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SAAL Quarterly is under the editorship of T. Ruanni F. Tupas and Ludwig Tan. Please address your correspondence and contributions to: T. Ruanni F. Tupas (elcttr@nus.edu.sg), Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore: 10 Architecture Drive, Singapore 117511.

Word from the President



Dear SAAL Members and Friends,

Greetings to all, and welcome to another issue of SQ!

On Saturday, 12 September, we held our 24th AGM. This marked my first year as SAAL President and, as you will note from my address (<http://www.saal.org.sg/message2009.html>), your Committee and I have been hard at work achieving the goals we set last year.

I spoke last year about developing a scholarly journal. We are still at the very initial planning stage, but by our AGM next year we hope to be able to announce concrete plans and a possible launch date. I also mentioned wanting to reach out to regional neighbours in applied linguistics. I'm pleased to say we have formed a Global and Local Outreach subcommittee, who will be working on fostering stronger links with our regional partners. I also mentioned giving SAAL a more multilingual focus. In January we co-organized, with the Malay Teachers' Union, a talk by Emeritus Professor Asmah Haji Omar; and with the help of Dr Seetha Lakshmi, we look forward to reaching out to Tamil teachers in the coming year. Another goal was to grow the pedagogical focus of SAAL. The workshop we held on the morning of the AGM was aimed at in-service teachers and intended to recruit students of applied linguistics.

In this issue, you can read an interview with SAAL Advisor Dr Ho Wah Kam, conducted by immediate past President Chng Huang Hoon and myself. Jessie Teng has kindly contributed an article entitled 'Power and Identity in a Community of Academic Literary Practice'.

It leaves me now to wish you all a pleasant read!

Yours sincerely

Ee Ling

N.B. The following notice was sent to all members in advance of the 24th AGM on Saturday, 12 September 2009.

SAAL AGM NOTICE

The Singapore Association for Applied Linguistics (SAAL) warmly invites all SAAL members to the 24th SAAL Annual General Meeting & Workshop on Academic Writing on Saturday, 12 September 2009. This is at 11.00 am at the UniSIM Clementi Campus.

Summary of the main events:

Date: Saturday, 12 September 2009

Place: UniSIM Main Campus, 461 Clementi Road, Room 4.07 (Level 4, Rm 7)

11 am –12.15 pm: Workshop on ‘Academic Writing as Persuasion’ by

Assoc Prof Antonia Chandrasegaran

12.15–1 pm: Lunch

1–2 pm: SAAL AGM

SAAL 24th AGM Agenda:

- 1 Opening address by the President
- 2 Confirmation of the minutes of the 23rd AGM held on 6 September 2008
- 3 Hon. Treasurer’s annual report circulated at AGM)
- 4 Hon. Secretary’s annual report
circulated at AGM)
- 5 AOB

Workshop: Academic writing as persuasion

This workshop will invite participants to view academic writing as a process of persuasion enacted through argument, purposeful use of sources, and construction of authorial voice. Workshop activities will engage participants in recognizing indications and strategies of persuasion in academic texts. The final 15 minutes will be devoted to answering questions from the audience.

By Dr Antonia Chandrasegaran, associate professor in the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. She teaches writing-related courses including academic discourse and composition research. Her publications include articles on the development of writing skills in the *Journal of Second Language Writing* and *Linguistics and Education*.

SHORT ARTICLE

Power and Identity in a Community of Academic Literacy Practice

Jessie Teng

Centre for English Language Communication
National University of Singapore

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to fill the need for empirical ethnographic studies on the impacts of literacy-as-social-practice on individuals in the tertiary educational institution context by examining the effects of engaging in academic literacy on undergraduate students in a Singapore university. Based on Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation and Wenger's communities of practice framework (1998), it examines how participation in a community of academic literacy practices (CALP) impacts the identity construction of three undergraduates. The discussion focuses on how institutional forces influence identity negotiation in relation to the construction of emotions, identity work and the issue of different economies of literacies in a multilingual context, and the impact of transnationalism and literacy in opening up new options for the construction of new, hybrid identities for transnationals. The findings of this study raise awareness of the impacts of different economies of literacies and power relations on identity construction within a CALP, thus supporting a sociological approach to literacy, and call for further consideration of and support for the notion and practice of critical pedagogy aimed at empowering students to challenge inequities both within and outside the classroom.

