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EAP: Imagining a new tertiary community

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Through a case study of an English for Academic Purposes and academic readiness program in Lao PDR, this article explores how the particular needs of the students can be taken into account in the design and teaching approaches of such programs. The program, delivered for international students preparing to study in Australia or New Zealand, suggests ways to incorporate students' voices, which, in the pressure to prepare students to cope with disciplinary and academic study demands, may be overlooked in the design of current EAP programs. We found that questions written by students gave insights into ways they were imagining their future study communities. Our responses involved drawing on the Lao students' previous educational experiences to highlight the diverse learnings and insights they could bring to their new contexts. Working from sociocultural perspectives and with insights provided by the notion of relational agency, we reflect on ways that these approaches provided a basis for students to observe and experience the deployment of new academic skills and related social practices as additions to their existing repertoires.

Key Words: English for Academic Purposes (EAP); imagined communities; relational; student voice; sociocultural; agency; academic preparation.

1. Introduction

Teachers working in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) need to consider how best to help students develop the understanding, knowledge and confidence to incorporate new academic practices within their existing repertoires. At the same time, most teachers hope that students will transfer knowledge, skills and attitudes developed in previous educational experiences. Yet it is often difficult to maintain a positive focus on what students bring, while confronting them with new academic and discourse challenges. Early recommendations for EAP course design (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) highlighted the importance of needs analysis and the role of student input and voice into the development of curriculum. However more recent studies conclude that EAP has moved towards a monologic generic approach that is determined by institutional needs (Benesch, 2001; Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016). Even with this increasingly narrow focus, EAP programs may come in different guises for different audiences and can often be underpinned by a conceptualisation of students as deficient (Leung & Street, 2012). This conceptualisation is sometimes internalised by students themselves (Norton, 2010; Kumaravadivelu, 2003a) and may

be a result of the challenge they have set themselves in preparing for tertiary study in an additional language.

In this paper, we focus on an offshore pre-departure English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program for students hoping to qualify for a scholarship to study in Australia or New Zealand. We examine the importance of context and student voice in the academic readiness component of a broader EAP course that is conducted in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). In our research for course preparation we had the opportunity to incorporate the perspectives of a specific group of Lao students. This is a rare opportunity in EAP studies, as often research in this area focuses on groups of international students once they are in the receiving country (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Wearring, Le, Wilson, & Arambewela, 2015). We take a sociocultural perspective, drawing on the analytical frameworks of post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2003b) and relational agency (Edwards, 2005; McNamee, 2007) to investigate ways that recognition of context and learner agency can help shape a responsive EAP pre-departure program.

2. EAP and academic readiness

The origins of the article came out of our mutual interest in the practices of academic readiness EAP programs and ways in which international students are acculturated or, from a more critical viewpoint, assimilated into the Australian and New Zealand tertiary institutional cultures. We are also interested in the presence of student voice and input into the development of pre-departure EAP curriculum, because our backgrounds in English language and literacy tertiary education in Australian and New Zealand contexts have exposed us to the narrowing of EAP curricula, and a tendency for a 'one size fits all' approach to the teaching of academic skills and knowledge (Benesch, 2009; Canagarajah, 2014; Chun, 2015). It is clear that there is increasing reliance on income from international students to bolster the coffers of universities in our countries (Dodd, 2016; Lewis, 2011) and the pivotal role EAP programs play in the economic environment of tertiary education (Benesch, 2001).

The purpose of English for academic purposes courses is to prepare students for the experience of studying a tertiary program in a setting where English is the medium of instruction. The notion of EAP is far from straightforward (Chun, 2015). It is a term used widely within the higher education sector that seems to imply there is a single form of academic English that will help to 'fix the academic English language and literacy' of those students who do not meet the requirements to enter a degree program or lack the English proficiency to succeed in their area of study. EAP is approached from a variety of beliefs about language and literacies that range from viewing these as instrumental skills to the perspective of language and literacies as socially-situated practices (Lillis & Scott, 2007). The approach we take here is that language and literacies, as social practices, cannot be understood in isolation from the political, sociocultural and historical context in which they occur (Street, 1995; Baynham, 1995). The term 'sociocultural perspective' is now often used to indicate that the broader social context in which language is used is taken into account (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). However, EAP courses may not always reflect the various language practices that students may need to engage with in their studies in the destination universities. As mentioned earlier, EAP courses may take a generic form that aims to anticipate and mirror the students' academic needs. A typical course includes academic grammar and vocabulary, introduction to and practice of various academic genres, some elements of academic culture and some focus on skills development (Canagarajah, 2014).

