International students' linguistic transitions into disciplinary studies: a rhizomatic perspective

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Abstract

This paper offers a reconceptualisation of international students' transitions into and through UK higher education. We present two case studies of students which explore their transitions in terms of their academic speaking skills from pre-sessional courses into their disciplinary studies. Students describe how the development of their confidence and performance in academic speaking was contingent on a number of factors and micro-moments, and how this progress into and within disciplinary studies often involved regression and discomfort. Nevertheless, they also talked of developing strategies to overcome challenges and the resultant learning. We argue that transitions to disciplinary studies in terms of academic speaking can be more helpfully understood as non-linear, fluid and rhizomatic. This study offers valuable insights for individuals and institutions to move away from a fixed student lifecycle perspective to consider instead how reciprocal, embedded and on-going support for international students may better reflect students' experiences.

Keywords Transitions · Pre-sessional courses · Rhizome · Academic speaking · Confidence

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reconceptualise how we view international postgraduate students' transitions from their pre-sessional English courses to their disciplinary studies in UK higher education. There is considerable literature exploring international students' transitions into Anglophone higher education (Dooey, 2010; McKee, 2012; Menzies & Baron, 2014), highlighting challenges students face and how institutions can better support them in order to mitigate negative experiences (Knight et al., 2015). Much of the work within this area is underpinned by taken-for-granted assumptions of what transition as a concept might mean. In the literature, transition is often framed as a linear, finite, period and connoted with bridging (Green, 2015), integration (McKee, 2012) and 'crossing cultures' (Moore & Popadiuk, 2011). Despite attempts to highlight the individuality

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of learner identity development in transitioning to university (Briggs et al., 2012), the discourse of transition ‘stages’ prevails.

In this paper, we reject a homogeneous perspective of students’ experiences. Instead, we put to work Gravett’s (2019) conceptual frame which recognises the diversity and granularity of student experiences and advocates a shift away from a traditional paradigm of transition. Building on this work, we explore what such a reconceptualization might look like within the context of academic speaking, a fundamental skill for developing disciplinary knowledge (Mah, 2016), demonstrating understanding of the discipline (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014), and developing students’ confidence.

Background

Positioning of international students

International students are often portrayed in the literature as vulnerable and facing great challenges (see summary in Dippold, 2015), such as acculturating to new ways of learning and building relationships with tutors and fellow students (Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2019; Sovic, 2013; Tian & Lowe, 2009). In particular, the literature on international students’ experiences of studying in an Anglophone context highlights the linguistic demands they face, reporting for example that international students’ difficulties with speaking are more severe than problems with writing (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Sherry et al., 2010) and that speaking in class discussions and giving presentations are particularly challenging (Berman & Cheng, 2010; Kettle & Luke, 2013; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009). Similarly, there exists a perceived need for international students to adjust to and fit in with the host community (e.g. Yu & Shen, 2012). These deficit notions of the international student have also led, as Ryan and Viète (2009) show, to the conflation of linguistic ability with academic ability.

In this paper, we draw on the literature which argues for a non-assimilationist perspective and instead demonstrates how an internationalised campus provides opportunities for cross-cultural learning (Tran, 2020; Volet & Ang, 2012), reciprocal adaptation (Volet & Ang, 2012) and individual self-formation (Marginson, 2014). Positioning international students as independent and agentic with diverse experiences is supported by a reconceptualisation of transitions as fluid and individualised.

Transitioning from pre-sessional to disciplinary studies

Studies describing international students’ transitions from pre-sessional into disciplinary studies have generally focused on students’ experiences, how institutions can better support them, and significantly, how students can integrate, or ‘get to grips with’ (McKee, 2012, 31) their new environment. Pre-sessional courses in English, or ‘top-up courses’ (Thorpe et al., 2017) aim to equip students ‘with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts’ (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, 2). The pre-sessional courses are viewed as the first ‘stage’ of studies with the aim of ‘inducting’ and ‘acculturating’ students (Pearson, 2020) into the academic literacy practices of UK HE.

Transition is viewed as a journey from ‘the familiar to the unknown and involves the adoption of new cultural, social and cognitive challenges’ (Prescott & Hellstén, 2005, 76), or as ‘transfer of learning’ from one learning context to another (Green, 2015, 1). Some scholars have contested this notion of this ‘deficit’ and assimilationist approach.