KEYWORDS: power, identity, academic community of practice, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there have been calls to focus literacy studies on pedagogy (Baynham, 2004; Rodgers, 2004) and its material consequences (Luke, 2004) within the postmodern context of multilingualism and multimodal communicative practices (Street, 2004). As there has been relatively little research done on the impacts of literacy-as-social-practice on individuals in the tertiary educational institution context, this study seeks to fill the need for empirical ethnographic studies by examining the effects of engaging in academic literacy on undergraduate students in a Singapore university.

Based on Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation and Wenger's communities of practice framework (1998), this study examines how participation in a community of academic literacy practices (CALP) impacts the identity construction of three undergraduates: Steve (a local Chinese male), Vasanthi (a local Indian female) and Ming (a male transnational scholar from China). The discussion on Steve's experience focuses on how institutional forces influenced his identity negotiation in relation to his construction of emotions. In Vasanthi's case, the issue of different economies of literacies in a multilingual context and the resulting identity work that took place is looked at. Finally, Ming's case highlights the impact of transnationalism and literacy in opening up new options for the construction of new, hybrid identities for transnationals.

Theoretically, the findings of this study raise awareness of the impacts of different economies of literacies and power relations on identity construction within a community of academic literacy practice, thus supporting a sociological approach to literacy. Pedagogically, they call for further consideration of and support for the notion and practice of critical pedagogy aimed at empowering students to challenge inequities both within and outside the classroom.

FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

This study is largely based on the theory advanced by the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984, 1993, 1995; Gee, 1996; Barton & Hamilton, 2000) tradition of literacy being socially embedded and located within various social contexts. Hence, its emphasis is on the ethnographic approach, which lends itself to giving a voice (Hymes, 1995) to those often unheard – the students themselves – within the context in which they are embedded, thereby facilitating both a deeper and broader understanding of issues raised.

It has been proposed that languages in the form of narratives can “serve to produce, reproduce, transform and perform identities” (Pavlenko, 2002, p.298), the discourse and practices surrounding (academic) literacy events result in the negotiation and construction of identities. Thus, one effectual method to analyse the construction of identities is to look at an individual's narrative accounts and discourse excerpts (Pavlenko, 2002). Therefore, this study draws its data significantly from the journals of the three informants.

The framework with which the data is analysed is based on the concept of communities of practice (COPs), a notion popularized and elaborated on by Lave and Wenger (1991) in relation to learning, which they define not so much

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as acquisition of knowledge, but as changing participation within COPs. This model of “situated learning” proposes that learning involves a process of engagement in a COP, which is used in this study to better understand learning practices in higher education, “the lived experiences” of students in tertiary institutions and “the importance of different communities of practice in the learning process” (Lea, 2005, p.194).

For this study, the COP identified for analysis is the (sub-)community of academic literacy practice (CALP) of School of Computing (SoC) undergraduates within the larger academic community, in which academically successful students who consistently top the class represent the community’s core members, while peripheral members comprise newly-matriculated student ‘apprentices’ who aim to move towards being core members of the community. Marginal members are represented by SoC students who fail to demonstrate competence in appropriating academic knowledge.

The three types of peripheral, marginal and core membership are seemingly distinct categories, but such membership is often in a state of constant flux as individuals negotiate their identities in relation to their participation in the community. Such processes of identity construction are in turn embedded in power relations.

FINDINGS

This section summarizes the major issues involving identity and power with respect to the literacy backgrounds and practices (especially academic) of the three informants.

