Micro-Ethnography Study: Effect of Home Habitus, and Western Cultural Capital on Foreign Students' Small Group Discussion Experience

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Abstract: This study explores the learning experiences of an international student, as a special case, in small group discussions within American classrooms. Utilizing Bourdieu's capital theory, the research investigates how past experiences influence current educational experiences, highlighting disparities in cultural, linguistic, and knowledge capital between international and domestic students. The study identifies power dynamics affecting international student's participation and learning outcomes. It emphasizes the need to consider international students holistically, with their unique backgrounds shaping their ways of learning and participating within and outside of the academic setting. The findings challenge the uncritical acceptance of Western-centric cultural, linguistic, and knowledge capital in multicultural educational settings, advocating for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges and values diverse student backgrounds.

Keywords: Habitus; Cultural capital; International students

1. Introduction

The number of international students continues to increase. However, unlike K-12 educational settings where research and cross-cultural theories on teaching and learning strategies are available, almost no empirical research and very little theoretical work have been done on cross-cultural adult or collegiate classroom learning [1–3]. Most of the existing research focuses on describing foreign students' disadvantaged situation from linguistic, cognitive, and psychological perspectives, not from a perspective that analyzes the power dynamic in the classroom [4–5]. Many studies are examining international students from what they are experiencing "here and now" chronotope, barely considering what they have experienced before entering the classroom or the U.S. [6].

The primary goal of this study was to understand what the learning experience of international students in small group discussions was and what affected their current learning experience. Especially, how their past life and learning

shaped and reshaped their current learning experience. This study invited one Japanese female student to share her learning experiences in small group discussions in an American classroom to discover the power dynamic in an American classroom that affected her current learning experience. Based on the capital theory, the study examined whether foreign students' past life and learning negatively influenced their current learning experience because they did not share the same culture/ knowledge/ linguistic capital with the domestic students and American teachers [7]. By conducting this qualitative research, the study would suggest that international students should be considered as "whole persons" with past experience and expect their learning style and strategy in dynamic ways. Meanwhile, the study would like not only to reveal the "unthinking acceptance" of Western-centric cultural/linguistic/knowledge capital in multicultural classrooms but more importantly, to question and challenge in various ways that these "capitals" are affecting international students in everyday living [7].

2. Literature review

Most of the articles the author has read about international students situating international students as foreign learners with language, cognitive, and psychological barriers [4]. Linguistic scholars consider international students as second language learners [8–9]. Universities language specialists should establish language and learning support mechanisms for English as a second language (ESL) postgraduate learners so that ESL learners would find a legitimate way to acquire academic language and academic language communication skills [10]. Studying in a second language was one of the greatest challenges for international students [11]. They revealed the needs of the foreign student population for university language support and even advocated for administrators and policymakers to provide language preparations for international students even before they came to the States.

While language issues might be the most plausible reason why international students are experiencing struggles in academic and everyday life, it cannot be the exclusive factor. Other psychological factors are alongside the language factor. A great deal of research on the international student population highlights the difficulties such as interpersonal problems with American students, loss of support, and alienation [4]. Participants in the study offer an interesting point by saying that culture has a greater effect than English-language speaking problems [12].

3. Theoretical framework

While there are various perspectives to view this specific population, the framework that the author applying for this study is capital theory [7]. Heavily influenced by Marxism, Bourdieu's work is primarily concerned with the dynamics of power in society, and especially the diverse and subtle ways in which power is transferred and social order gets maintained within and across generations. As one of the most important terms in Bourdieu's work, habitus is produced by the structure of a determinate type of conditions of existence, through the economic and social necessity [7]. Habitus then becomes in turn the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience.

Sometimes, habitus will also be entitled as collective history or unthinking acceptance [13]. The author would like to explore international students' home habitus and postulate that the reason why international students are facing "barriers" in American classrooms is because they do not share the same habitus with domestic students and American teachers. In other words, they share different conditions of existence and different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable.

As further indicated the work of education is not clearly institutionalized as a specific or autonomous practice, but it is a whole group and a whole symbolically structured environment, without specialized agents or specific moments,

which exerts an anonymous and pervasive pedagogic action [7]. When pedagogic action bears the responsibility to be the mediating tool to transfer habitus, power maintains its status quo, and the education field is again divided into the dominant and dominated groups. Within this pedagogical action, the elite group imposes its cultural dominance as the legitimate definition of educational culture [7]. This study explored how this Japanese student performed in a Western-centered learning environment, how her past habitus affected her current learning experience, and how she negotiated with specific forms of dominance within her small group.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The participant is a Japanese female, named Yuki (pseudonym) who is a student at Northeastern University in the U.S. It is her first year in PhD program but not the first year in the U.S. Every time before the small group and whole group discussion, Yuki will tell everyone else that her English is not good and she struggles because of this. Thus, she would rather stay silent, Yuki is from the "high context" culture, which means information is internalized within the individual and situation and is not necessarily part of the social discourse [14]. It was revealed that Japanese students felt comfortable with silence [12].