For example, Ploner (2018) critiques the binary view of ‘host’ and ‘guest’ and argues for reciprocal experience and responsibility. Similarly, Dooley (2010) suggests that institutions should recognise the needs of international students reflecting a two-way integration. Despite the welcome critiques of assimilationist approaches, all these studies view transition as a time dependent process, as demonstrated in the use of phrases such as ‘international student lifecycle’, (McKee, 2012) and concluding that students had ‘transitioned well’ (Ploner, 2018, 92). Furthermore, transition has become synonymous with ‘readiness to study’ (Dooley, 2010). These studies arguably fail to recognise the diversity of transition experiences, or to consider the value of conceptualizing transitions as ongoing experiences in HE and beyond. Furthermore, given that speaking skills are key to academic performance and developing disciplinary knowledge (Mah, 2016), it is surprising that a focus on speaking is largely absent from the literature on transition.

A rhizomatic perspective

Much of the work on students’ educational transitions within higher education has been shown to be underpinned by assumptions regarding what transition as a concept might mean’ (Gravett, 2019, 1). To re-examine our assumptions regarding international students’ transitions, in this paper, we adopt Gravett’s framework for reconceptualising the concepts of transition, becoming and change within learning (2019). Within this article, Gravett advocates moving beyond conceptions of homogeneous linear pathways, and advocates educators resist considering transition as a ‘process to be smoothed’, as a gap in students’ learning, or as a process occurring at identifiable stages. Instead, Gravett explores how concepts of the rhizome and becoming can be used to understand the irregularity and fluidity of students’ experiences. Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Gravett engages the concept of the rhizome. A botanical rhizome spreads horizontally in all directions. It ‘has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, 26). The rhizome serves therefore as a metaphor for understanding systems, structures or processes that are non-linear, that are continuously evolving and making new connections. Conceptually, the rhizome can be used to reconsider learning and change.

Gravett also draws upon the concept of becoming. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), ‘a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival origin nor destination’ (341–342). Becomings are fluid, evolving and continuous, indicating the permanent nature of change. This concept therefore offers rich potential for educators to think differently about areas of practice. In this article, we put to work this conceptual framework and are interested, specifically, in exploring how institutional students’ lived realities may not fit neatly into assimilationist narratives of transition. Rather, in reconsidering international students’ transitions as rhizomatic, and as ongoing becomings, we suggest that we can generate useful understandings to help re-orientate the way we support students’ development within higher education.

In this study, we aim to answer the following research question:

- How are transitions from pre-sessional to disciplinary studies experienced by international postgraduate students?

Methodology

Study design

The study reported on in this paper uses a longitudinal case study design. Gillham (2000) argues that case studies have the potential to illuminate individuals and organisations, their changes, directions and achievements. Individual case studies also provide a more nuanced understanding of students' experiences and provide meaningful presentations of individual experiences over time (Tardy, 2005). Given the continued stigmatisation of international students described earlier, we felt that a case study design would allow us to illuminate these issues from an individual perspective.

In this study, the 'cases' examined are individual students, whose transitions into disciplinary study were explored through a series of three interviews at different points in the academic year. The reason for this was to allow time for students to reflect on their experiences (Dooley, 2010) and to explore their experiences of transition throughout the academic year. Whilst this approach will not allow us to generalise our insights, it does allow us to reflect on these individual cases in relation to theoretical frameworks concerning 'transition' and derive implications for policy and pedagogical practice. It also allows us to identify factors influencing students' development which offers scope for further research.

Research methods

Data for the longitudinal case studies were gathered at a higher education institution in the South East of England. Interviews with students who had completed summer pre-sessional courses were conducted in week 1 of the academic year, at the end of semester 1, and at the end of semester 2.

Interviews followed a semi-structured design (see interview schedules in [Appendix 1](#)). In the first interview, questions explored areas such as students' confidence in English language skills and their expectations for the use of spoken academic English as part of their disciplinary studies. In interviews 2 and 3, the question of confidence was re-explored, and students were also encouraged to read a transcript of their previous interview and to report any changes. Students were asked to report on their actual use of academic speaking skills, in classroom activities as well as assessment. Prior to interviews 2 and 3, students were asked to record an academic speaking 'event' (such as a group discussion, or a presentation) and during the interviews they reflected on their performance.

To aid question comprehension and reflection and decrease linguistic and cognitive load (Meyer, 2000), students were sent the interview schedules a few days before each interview. This resulted in significant engagement with the interview process.

Participants

Participants in the longitudinal case studies were recruited from the student cohort who had taken pre-sessional English classes in the summer of 2018. They were invited to the first interview by the course director via the pre-sessional course site. Once the first interview was completed, they were asked whether they would be happy to be contacted to take part in subsequent interviews.