Steve

In his journal entries, Steve reflected efforts to negotiate his identity by exercising his agency to resist marginalization, a trajectory he seemed to be moving towards. His narratives suggest that this could be attributed to the fact that the cultural capital he brought with him to the university in terms of computing knowledge and skills obtained at the polytechnic was neither well valued nor made relevant to his academic literacy practices at the university, thus reflecting the role of institutional power in promoting dominant literacies and acting out the notion of economies of literacy. His lack of appropriate cultural capital resulted in his lack of competence in making meaning in his academic practices, thereby problematizing his participation in the CALP.

Consequently, he underwent a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of his identities as he tried to make sense of his self within the context of the CALP. His changing identities were a result of the impact of institutional power wielded by his lecturers and tutors, specifically in their feedback (particularly through giving grades) on his academic literacy practices (especially evaluated academic literacy events like tests and assignments). In addition, his attempts to resist a marginalized identity within the CALP constrained him to structure his time and space around academic literacy practices. This dominance of his CALP participation resulted in the displacement of socioliterate practices in other domains in his life (e.g. the recreational reading of newspapers), which in turn reinforced the impact of his membership in the CALP on his overall identity. In this way, Steve lived out institutional power in a diffused sense on a day-to-day basis.

Vasanthi

Vasanthi's narratives present her attempts to contest the marginalized identity (member of the minority ethnolinguistic Tamil group) framed for her by society at large by presenting an alternative public self that would identify her as a member of the dominant majority: namely, that of being a full member of a multicultural community. This exercise of agency in contesting positioned marginalized identities was also evident in her effort to make sense of her participation and membership in the CALP at the university. Here, she sought to contest her identity as a peripheral participant by attempting to redefine the shared standards of the community's goals and the meaning of its practices, in order that her competencies may be perceived with greater value within the community, since she apparently neither had sufficient cultural capital and competence to fully participate in the meaning making of these practices nor the access to learning resources which could have empowered her to take more control of her learning. Such contestation of identities constructed in relation to literacy puts the focus on the inequality of access to academic literacy practices.

Ming

Ming's case demonstrates how globalization and transnationalism that bring about the movement of people across borders also lead to the mobility of literacies across sociocultural spaces and boundaries. Such movement across geopolitical and sociocultural borders leads to the alteration of the cultural and symbolic capitals (and the associated power) of languages and literacies, as highlighted in Ming's narratives. This opens up new identity options for transnationals who then form new, hybrid identities. The construction of such an identity is illustrated by Ming and his peers from China who seem to construct identities that not only enable them to retain ties and identities in relation to their home country but also encourage them to embrace new

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relationships and new identities in their adopted country. In addition, we see how a transnational student like Ming developed his CALP identity as one who was moving towards the core of the community. This was enabled to a significant extent by the learning and scaffolding resources available to him in terms of emotional and psychological support from his family and fellow Chinese peers, as well as linguistic support in the form of an intensive English course he attended upon his arrival in Singapore and his tutors on the course.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have important theoretical and pedagogical implications.

Theoretical Implications

An important implication of this study is the impact of the inequality of literacies, which is propagated through official, educational and social literacy practices that favour certain dominant languages and knowledges while marginalizing other languages and literacies. Such literacy inequalities cause major shifts in the life trajectories of individuals such as Steve and Vasanthi, whose pursuit of cultural and symbolic capital in the form of developing competence in a specific field of knowledge/ literacy have led them to make choices that have affected their life trajectories.

Next, while broader institutional power has been highlighted by philosophers such as Foucault (1997), this study reveals the less visible signs of power which students experience in their daily engagement with academic literacy practices, and which contributes to their identity construction within the CALP. In essence, through its influence on the features of various sub-communities within the university, institutional power significantly affects individuals' participation in the community and their corresponding identity constructions. In addition, such power structures time and space in students' lives, thereby impacting their participation and identity formation in other domains of their lives, with the result that their identity and membership in the CALP becomes dominant.

The third implication is how identity construction takes place within communities of practice, where individuals construct their identities not just in their interactions with their interlocutors or in relation to other members of the community, but also in connection to their participation and competency in making meaning in the practices of the community. In the cases of Steve and Vasanthi, their limited participation in the CALP positioned them as peripheral

participants of the community, identities which they sought to resist in various ways. Moreover, for transnationals like Ming who cross sociocultural boundaries due to academic pursuits, transnational mobility provides access to new communities and make available new options for the creation of new hybrid identities, in the process not only impacting such individuals in identity construction.