2.1. The EAP pre-departure program in Laos

The pre-departure scholarship program is a component of broader aid and development initiatives to assist in the growth of an independent Lao economy. Until recent years one of the ten poorest countries in the world, Lao PDR has been reliant on aid funding primarily from Organisation for

Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to support its economy since the dismantling of the USSR (Chounlamany & Kounphilaphanh, 2011; Evans, 2002). Lao PDR was dependent on the small amount of foreign aid from the USSR up until the late 1980s and in particular the education sector experienced a lack of funds and resources. Apart from the constraints on funding, education was disrupted by different colonial and political regimes, each requiring different priorities in language education and curriculum goals (Souriyavongsa, Rany, Jafre, & Leong, 2013). The country remains in the group of Least Developed Countries (LDC), a United Nations category based on the levels of development in areas such as personal income, economic indicators such as GNP, levels of education, gender equity and health outcomes (United Nations Economic and Policy Division, 2018).

The EAP pre-departure program was delivered in a large English language college in Lao PDR. There were approximately 30–50 students in the separate New Zealand and Australia programs and these students were scholarship candidates for post-graduate or doctoral courses. This aid funded scholarship program requires candidates to meet criteria decided on bilaterally by both the donors and the Lao PDR government. A key criterion is that Lao candidates have to demonstrate that their proposed studies align to the national development goals of Laos (World Bank, 2018) as well as to the expertise and interests of the country funding the scholarship. Currently the New Zealand government lists the priority areas for 2017 as agricultural development, renewable energy, disaster risk management, public sector, private sector and English language teaching (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2017). The Australia Awards website (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade – Australian Awards, 2014) is less prescriptive about priority areas but indicates that the overall aim of the program is to contribute to the long-term development of participant countries. In addition to an appropriate level of academic achievement and work experience relevant to a priority area, the New Zealand entry requirements indicate that candidates for a Masters scholarship must have an IELTS score of at least 5.5 (with no subtest lower than 5) on entry to the pre-departure program and will need to achieve IELTS 6.5 before mobilization (Education New Zealand, 2018). The 44-week pre-departure program in Laos is designed to comprehensively prepare participants for academic study in an Australian or New Zealand context. There are 6-7 hours of class per day, which includes time on site for students to work on self-directed tasks, often involving the use of educational technology. Along with a focus on English language proficiency development, the program's core content and processes aim to foster the personal and academic shifts necessary to make the transition from Lao academic practices to those favoured in Australasian tertiary institutions. Our component as visiting lecturers is integrated into the program and occurs at the end of it.

The EAP program demonstrates a solid grounding in relational practices and it takes into account the Lao students' educational experiences. Lao students are not necessarily experienced in the expectations and practices of New Zealand and Australian academic cultures (Souriyavongsa et al., 2013), which commonly require that students be independent learners and critical thinkers and manage a large load of academic reading. The Lao college recognises that students will need the opportunities of time and contextual experiences to add these ways of learning in their existing repertoires of skills (Chanock, 2002). The program draws on contemporary EAP, TESOL and education research and practice, as evidenced in the teacher and student materials and references. Within this framework the program focuses on making the hidden values and beliefs of texts visible, encouraging students and teachers to use questions to generate reflection and critical thinking. The classroom walls are porous to the external society and what students do inside the classroom goes outside as the students work on projects of interest to them that are relevant to Lao development goals. These projects are a key part of their academic and communicative skills development.

3. Incorporating student voices

One aspect which may be overlooked in discussions about international students and their preparation for learning in overseas universities, is that of exploring and legitimating the academic culture and experience that the students bring with them, by encouraging students to articulate their questions, concerns and responses (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007; Benesch, 2009). EAP courses often follow a model of acculturation or induction into the way things are done in Western universities (Leung & Street, 2012). In the Lao EAP program the students were asked to prepare questions they had about their upcoming study in their destination universities for us as visiting academics. The questions could be about any areas of interest or concern and students had opportunities to discuss these issues with peers beforehand.