In the first stage of my inquiry, the author did 125-minute small group discussion observations with Yuki. The author suggested Yuki participate in a small group that included domestic and international students. During the observation, the author took field notes about small group discussion content and physical gestures. After the observation, the author transcribed verbal and physical information as preliminary data and then processed the data. After observation, the author continued and documented my analytic memo to ensure that the author was on track of not missing important information. Then, the author conducted three private interviews with Yuki. Interviews were structured and organized in a sequence of three stages: history before coming to the U.S., history in the U.S., and personal experience in small group discussions. The whole process lasted three months with the first month collecting the observation data and interviewing, and the second and third months analyzing the data and writing the paper.

4.2. Research questions

In terms of the research questions, the author investigated the following ones.

1. What is the learning experience of Yuki in small group discussions in an American classroom?
2. How does "habitus" affect Yuki's current learning experience in small group discussions?
3. During the small group discussion, how do cultural capital, knowledge capital, and language capital influence Yuki's learning experience and how will she reflect on them?

4.3. Data analysis

4.3.1. Past learning experience

Yuki's undergraduate major in Japan was English education. Her professors encouraged her and her classmates to speak in English in class. English was a language that had already dominated the way of communication in her Japanese classroom which was a non-English speaking country's classroom. The fact that English was preferred in Japanese classrooms cannot be simply explained as Yuki's major being English education, but it could also be traced back to the colonial time when the English language possessed the dominant status globally. Even before Yuki entered the U.S., it was already rooted that English was a preferred speaking language in academic settings, both in Japan and in the U.S. As she said,

Not only because of the advantageous international communication status of English, the more a language or its culture was attractive, the more learners were motivated to acquire it [15]. The reason why she wanted to study in the U.S. was influenced by her advisor who talked about how wonderful American life was. When Yuki told her advisor about the idea of studying in the U.S., her advisor encouraged her to do so. Through her interaction with other Japanese, such as her academic advisor who would be quite influential to her academic identity and could direct her academic path, Yuki developed her own idea about what her study in America would be like.

However, after coming to the U.S., Yuki had to adjust her learning style while discussing in a small group. Her past learning experience in Japan was that the purpose of students discussing in a small group was to get correct answers. Yuki and her group members would prepare for the answer and then share the correct answer in front of the whole group and the teacher. This was a normal process of small group discussions in Asian countries, such as China or Japan. However, small group discussions in the U.S. were to build on ideas. Each member of the group offered their ideas, exchanged opinions, and built them on each other. Yuki's past learning experience, which was preparing for the correct answer, was not what Western learning constructivists advocated.

This disadvantaged her as she entered a low-context country like the American discussion was one of the most important ways to learn knowledge in the American classrooms, especially when America was a country where silence and unspoken negotiations were not preferred. Even for some American students who did negotiate in the discussion, Yuki felt excluded from the negotiating process because she was not familiar with American negotiation rules.

4.3.2. Past life experience

In Japan, because of the endless negotiations and the social requirements of being polite, Yuki sometimes felt that she was not speaking what she really thought at all. From this perspective, staying in the U.S. made her feel more real and true to herself and others. Meanwhile, Yuki thought it was stressful to live in Japan because of the population density, house prices, and unfair social pressures on Japanese females (i.e. quitting after getting married). Thus, Yuki did not want to go back to Japan anymore. She planned to stay in the U.S. and not go back to Japan by looking for and getting a job.

After finishing her Master's degree at an American university, she went directly to Thailand because she did not want to be in Japan. She told me that she felt jealous about refugees who got American citizenship and she said she wanted to be a refugee if she could get a green card and stay in the U.S. This really surprised the author because the author once thought that Japan was a developed country, highly educated, and very considerate to its citizens so that Japanese people might be living satisfactorily. After listening to her own life and learning experience, the author once again realized the value of learning people's past experiences and not making over-generalizations. As she further expressed,

40 "But here (America), I in ehhh, small group discussion, I can, I feel I can say what I want to say (rising)."

42 "So, I feel very comfortable speaking any of my opinions (in the U.S.)."

28 "yeah, anyway..then… I finished my master's here and then I went to Thailand to teach at a Japanese school and worked there."

