student E: It's very teacher centred, yeah.

Student A: We were kind of passive when we were in High School in Vietnam because the teachers also give us everything and all the information.

Student E: Yeah, just memorise, memorise, memorise….

Student C: Just memorise, blah, blah, blah

Student E: And then we get a score.

The students here show that the written literacy practice did not necessarily require individual or collective analysis. In addition, both student E and C appear to show some disdain for the practice, as when they state above that the task simply required

memorization to achieve a grade. The students all agreed that they were simply told what to write and then to memorise it. This type of literacy practice would not take place in an EAP setting, which typically aim to foster critical thinking, analysis and inquiry (Ha, 2009).

Moreover the method of preparation and the absence of some of the more common EAP essay types such as the cause and effect essay or an essay requiring external research would further support the idea that many students will engage in very different literacy practices than those undertaken in High School (Asaoka & Usui 2003). A reliance on memorization may even call into question whether intercultural rhetoric (the idea that previous literacy practices in a particular educational cultural context may affect the acquisition of new ones) may have been a factor within this particular academic context (see Belcher, 2014, for discussion). At the very least it would seem that a lack of familiarity with a particular discourse practice will make access less straightforward (McKinley, 2013).

5.2 *The Problems Students Faced*

The students were asked questions in the same survey about the problems they faced with grammar or 'surface level' problems , structural issues or 'macro level' problems (Asaoka & Usui, 2003), and which areas they found most difficult. In terms of the specific surface-level problems, the respondents most often cited sentence structure, prepositions and articles. In terms of the macro-level difficulties, four main areas appeared; choosing academic words; generating ideas, thinking of examples, and writing quickly. The latter could be seen as an external factor as this simply may have been

attributable to handwriting speed, and as such may not have been a barrier to accessing the literacy practice itself. When asked to identify the area that they found most difficult, the majority of respondents answered that generating ideas and supporting them with examples was the most problematic.

In response to the question of why an area was found to be difficult, the only reason given for a grammatical difficulty was remembering when to apply certain rules. Writing on unfamiliar topics, i.e. generating ideas, appeared to be the most difficult area. It is also interesting to note that a limited vocabulary was seen as an area of difficulty in explaining ideas, indicating perhaps that the surface and macro-level problems were interlinked and maybe should not be seen as separate factors.

In the second interview the students mentioned that idea generation was one of, if not the most difficult part of the essay writing process, owing perhaps to the particular challenge of evaluating ideas and determining whether ideas could be used or not in the essay.

Interviewer: What areas of writing were most difficult?

Student A1: (inaudible) Ideas was difficult for us.

Interviewer: Was that getting ideas about new topics?

Student A1: We didn't know what is good idea and what idea is not good.

As a way of circumventing the problem of idea generation the students mentioned independent research, asking others for help, and group discussions, which took place in class as a means of helping students generate and evaluate ideas on certain topics. They also stated that it was easier to write about familiar topics as they already had ideas to evaluate on these topics.

A possible reason offered for grammar being problematic was that certain grammatical areas, such as prepositions, were easy to forget and that they had trouble with word form and subject-verb agreement, with careful proof-reading being cited as a method of avoiding such errors

Vocabulary, in particular choosing academic words, was seen as an area of difficulty by 70% of students. The interviewees also concurred that the academic discourse required for EAP essays was difficult, as Student A1 explains:

Interviewer: Okay, what about vocabulary, was that difficult or easy or…?

Student A1: Sometimes we used the wrong word to talk about a cause or effect.

…..it was very difficult.

Interviewer: Did you find it easy to learn new vocabulary?
(Several students laugh and shake their heads)

Interviewer: What did you find difficult about learning new vocabulary? Did you find it difficult to remember new vocabulary? Did you find it difficult to use new vocabulary?

Students: All of them.

The use of academic English vocabulary has been shown to be problematic for native speakers of non-Indo-European languages (Corson, 1997; Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2009). Corson (1997) states that many of the academic words used in higher education are Greco-Latin in origin and, while native speakers may begin encountering them late on in Primary School and in Secondary School, non-native speakers may not encounter nor use

them in the same way. Corson also explains that gaining access to the 'meaning systems' of academic words is connected to what he terms a 'culture of literacy' and stresses the importance of participation in this practice, whereby people use these words in context, as a prerequisite of accessing their meaning and usage. This lack of exposure to academic vocabulary and access to a previous 'culture of literacy' may be at the root of the student difficulties in using academic English discourse.