In preparation for a new tertiary environment, the early provision of information in response to students' initial questions as well as their attitudes to new academic practices are significant to their success and sociocultural adjustment (Wearring et al., 2015; Brown, 2008; Arkoudis & Tran, 2007). Time lost in the beginning stages of a course cannot be easily regained. It is therefore helpful if academic preparation helps students to develop awareness of their own attitudinal dispositions, thinking skills and systems, and an interest in observing and identifying those that may be encouraged in the target country. Agency has been identified as a significant component of academic success (Norton, 2001, 2013), but this is a culturally loaded notion and the students' academic culture of origin may not conceptualise a student's agency in the same way as the destination academic setting. Similarly, explicit reflection on learning or self and peer assessment are activities which the preparation program aims to develop, as they can help with adaptation processes, as well as being components of the assessment on some academic courses. However, telling and advising students about the benefits of being agentic is not the same as developing their own awareness of the attitudes and behaviours that may be useful in the new study context. Encouraging students to formulate their own questions can help to lay the groundwork for student agency.

4. EAP pedagogy: Relational practice and postmethod approaches

Relations of power are evident in any teaching situation and we were aware that the power relations in this particular context could either aid or inhibit student participation in their learning. Given that we view language and literacy as a social practice, we were interested to explore the ways we could negotiate the imported EAP and academic cultural practices with the local. The industry of EAP conveys a certain hierarchy of knowledge and skills, and consciously or unconsciously stigmatises non-Western forms of academic culture (Doherty & Singh, 2005). EAP may also romanticise notions of egalitarian Western education and accompanying classroom practices. Unequal relations of power can impact the learning potential of the students and, despite high levels of motivation, students may not invest in particular classroom practices (Norton, 2013; Ziguras, 2008). It was crucial for us in this setting to understand the Lao students' investment in their learning experiences. By using the term 'investment' (Norton, 2013), we wish to convey an understanding of the students' hope to convert their efforts and achievements in language learning to material and symbolic gain. The students were clearly highly motivated, but we were keen to explore their levels of investment in what was happening in the classroom, as well as their sense of inclusion or exclusion.

The critical approach to EAP acknowledges disparities of power (Benesch, 2001; Fenton-Smith, 2014; Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016; Ziguras, 2008) and seeks ways that students can be involved in the content and process of the course. A recent article by Khany and Tarlani-Aliabadi (2016) asserts that there are limited opportunities for students to give input into EAP courses. Students may also experience a generic representation of educational cultures, in terms of an Eastern–Western dichotomy (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, 2012; Holliday, 2007). While it is acknowledged that sociocultural adjustment is an important factor (Brown, 2008; Wearring et al., 2015),

it is not uncommon to see learning materials that discuss ways people may approach academic work without addressing what is really meant by 'academic culture'. When academic culture *is* discussed, it is often restricted to assumptions and principles underlying universities in the NABA +N (North America, Britain, Australia and New Zealand) parts of the world (Holliday, 1994). In referring to academic culture, we recognise that the tertiary education sectors in New Zealand and Australia, as elsewhere, are constantly changing focus, priorities and practices, especially as new technologies drive changes in study modes and delivery. EAP and academic readiness programs need to avoid representing academic culture and contexts as fixed or static (Chun, 2015). As well as encouraging students to see academic culture as evolutionary, it is also important that 'Western' academic practices do not become a knee-jerk standard against which the local academic culture is implicitly or explicitly measured and found wanting.

The success of an EAP program can be measured by the extent students are able to realise the 'imagined community' (Norton, 2001, 2013) of their destination tertiary context. EAP classes can be a somewhat secondhand experience for the student, as the students are engaged in learning about an experience they are yet to have and are required to imagine and adopt an additional academic identity. The students' investment in their learning experiences, and in particular members of the learning community, may govern their access to the imagined communities. They may have the greatest investment in those teachers who give direct access to a lived experience of their imagined communities (Norton, 2013). This places responsibility on the teachers to provide a bridge between the local and imported practices and to attempt to replicate educational experiences the students will have in their destination universities (Canagarajah, 2014).