A consequent implication is support for the notion of reframing linguistic skills as ways of coping with the demands of identity construction and the making sense of self rather than as a set of skills. That is, instead of adopting a skills-based approach, literacy should be viewed from sociological perspectives where it plays a pivotal role in identity construction and the apprenticeship of learners within the context of communities of practice.

Pedagogical Implications

There are two important pedagogical implications. Firstly, educators need to engage in critical literacy pedagogy (Canagarajah, 2004; Norton and Toohey, 2004) that will teach students how to use literacy practices and cultural artefacts (such as narratives) to achieve positive social positioning and avoid negative social positioning (Bartlett, 2005). This could be done, for instance, by incorporating (though not necessarily co-opting) cultural artefacts into the curriculum and helping students to develop social analysis that is key to critical literacy (Moje, 2000, as outlined in Bartlett, 2005). Such critical literacy pedagogy would be aimed at empowering students with the social awareness and critique required for them to challenge social inequities. Educators should also help students learn to draw on (linguistic) resources and manoeuvre space to successfully negotiate their multiple identities (Canagarajah, 2004), as well as to critically engage in the analysis of power relations embedded in literacy itself (Norton and Toohey, 2004). Students should be made aware of how literacy is socioculturally and sociopolitically framed, and taught how literacy practices disadvantage certain learners and how dominant knowledges are maintained by such practices (Shohamy, 2004).

Secondly, in accordance with Wenger's (1998) call for education to be "transformative" rather than "merely informative" (p.263), education should be regarded as the opening of new dimensions for learners to negotiate their sense of self towards myriad possibilities of new identities. Education should thus be addressed primarily in terms of identities and modes of belonging and only secondarily in terms of skills and information. As identity formation is a lifelong, dynamic process, education should thus be seen as an investment of a community in its own future through its members' formation of new identities.

It then becomes more important to offer learners alternative forms of participation that can become a meaningful source of identity for them, rather than focus on reification that could potentially hinder learning by presenting simplistic relations between them and the content they are taught, leading to learners' superficial understanding of the subject matter without the competence to apply such knowledge broadly.

The above could be particularly true if such codified knowledge is presented apart from actual practice. Hence, it is incumbent upon educators to create new ways and spaces for students to engage in meaningful practices and to gain access to resources that enhance their participation, in order that they can put themselves on learning trajectories they can identify with. This would empower students to negotiate their enterprises and thus to shape the context in which they can construct and experience "an identity of competence" (Wenger, 1998, p.175). Such a context could certainly be empowering for students who would then be able to engage in authentic practices that allow them to take charge of their own learning.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

English for Business & Technology 2010

3–4 February 2010, Institut Teknologi Brunei (ITB), Brunei Darussalam

English is the language of globalization and is fast becoming accepted as the lingua franca of South East Asia and the Pacific region. As such, it is the medium of instruction at higher educational institutions, technical colleges and vocational schools. For educators and trainers to keep abreast of current trends and innovations in the teaching of English for Business and Technology, a forum is needed for sharing views. ITB is pleased to announce its second E4BT Conference which will provide an opportunity for educators and trainers to present, discuss and generate ideas on the current trends and the effective delivery of English for Business and Technology. The Conference is explicitly aimed at being inclusive in its scope of interest.

Information at: pmubd.files.wordpress.com/2009/08/english-for-business.doc

Leader, Mentor and Role Model A Tribute to Dr Ho Wah Kam

In this series, *SAAL Quarterly* will be publishing articles on Dr Ho Wah Kam, SAAL Advisor, which were put together and edited by Assoc. Prof. Chng Huang Hoon and Assoc. Prof. Low Ee Ling, and presented to Dr Ho on his 75th birthday (February 2009) during the SAAL Annual General Meeting on 6 September 2008. In this issue, the second part of the series will feature an interview Dr Ho conducted by Assoc. Profs. Chng and Low.