5.3 The Results from Students That Had Completed the Course

The results of the surveys and two interviews provided some further areas to investigate. Namely whether students who had successfully completed the program had the same problems and, as the more advanced levels of the course featured a greater emphasis on critical literacy, whether critical literacy was deemed by the respondents to be problematic. In the second interview the use of discussion with classmates or peers in generating ideas was mentioned.

> **Interviewer:** Let's look at ideas, how did you get ideas for your essays for something you hadn't studied before?

> **Student B1**: Discuss with our group.

> **Interviewer:** When you discussed with a group, did you come up with your ideas or did you remember what other people had told you?

> **Student A1:** Both.

Moreover, the response from students that they would not simply remember what had previously been explained to them in discussions, as might be expected from a learning

environment that may have involved significant memorization, was deemed to warrant further investigation.

The respondents (n=4) were unavailable for interview however the responses given to an online questionnaire were detailed and candid. As such the decision was taken to use the raw data collected in table form and qualitatively analyse the answers to open-ended questions rather than coding different responses for statistical analysis.

The students that had already completed the course had also engaged in a variety of previous literacy practices. Among these, the opinion essay was the most common; and although the students had engaged in the similarly common previous practices of narrative and creative writing or a response to a book or article, one student had written a cause and effect essay in their L1. Among these students it could be argued that the previous L1 literacy practices engaged in may not have differ so greatly from those in a typical EAP context.

In terms of the problems these particular students encountered, the surface level problems were not dissimilar to those faced by other students but only one area (prepositions) received more than one response. With regard to the macro-level difficulties the previous problems of generating ideas, examples and supporting details featured strongly. The emergence of vocabulary being an area of great difficulty for all subjects was also interesting to note. This is in contrast to the number of students that deemed it a particularly difficult area in the previous survey, where only four out of the twenty students deemed it significantly problematic. However, fourteen acknowledged that this aspect of writing had provided them with difficulties. It could be that as the topics on the course became more academic then the discourse required in written tasks did also.

Perhaps this is why vocabulary was seen as an area of significant difficulty in the latter stages of the English preparatory program, which is worthy of particular attention.

5.4 Student solutions

Although difficulties existed in accessing this particular literacy practice, the students who had successfully negotiated the course adopted a variety of methods to overcome these problems. The most striking of these was the adoption of particular strategies on the basis of what they perceived as an area of weakness. Each student selected a particular strategy to improve an area of their learning, be it vocabulary acquisition or remedying a particular grammar problem; two students even recommended the use of L1 in grammar explanations and vocabulary recollection.

Student C2: I often watch news on BBC, CNBC; write down new words and try to make sentences. Another way I use to improve my vocabulary which is do some IELTS reading practice tests.

Student A2: I use the Oxford Advance Dictionary. Try to remember the phrases and idiom I see. Then I use another dictionary to translate it into Vietnamese idiom. It will be much more easier to memorize"

Student D2: In my opinion, students who have low level of English, they should buy grammar books in both English and Vietnamese.
therefore, they can understand more deeply."

In short, to improve surface level problems such as grammar and vocabulary acquisition, students made conscious decisions with regard to the improvement of their own learning

in terms of what they perceived as necessary actions, decided on their learning objectives, and took charge of their learning. In effect, they all displayed characteristics of autonomous learners (Thanasoulas, 2000; Chan, 2001; Sakai et al, 2010).

In terms of idea generation and support, the students were asked how valuable the in class pre-writing discussion time was. The reason behind enquiring about the pre-writing discussion in particular was that its benefit was alluded to in the second interview with students currently on the course. Most students found the in-class pre-writing brainstorming sessions valuable, although one student did seem to prefer working alone. In the same survey, students elaborated on what helped them generate ideas on an unfamiliar topic like globalization.

Student B2: Discussing with partners and trying to link to the reality.

Student A2: After I understand the meaning of the word, I try to connect it with all of the related aspect such as atmosphere, forest, sea, etc. Then I will note some ideas and write the essay"

Student D2: Brainstorming the main ideas and supporting ideas...Remember of "E" in finding supporting ideas- expand, extend, explain, example."