We decided that the goals of the academic readiness component of the pre-departure EAP course as described above would be best met by addressing language and academic skills from a broad sociocultural perspective; one that takes account of the students' local academic context, their particular disciplines and their desired communities and identities (Canagarajah, 2014). Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogy (2003a; 2003b) provides both an analytical framework and a pedagogical approach from which to develop an EAP program that enables students, in the words of Canagarajah (2014), "to merge their competing cultural academic and linguistic traditions" (p. 101) and not have to separate their local experiences from their imagined destination communities. Kumaravadivelu's framework consists of three parameters he calls particularity, practicality and possibility that are interrelated and overlapping. Particularity addresses the specific learning context as well as the students' goals and characteristics, while practicality draws attention to the teacher's ability to make sense of their teaching conditions and to be able to develop theory and/or theorise their practical experiences. In this second dimension the teachers take account of the particularities and the permeability of classroom walls to the outside world (Pennycook, 1994), an idea which highlights the way that knowledge enters and leaves the classroom through links with the external context. This parameter engages the teacher and students in creating and imagining their new communities. The parameter of possibility allows the teacher and the students to identify changes that need to be made in order to transform their current situations. Through awareness of this parameter the teacher is able to collaborate with students to bring about change. The teachers cannot fulfill their pedagogic obligations without at the same time fulfilling their social obligations.

While Kumaravadivelu's postmethod pedagogy provides a way for us to discuss the academic program, relational agency (Edwards, 2005) offers a useful framework to understand teacher-student relationships in an EAP learning context. Both are useful to suggest how sociocultural perspectives can be implemented in practice. Relational agency describes the capacity "to know how to know who" (Edwards, Lunt, & Stamou, 2010, p. 31), that is, to understand ways that students might learn how to interpret and negotiate complex aspects of their social and academic roles in the target universities. Relational agency is built on the sharing of expertise between teachers and students, recognising the learner as a resource with capacity for enhanced agency. It highlights collaboration with peers that involves interpreting and questioning. An expanded and

contemporary view of EAP would take account of the knowledge and skills all students bring into this learning space, and find ways to utilise these skills in collaborative ways to reinterpret and negotiate the complex tasks and responses required in tertiary studies, along with the different types of social roles the students would take up in their new context.

The nature of conversations between teachers and students can take on new meaning and shape when education is viewed as a relational practice (McNamee, 2007). The focus is on building a sense of community, connection and collaboration among participants to recognise that there exists an array of diverse voices and experiences, even in contexts where diversity may not be immediately or overtly apparent. There is also a focus on student participation in constructing the content and process of a course. While McNamee describes engaging in relational practices leading to knowledge and skills in university classrooms, the themes of collaborative conversations and identifying and sharing diversities to create knowledge and meaning can be effectively applied in EAP settings and contexts. The ways in which we engaged in the academic preparation program reflect key elements of McNamee's four resources for a collaborative classroom: i) avoiding abstract positions: giving space for what students bring to the educational context; ii) privileging narrative forms: giving voice to students' interests in the topics and content of discussions and texts; iii) fostering community: sharing individual perspectives to co-create knowledge; and iv) blurring the boundaries between the classroom and everyday life: students take their classroom learning beyond the walls of the classroom (McNamee, 2007, pp. 326-329). One of our main aims was to translate abstract Western academic concepts, such as academic culture, into practical tasks and objects; another was to draw on the Lao students' academic experiences to encourage them to incorporate their experiences into their academic repertoires. Thirdly we drew on the existing connections and sense of community within the class; and lastly we implemented our belief that the social context is integral to the academic context by recognising and examining possible challenges in sociocultural adjustment. In the following section practical ways of doing this are presented.

5. Towards a new tertiary context

The relational stance, Kumaravadivelu's focus on contextualisation, and the central notion of moving from an understanding of the Lao setting to the new tertiary contexts were three key concerns that underpinned our approach to teaching. We focused on how students get prepared for a new academic setting and what actually helps to build students' cultural competence, confidence and knowledge.