An Interview with Dr Ho Wah Kam

1. How long have you been in the service of education/ teacher education?

In education, from 1959 to 1964 and, in teacher training, from 1964 to 1994, making a total of 35 years when I retired as Dean of the School of Education in the National Institute of Education. It was in 1959 that I completed my teacher training in the Diploma programme at the former University of Malaya in Singapore, and was deployed to teach in Victoria School. It was in that same year that Singapore was granted full internal self-government by the British.

2. What made you choose the education service as your career?

You need a context for this answer. 1959 was not a year of plenty for young university graduates. The range of job opportunities was really limited. So career choice was confined to what were then available in the private and public sectors and not based on one's idealistic career aspirations. One had to be pragmatic. Teaching was attractive then for two reasons — there were teaching bursaries available, more than those for other areas in the public service, and teachers were then in demand, as Singapore tried to move out of its entrepôt economy to early industrialization.

In May of that year (1959), when I joined the teaching service, the PAP won 43 out of the 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly and, a year or two later, the PAP government launched a four-year plan to attract foreign investments, expand industrial capacity, and build more schools and public housing. Having said that, I have to add that, once in teaching for whatever pragmatic reason, if the experience grows on you and you begin to enjoy it, you will stay.

As envisaged, Singapore's economic strategy shifted in the late 1960s from one of import-substitution to that of industrialization by attracting foreign investments for export-oriented and labour-intensive manufacturing. When more multinationals set up shop in Singapore, there was a demand for supervisors, middle-level managers and trainers, and trained and experienced

men teachers fitted the bill very well. So, the attraction for men then to leave teaching to work in multinationals was particularly strong, especially for those who thought that they had not chosen a career (i.e. teaching) that was best for them in the circumstances. In a way, the training we had provided for teachers had prepared them for many other supervisory jobs as well, not just for classroom teaching.

3. What motivates you to be in the service of fellow educators/ teacher educators for as long as you have?

Firstly, it was my love of literature. In those early years, when the British expatriate teachers were being repatriated or “Malayanised”, as the term was then used, there was a demand for local teachers to teach English literature. Secondly, after 1964, I moved from school teaching to teacher training, and I really liked the idea of teaching English literature to young trainee teachers. Then in 1969 or thereabouts, the late Dr Ruth Wong came into the teacher training picture. She was really a breath of fresh air. I became one of the beneficiaries of Dr Wong’s kindnesses and generosity and, although I was given the chance to leave teacher training to head a school at that time, I decided to stay on in the Teacher Training College to help her achieve her vision for Singapore’s teacher education. Much of that is now documented in my monograph on Dr Ruth Wong’s vision and contributions, entitled ‘The Educational Legacy of Dr Ruth Wong Hie King’ (1995).

4. What do you consider to be your proudest moment?

Two moments in particular, if I may say so, both connected with SAAL’s (or Singapore’s) hosting of the 2002 AILA World Congress:

Moment 1: When we actually hosted AILA2002, despite the SARS problem, putting SAAL (after only 18 years of existence) on the world map of Applied Linguistics; and

Moment 2: when the late Professor Yoji Tanabe, then of Waseda University in Tokyo, launched our co-edited volume on English Language Teaching in East Asia Today (2002, 2nd edition 2004). Moment (2) is best seen as the coming of age of a network of indigenous scholars coming from as far away as Mongolia and Myanmar to contribute in trust to our two volumes — one on ELT and the other on language policies. Some of these scholars had not published outside their own provincial journals.

5. You have been associated with SAAL from the beginning. In your opinion, is SAAL a viable organization given the small pool of academics in Singapore?