Street (2003) suggests the process of idea generation is a social one. The students from the same survey all highlighted the importance of dialogue and discussion in generating and evaluating ideas for use in an essay. Street (2003) claims that the ways we socially interact shape our language and that, naturally, without this level of social interaction we would be unable to expand our variety of literacies or in fact ever become truly literate. Mercer (2000) also found that dialogue and language are the basis of our

learning and reasoning; he outlines the idea of 'exploratory talk', which he describes as necessary to the development of reasoning skills. The attitudes of IBC students surveyed seem to allude to the intrinsic relationship between the different literacy practices of written an spoken discourse in reasoning, supporting Street and Mercer by showing the importance of collaborative work as one of the most valuable ways to generate ideas.

A further area of difficulty highlighted in both the second interview and areas of writing students found difficult was choosing and learning academic words. According to the survey of students that had completed the program the respondents often chose to learn what they thought were either useful or high frequency words and to not only make example sentences to internalize them but also to then use the words when possible in their academic writing.

> **Student A2:** I often learn formal words which are common and will be used frequently for my essays. Whenever I write an essay, (or now it is my assignment), I try to utilize these words. The more frequently I use the words, the longer I can remember them."

Students from the same survey recommended learning between five and ten new words a day, personalizing them and looking for word associations to build up the vocabulary base around the word.

> **Student D2:** When you learn a new word, try to find synonym and antonym of that word. Learn 10 academic words each day"

Student D2's comments here describe a method of developing 'vocabulary depth' through the accumulation of other word forms, word associations and collocations, which leads to an increase in the size of vocabulary knowledge (Akbarian, 2010).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

From the results of the study a number of recommendations can be made. As the students that had successfully completed the program had developed their own tailor-made strategies to overcome difficulties and exhibited aspects of learner autonomy, it would seem prudent to foster this in the IBC classroom.

One method of achieving this is though clear goal setting (Sakai et al, 2010). This could include measurable targets, such as the ten academic words a day mentioned by student D2. Sakai and colleagues state that students attain a greater focus to adopt their own strategies to improve their learning and to consider their own individual learning differences in choosing learning material as this increases their motivation. Students also come to view the concept positively and to a certain extent see themselves as autonomous learners, thus raising awareness of the concept will help students see the their own role and the teacher's role in their learning (Chan, 2001). The fostering of learner autonomy seems both important and feasible despite students' 'authoritative' educational backgrounds (Chan, 2001) or those which prioritized memorization (Wong, 2004).

Students found the area of academic vocabulary difficult with one student even linking the problems of vocabulary with expression of supporting ideas. Improving the acquisition of academic vocabulary may be better facilitated during supplementary or core speaking activities through using the four design features (Nation, 2008) as a means of addressing the problems of familiarization with academic words. As using the corpus in the classroom has been shown to improve student command of lexicogrammar (Biber et al, 1996; Liu & Jiang, 2009; Romer, 2011), this approach may benefit students in

analyzing authentic uses of target vocabulary to assist students with collocations and usage which will aid them in developing their own corpus, leading to further vocabulary acquisition (Charles, 2012). Through these steps and through greater recycling and repetition of these words it may be possible to develop a class 'culture of literacy' (Corson, 1997) thus improving student access to the words' meanings and usage.

The final area that students found problematic was that of idea generation and finding suitable supporting reasons. In this area students found the pre-writing idea generation discussion particularly useful. Possibly one of the reasons that they did not find critical literacy a significant hurdle, which might be expected due to the previous literacy practices of memorization, was the time given to discussing and evaluating ideas. According to Hammond and Macken-Horik (1999) critical literacy will allow students to challenge the existing status quo, and foster the abilities to read a text resistantly and critically respond to the text in written or spoken form. In fact, according to Olsen (2003) reasoning and written literacy are inextricably linked; thus, the ability to form reasoned arguments would perhaps facilitate the access of academic literacy. This type of literacy is fostered more at higher levels of language programs, but the necessary scaffolding is introduced much earlier. With the language of discussion checking and clarifying built into the curriculum and assessment, students have opportunities to analyze and evaluate ideas critically, in a similar way to 'exploratory talk' Mercer (2000) where participants co-construct meaning in their learning environment. Therefore, to improve the reasoning skills and access of written academic literacy, the literacy practice of group discussions, involving checking, clarifying, analysis and evaluation, should be part of the curriculum, as it was at this particular IBC, and sufficient focus should be given to discussion of topics related to the writing task.