As an indicator of the program's capacity to integrate the interests of students into the design and direction of the course, students composed questions for the visiting lecturers (the authors). Students were asked to think forward to their studies in Australia or New Zealand and identify what they would like to know about their university study, both as post-graduate students and temporary inhabitants of the target countries. As noted earlier, EAP can become monologic due to the lack of dialogue between students and teachers (Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016). The impact of this absence of student voices is then to privilege the institutional requirements (Benesch, 2001). The Lao program demonstrated an innovative approach in providing a way for the students' voices to be present in the development of the course. We received the questions (for examples of these, see Table 1) prior to going to Lao PDR and therefore had to time to consider the information that the students requested and to incorporate this into our teaching component.

Table 1. A selection of student questions from both the Australian and New Zealand cohorts, 2014-2015.

Nature of question	Examples of questions
Academic concerns	How many subjects can I fail for each term?
	What aspects will be considered to cancel our scholarships?
	Could you please show us your study timetable and explain how you manage your time?
	If I cannot finish my assignments on time, what should I do? Is it okay to discuss with professors very often in order to find a solution to a specific problem?
	How will I be expected to participate in class?
	Are we going to have adequate consultation with our tutors?
	Are there cases where students cannot work together as a team?
Getting support with academic study	What type of academic assistance is available to international students?
	In the case that I am weak in learning some subjects where can I find tutors? Do I have to find them by myself? How much will they cost in general?
	Are there any special academic assistance if we find any difficulties? Especially language?
	Do I need permission from the lecturer to ask for a teacher at the student support centre?
Sociocultural concerns	What type of culture shock can I expect?
	Who should I talk with when I have a problem with adaptability in learning at the first semester?
	Basically, do Australian people like Asian people? If yes, why?
	Should I avoid presenting that I am a scholarship student as local students may have negative feelings against us?
	How will I meet other Lao students?
	How do Lao students organise get-togethers and other social activities?
	Will the university have a Lao student organisation?
	Is it a good idea to share room with local people in order to practice culture?
	Is it true that Australian and New Zealand people are open-minded and tolerant cultures? Are there any big differences between their cultures and Lao?
	It is not straightforward to adapt to other cultures in a short time, so what is the best way to learn to understand other cultures?
	How should I begin a conversation with local people? Or what questions should I avoid to ask local people?
	Will I get an opportunity to express myself about my home country?
Administrative / Practical matters	How much does it cost to live in Sydney / Auckland etc.?
	If we compare staying on campus and off-campus, which one is safer?
	Could you please provide what are the pros and cons of living in campus and outside campus? in Wellington?
	Can I work while I am studying?
	Is it hard to find a part-time job?
	How will I find a place to rent? Will the university help me?
	Can I access the campus at night time?
	I am in a wheelchair; how well will the university provide for me?
	Will I be able to bring my family with me?
	What assistance will I receive?

The questions strongly indicated that the students were imagining their new academic community and were invested in learning new ways of undertaking academic study and life in a new country. It was clear that the students had high expectations of our component in the program so we needed to think through how best to respond. The students were clearly trying to troubleshoot, anticipating situations that they might encounter; a clear sign they were taking up proactive stances and exercising their agency and preparedness to deal with some of these situations. As evident in the table above, some of the students' questions addressed their concerns about social life, acculturation and coping with new demands; indeed we were initially surprised that their questions indicated more concern with these matters than with academic study. While they clearly felt uncertain about multiple aspects of the forthcoming experience, the manner of asking questions suggests that students viewed their role as active and agentic *("what should I do…? should I talk directly…? how can I…? where can I find…")*. This may indicate that an agentic student identity (Norton, 2013; Arkoudis & Tran, 2007) was a familiar role for students, even if the problems they might face may be new. We could perceive in their questions an awareness of the importance of being appropriate to the sociocultural context, and the understanding that cultural particularities of a society can be far more significant to feeling comfortable and confident in their destination societies than a level of proficiency as measured by a standardised international test. English language proficiency is of course an important factor, as maintained by Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012) in their research looking at international students, language proficiency and security; however, it is not experienced in the same way in every area of student life. The significance of language proficiency changes as it interacts with other factors, "for example, academic requirements or cultural difference, and above all agency" (Sawir et al., p. 449).