Small as it is, SAAL will be a viable organization, as long as it remains alert to the changes around it, and adapt to these changes. There may not be immediate

payoffs but there will be benefits in the longer term. It was M A K Halliday, who made that same point in his AILA Gold Medal Award speech at our 2002 AILA Congress. Halliday, in starting that speech, drew the attention of the international audience at the Suntec City Convention Hall, to the two points that Chris Candlin (who was in the audience) had made about the role of applied linguistics — (1) that it is social, and (2) that it is “problem-centred”. The viability of SAAL will depend on how we have been and will be guided by these two principles. (For those who were not at our AILA Congress in 2002, the title of Halliday’s speech was “Applied Linguistics as an Evolving Theme”. Halliday was then receiving the award of the first AILA Gold Medal for his distinguished scholarship in linguistics and applied linguistics.)

6. What do you hope to see SAAL do in the years ahead? What is your vision for SAAL in the years ahead?

Allow me to take another very useful point out of Halliday’s 2002 speech, given the multilingual situation we are in. To understand the reality of our multi-language situation, you have to stop by at one of the coffee shops in the heartlands, where you will hear languages/dialects as they are used — to experience a slice of the real world of languages in Singapore. In his speech, Halliday noted that 40-50% of the many abstracts at the 2002 Congress had English as their primary concern. He then asked:

How does this feature, the dominance of English as the language under discussion, square with the aims of AILA as embodied in the name of the Association? ... What I find more problematic is “linguistics”. Linguistics means language and languages, in general.

The same question may be asked of SAAL — why only English? Halliday added:

Now in applied linguistics, it has been useful to have one language as testing ground, in this case for practices rather than for arguments, and many ideas on language teaching, for example, tried out and evaluated with English. Many of these ideas have had only mixed success, but nevertheless (or perhaps for that very reason) they should have provided valuable experience when applied to the teaching of languages other than English.

Dr Goh Yeng Seng of NIE’s controversial experiment in using English for the teaching of Chinese, which was started three years after Halliday’s statement, would have served as a good example for Halliday to note.

So to answer your question, I hope that in the years ahead SAAL’s programmes would be more reflective of the mix of the actual languages being used in this small nation state.

7. *Could you tell us what you enjoyed most about your attachment to RELC?*

After NIE, my sojourn in RELC from 1995 to 1999 or so was professionally speaking a very fruitful one. I enjoyed the association with RELC and certainly profited from it. My position at RELC then provided me with a newer and broader perspective on the concept of language policy and English Language Teaching in Southeast and Northeast Asia. There are about 16 countries or political entities in this region, from which I was able to form a network of indigenous scholars who wanted to tell their stories about language policies and language education in their respective countries without someone else imposing an ideology on them. And I believe they were pleased that there was someone from Singapore who was prepared to give them that voice. I see what Ruth and myself had done in the two volumes in that light.

8. *What are your personal goals by the year 2010?*

If I could see 2010 at all, I hope that (1) at the personal level, I will not be over-dependent on other people because of physical or mental frailty, and (2) at the professional level, first, to see the younger ones I have worked with succeed in their professional lives, and second, for my twin interest, Philosophy for Children (P4C), develop into an important aspect of the school curriculum here, as it is in some schools in the West and Australia. Since 2003, I have been active in advocating the use of P4C, with more than 300 primary, secondary and JC teachers exposed to ways of using philosophical and ethical inquiry in their teaching. I have formed an informal network of P4C teachers, for which I have given the acronym COIN (for Community of Inquiry Network) and I am trying to get this group, as we had done in 1984 for SAAL, to form an association for philosophy in schools. Then we will get it affiliated with some of the larger philosophy for children associations in the US, UK and Australia. We have already established close contacts with these overseas organizations. In fact, I have just returned from the University of Melbourne, where a conference on P4C was held, and two of our schools presented very credible papers at the conference. That's another way of putting what we do for P4C in Singapore on the world map, as we had done with SAAL. That aim in brief is one of my personal goals.

9. *Do you have any advice for those of us who are currently serving in the teaching profession/ education service in Singapore?*

It is important to keep learning and be open to new ideas. The term life-long learner has become a cliché, but it is true that one becomes out of date very quickly in a world that keeps changing all the time.

10. *Any regrets as you look back on your career?*

No regrets really. Could I have worked in another line and be more satisfied today? I don't think so.

**SAAL Executive Committee
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