5. Current capitals: Language, culture, and knowledge

After coming to the U.S., the first barrier that Yuki perceived was still the language barrier. She said repetitively about her worries about her English incompetency. Compared to English writing, she was more concerned about her English speaking. She explained,

18: "Then, I came here, umm, I already knew, my English is not enough (Japanese style nodding), but I was ummm, I attended ELI, English language institute before just studying my master program here."

52: "So but probably unconsciously they know I am not a native speaker. Their English is more comprehensible, not to me, but to other native speakers."

64: "I mean, maybe because I am not good at speaking English. I think I am more confident in writing English (rising)"

69: "Yeah, but for me, ummmm, this is my second time studying in the U.S., but still I am very struggling with speaking English."

82: "But I do not know how American students think about my speaking (rising)."

As Bourdieu proved within the pedagogical action, the elite group imposed its cultural dominance as the legitimate definition of educational culture. International students who do not share the possession of dominant culture might be disadvantaged in academia while international students tried much harder to succeed in the U.S. tertiary educational system. As Yuki said,

77: "Then probably they knew that I do not know. So, they just do not try to explain what it is to me. I know it is so annoying (to explain to me every time). It is cultural stuff. Like something on TV, kind of. Even if I do not watch the TV, maybe I never know."

78: "So, yeah. I understand how they feel. I cannot blame them. But, yeah, sometimes, I feel a little bit isolated from that kinda conversation."

115: "I hope they can explain a little bit more about the cultural stuff."

116: "I know it is fine to talk about culture. But, if people do not understand, sometimes I do not understand what they are talking about. Then I feel a little bit isolated. So, I want them to explain what it is."

From an academic perspective, people should not define that a certain form of knowledge is better or more valuable than other forms. However, it is also the academic reality that in many of the American higher education level classrooms, most curriculums concentrate on European and North American educational philosophy and history. Thus, the dominant and appropriate way of expressing and exchanging knowledge and ideas exists in everyday U.S. classes. However, Yuki did not know exactly how to express her knowledge, how to interrupt the discussion, and how to change a topic in an American way. Because of her non-Western communication skills, she relied heavily on the discussion board forum and the English academic writing format where she could get heard and be equal with her American counterpart.

6. Discussion

Yuki was quite sensitive about eye contact during the small group discussion with American classmates. She wished that when American students were talking in small groups, they could look at her too, not only looking at other American students. This comment from Yuki appeared more than ten times. Whenever native speakers did not look at her, she thought that maybe it was because she was not a native English speaker that her English was neither good nor intelligible. The consequence was that she felt ignored, isolated, and unequal. Toward the end of the interview, Yuki said: "I get used to it." the author assumed she was not used to being ignored, but only not to stick to the idea of "looking at me."

Compared to how small group discussion was performed in Japan, she preferred the American way of small group discussion because she could "be honest and real" to herself and others rather than negotiate with others stressfully and consciously. In American small group discussions, when she was in a group with someone she felt comfortable with, she would be even more relaxed and willing to talk. On the other hand, it was often the case that she was ignored and

isolated because of her lack of confidence, disempowered language status, Western versus Eastern cultural barrier, language barrier, and unawareness of communication skills in American classrooms.

In any multicultural and multinational classroom, whether it was reasonable to equalize international students' being different as deviant, not knowing Western cultural and linguistic capital being their fault, and the willingness to further education in the U.S. would deprive students' power of getting their true voices heard by the domestic students and American teacher.

In this study, Yuki's perceptions and actions should not be explained from "here and now", but also discussed on a macro level. For example, globalization made English a dominant language all around the world so that individuals in non-English speaking countries felt they were obliged to learn well in English. Yuki did not want to go back to her own country which pushed her to be more tolerant while being "ignored" in the small group discussion. Quoting Yuki's own words, "If I can stay here, I am willing to be a refugee."

7. Conclusion

As the study showed, it should be analyzed thoroughly when international students are silent and inactive. Other factors should also be taken into account, such as what they have experienced, what their habitus was, and what the possible power distance and capital they possessed, compared to the domestic students and American teachers in American classrooms. As Yuki said at the end of one interview, despite all the challenges presented in small group discussions, studying in the U.S. was a satisfying experience, not only for academic purposes but also on a personal level of everyday life.

Summing up, people should engage international students in small group discussions in the context of acknowledging the value they bring to every conversation. Many international students were seeking to construct their knowledge in a new culture, which was quite different from their home context in which they accomplished most of their learning [16]. Understanding international students does not only mean understanding them by where they are and who they are, but also about where they were and who they were.

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