The students' questions ranged over many aspects of academic and social life, some questions indicating the ways the students were consciously negotiating the space between their own academic experience and their anticipated new studies. Their queries demonstrated the need for EAP to allow students to bring their new insights into the dominant EAP form and initiate new inquiry (Canagarajah, 2014). We drew on other resources to help respond to the questions, including the opportunities for previous Lao scholarship holders to speak with current students about concerns and to share their experiences. In bringing the returned and new students together, the college staff fostered a local academic community (McNamee, 2007). Our role in these discussions was to listen and make notes, as we have not personally had the experiences that these peers have had.

6. The EAP program: Academic readiness

The post-method and relational agency perspectives guided the academic readiness program and fitted well within the existing EAP curriculum of the Lao college. As a response to concerns raised by students, we introduced authentic academic materials such as course outlines as objects of discussion and negotiation. We sought to have open and inclusive discussions, but were aware that we were positioned as authorities. Inevitably the students' expectations were that we would provide access to the information that they wanted. As well as asking how they would deal with a similar issue if it arose in Laos, we designed out of class tasks that involved students looking up answers to some questions, with an in-class collaborative session in which they shared and pondered the varied advice they had found.

Our various responses and attempts to broaden students' academic repertoires (Chanock, 2002) included discussions with the students about their preconceptions of how the destination universities would function, their concerns about how they would 'fit in' and the challenges that academic work would pose. We acknowledged some of the experiences of students we have worked with and used these as a basis for class sessions in a positive way. We ensured that this was situated knowledge and where possible acknowledged the disciplines students would be working in by using authentic texts, course outlines, assignment guidelines and completed assignments sourced from relevant subject areas. Students were also asked to find a research based journal

article relevant to their discipline and to summarise the broad research approach and findings to fellow students.

Following the suggestions of McNamee (2007) and Edwards (2005), we developed our sessions as conversations. In oral and written reflective texts, students articulated sociocultural awareness of their upcoming academic journey. Many commented that they would need to go into their new academic environment with an open mind to aspects that would be new to them. Instead of rejecting this information, students felt they would find ways to "find a new sense of self" in the new setting (Norton, 2010). This included taking up the challenges presented to them by having to steer their own course of study as postgraduate students. We were aware that some lecturers in the New Zealand and Australian contexts expect individual students to take a proactive stance and seek out advice to solve problems as they encounter them. In their current pre-departure course, the Lao students needed considerable encouragement even to seek individual help from their own EAP lecturers in the home country. Students were unfamiliar with and surprised by the range of services promoted on the websites of Australian and New Zealand tertiary campuses. Through texts and conversations that raised the students' cultural awareness (Kumaravadivelu, 2003b) about aspects of their new study context, the students felt that they could be proactive in seeking help and joining in university life.

In our sessions we provided opportunities to view resources from the target context so that students could observe how academic activities may be presented in the destination universities. We modelled academic teaching strategies, such as group reading and reporting activities, deconstructing texts in collaboration with the students, as well as identifying and explicating practices that were unfamiliar. As far as possible, texts covered were from a range of target disciplines and varied in degree of formality. We also discussed questions students raised about navigating expectations and relationships within the university, particularly between students and lecturers. This can be a confusing and challenging area for international students as it is easy for there to be "perceptual mismatches" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003b, p. 80), as things may not be as they seem. However, validation of perception is also important, for example when students express reluctance to confidently stand up for themselves, particularly in the presence of lecturers who they might rightly perceive as very powerful. It is important to acknowledge the power that some lecturers assume and recognize that speaking assertively might not sit well with a student's cultural schema. It is helpful to discuss consideration of appropriate timing and/or less direct ways of achieving a goal to equip students with strategies for the new environment. As teachers of EAP and academic readiness, we need to acknowledge the power that lecturers hold, despite the first name address and the apparently informal classroom atmosphere.