7. LIMITATIONS

The study itself cannot offer generalisable data from which to draw recommendations for all IBCs. The students are largely from one linguistic background, although others are represented. As such, the linguistic problems they may have had may not be the same as those from another linguistic background. The fact that the research was carried out by the class teacher may also have complicate the analysis, as students may have been unwilling to write what they truly felt even though all responses were anonymous. However, as one of the features of action research is that it is undertaken by the practitioner to investigate a particular question in their own context with the purpose of bringing about an improvement in that practice (Brydon-Miller et al, 2003), such an approach may be justified.

The research also generated further questions which the study was not designed to answer, namely the notion of identity in academic discourse. One set of questions revolved around the idea of utilizing key vocabulary until the students remember them and use them in their writing. Ha (2009) states that an issue all to common in second language writing is how the writer identifies with the style of academic discourse and the required vocabulary. What the students here could be doing by using the vocabulary in examples or when possible in their writing is attempting to take on these words belonging to authors of academic texts, which maybe harder to recognize (Corson, 1997), and making them their own.

The idea of student identity or of students not identifying with the style of academic written discourse is not an area that was considered (incorrectly perhaps) prior

to the research being undertaken, nor was it addressed with participants. Ha (2009) states that in an EAP context, writers may have difficulty in connecting their own voices and identities within the style of academic discourse required for higher education. This may also be an issue also affecting L1 learners and those in other contexts; and although the notion of connecting the writer's identity to the style of academic discourse was not considered previously, it is a legitimate, significant avenue for further research.

The approach to data collection was to offer students multiple-choice questions based on what the practitioner deemed possible answers rather than asking open-ended questions. This approach could be criticized for 'loading' the questions according to the researcher's agenda. However, the option of others was always available and the answers given might not have been as comprehensive if extensive written feedback to open-ended questions had been required, due to the time needed to complete such a task. This was in fact shown by the limited responses given to open-ended questions in the survey.

Finally, it must be also acknowledged that the number of respondents for either survey n=20 and n=4 is certainly not representative of the various learning backgrounds of all students who may have studied at international schools or who may have lived abroad and thus experienced a very different educational background.

8. CONCLUSION

This study was designed to answer two research questions as part of an action research project with a view to improving the practice in the particular context of the practitioner-researcher. The educational backgrounds of the students were more varied

than first thought and the students had engaged in a wide variety of literacy practices previously. However the emphasis on memorization for some students opens up a further avenue of research into the idea of intercultural rhetoric (Belcher, 2014).

All students experienced both surface and macro-level problems. In terms of the surface level problems all students experienced difficulty with particular grammar points yet not necessarily the same ones. All students also experienced difficulties with choosing academic vocabulary. In terms of macro level problems all students experienced difficulty with idea generation and support. Although the analysis cannot be generalizable, the problems have also previously been identified in other contexts such as (Asaoka & Usui, 2003). Yet, the difficulties students have with writing may go beyond the surface or macro level, and the difficulty of incorporating their own voices in academic discourse is a further area to investigate.

However, the recommendations based on student strategies to overcome the surface and macro level problems may be of use in this and other contexts. Fostering learner autonomy to allow students to prioritize their own learning needs may be of use in overcoming individual linguistic problems with either grammar or vocabulary.

Likewise, using the four features of vocabulary task design according to Nation (2008) to facilitate academic vocabulary acquisition and the use of the corpus in the classroom may be helpful to some practitioners and students in the acquisition and use of academic vocabulary.

The use and explicit instruction of the language of collaboration, which was built into the curriculum and assessment at the institution in question, was viewed positively by students and the use of dialogue and collaboration in fostering reasoning skills is widely

supported (Mercer, 2000; Street 2003). The combination of the final two suggestions may

even allow the students to develop a 'culture of literacy' in which to use the academic

words required for academic discourse in higher education and to further identify with

these terms.

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