The area of student / lecturer relationships was of particular significance for the students, as they were interested to know that they are able to approach lecturers or tutors about assignments, subject content and general issues that affect their study. The students clearly see this as a particular practice that they would need to keep in mind and to work out how they would build up the confidence and skill to negotiate with academic staff. In the academic readiness context, it is almost "know who to know how", to paraphrase Edwards, Lunt and Stamou (2010), in terms of 'reading' and responding to the preferences and expectations of each different lecturer. One student suggested that in coming years the course should include opportunities for students to 'practice what they would say to the lecturers'. This type of feedback coupled with the students' questions provides a significant rupture to the more prevalent monologist model of EAP.

In evaluations, students told us they found the sessions and integration of information about the academic cultures in Australia and NZ useful. The students clearly expressed the idea that they were going to a new academic culture and it was important to prepare themselves and to 'adapt'. A further benefit was gaining insight into the likely expectations of lecturers. The majority of students expressed greater confidence about entering a new academic culture once they had some

understanding of what their experiences might be in the first few classes, the position and expectations of reading in the universities, as well as the different types of writing they would be expected to do.

The responses indicated that the really useful aspects of the pre-departure program were the sessions where the students worked with realia from the university environment including real assignments with academics' comments and grading, as this helped them understand the grading systems and the assessment criteria. This was clearly new information for the students and they felt more prepared, especially since we showed a range of assignments that received different grades and had different styles of feedback and comments. As a result of the sessions, many of the students commented that they would need to go into their new academic environment with an open mind and aware that they would hear and see things that were new to them. Instead of rejecting this information they would work out ways to 'find a new sense of self' in the new university. This included taking up the challenges presented to them of being independent learners. Students commented that in their new study context they would be proactive, seek help and also join in university life.

7. Conclusion

This exploration of an academic preparation program identifies the importance of attending to local particularities and not presenting a 'one size fits all' approach to EAP. The Lao program is highly attentive to the particular needs of the students, building on their academic and work experiences. For the college, the aim of our role as 'visiting experts' was to bring authentic academic voices from the destination universities. In our academic readiness component, we were acutely aware of the diverse nature of the Lao student group alongside the apparent commonality of the students' experiences and their sociocultural context. We worked from relational practice and postmethod pedagogy perspectives, recognizing the importance of sociocultural adjustment, the richness of the students' previous experiences and their agency in determining what they wanted to know. While we knew in advance what the students were hoping to find out, we planned to work collaboratively with them in discussing possible responses. The students immediately engaged by actively participating, as they were already highly attuned to group work and discussion and ready to embark on an experiential journey into their new academic environments. If teachers give students opportunities to contribute to an academic preparation curriculum through strategies such as inviting questions, this may open the door to students becoming more aware of their existing knowledge and experience.

The students' questions provided us with a strong platform to work critically within the dimension of particularity (Kumaravadivelu, 2003b). We were able to open up the teaching space to the students' desire to venture into the uncertainties and ambiguities of an imagined community (Helmer, 2013; Lin, 2012; Benesch, 2001). A relational practice approach (McNamee, 2007) allowed the particular interests of students to shape choices of interaction patterns, pacing and materials. Conversations about their future academic studies and social environments fostered a spirit of inquiry towards resolving collective concerns, and at the same time acknowledged the experiences, skills and knowledge that the Lao students brought. The sharing of prior life and study experiences meant that group discussion developed in an expansive, iterative way (McNamee, 2007; Helmer, 2013). The focus was on supplementing their academic repertoires rather than students viewing themselves in a deficit mode which can occur if the EAP program intentionally or unintentionally conveys the need to replace existing behaviour, knowledge and skills.

Language proficiency will undoubtedly be a critical factor in the success of these students in postgraduate study. It is certainly the gatekeeper, as the level of the students' English language proficiency decides whether the student is offered a scholarship or not. However, its importance in terms of the students' successful sociocultural adjustment is linked to a myriad of other factors, particularly the extent to which students can operationalize their agency in the new academic

context. From a relational practice perspective, we aimed to act as mediators between the students' own academic cultures and the soon-to-be new tertiary cultures. Our aim was that our component would add to their academic repertoires, not replace their existing academic skills and knowledge.

The approach outlined above, which takes into account the particularities of the students' needs and contexts as well as theories built through practice sets out a way for teachers to acknowledge the skills and abilities that students bring to the academic preparation classroom, as well as redressing some of the balance of power within EAP and pre-departure programs.

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