The number of participants taking part in each of the initial interviews decreased as, in line with ethics principles, continued participation was entirely voluntary. Three out of originally eight students took part in all three interviews. In this paper, we present the trajectories of two of these students. These students were selected for the case studies as all interviews were conducted by the same researcher, the first author of this study who was able to develop a very good level of rapport with the students, both of whom were starting a taught postgraduate Masters programme (Table 1).

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the institution in which this study took place. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study via an information sheet sent out by the pre-session course-director via the course site on the virtual learning environment (VLE). The information sheet was then re-sent by the research team each time a re-invitation to the next stage of the study was issued. Consent was obtained via a form signed before the beginning of each interview session. All identifying information relating to the student was redacted before analysis started. To further preserve anonymity, we do not provide degree titles, but refer to students' subject areas in more general terms.

Data analysis

In this study, we adopted an inductive, iterative and thematic approach to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which had the aim to identify key factors in students' transition experiences. The analysis started with a close reading of the raw interview data by the first author with reference to the research question. Following this, further reading for factors was carried out by all authors, albeit with an awareness that the limitation of this study to two cases would not allow us to fully operationalise these factors as themes (Joffe, 2012). Instead, we perceive of the factors identified here as starting points for further study on this subject. At this stage, we also applied Gravett's (2019) key concepts for reconceptualising transition. In particular, we considered how our data reflected learning transitions as rhizomatic, as diverse, and as ongoing becomings. Final tables summarizing key factors in students' transition experiences can be found in Appendix 2, Table 2 (Boonsri) and Table 3 (Ayesha).

Students' case studies here are presented in a chronological fashion as we were keen to emphasise students' 'stories' over time (Tardy, 2005). We have indicated in brackets after each quotation which of the interviews the quote is derived from: just after the pre-session (Int 1), at the end of semester 1 (Int 2), at the end of semester 2 (Int 3).

Findings

In this section, we present key themes in the two students' experiences of transition from pre-session studies to their disciplinary studies.

Table 1 Students

Student	Nationality	Subject area	Pre-session length
Boonsri ^a	Thai	Social Sciences Degree	12 weeks
Ayesha	Saudi	Engineering Degree	5 weeks

Case study 1: strengthening confidence by ‘being understood’ (Boonsri, Thailand)

Boonsri was a Thai national starting an MA in a Social Science Degree. She joined the programme after the 12-week pre-session course. She was a mature student, her previous job being in a international governmental role involving international travel, and use of English as a lingua franca.

Having joined her degree programme as a mature student means that Boonsri already had some years of relevant professional experience, which provided her with an initial confidence boost regarding speaking English (1). However, this confidence was soon all but destroyed when negative tutor feedback on a speaking assessment in the pre-session had a devastating impact on her confidence in her speaking skills before even starting her degree course (2):

(1)

Mostly I will go to like Singapore and other [inaudible]. [...] So I have to use English language. I also have to give presentation about my career. But no one said I'm very poor at speaking. (Int 1)

(2)

Yeah, because before I come here I think my speaking is really well. I speak very well, but after I got out the mark sheet from the tutors from the PS Twelve [12-week pre-session] I just think that ‘Oh, I'm very poor at speaking’, and then when the listening mark came out, in the first time I got eighty percent, maybe my listening improve a lot. (Int 1)

Upon starting her degree course, Boonsri suffered from further blows to her confidence as the composition of her degree course lead to interactions with speakers whom she perceived to have stronger language skills in English. This exacerbated Boonsri's fear of not being good enough in comparison with others and resulted in a fear of not being understood. At this point, Boonsri viewed accuracy in pronunciation as key for being understood (3):

(3)

I worry about the classmates. They are not five point five like the PS12 [12-week pre-session], they got above, six point five, so I think the teacher maybe or my classmates will not understand what I am speaking. So I just think and I'm just quiet. I think I have lost confidence but at the same time, when I want to start to speak out, I think before, yeah, I try to think this beforehand how to pronounce correctly. (Int 1)

In addition to worries about classmates, Boonsri's negative perception and confidence were also heavily undermined by the difference in tutor and peer support between pre-session and degree class. Whilst the pre-session class provided a secure cocoon with high tutor support and classmates were all non-native speakers (4), this sense of security was all but gone in the degree classes (5):

(4)

The tutor also know us and they are always listen carefully so they knew us so that they don't understand us they always understood us. And then my friend, my classmate, ninety nine percent they are Chinese so English language also is not their first language, so I think I am able to talk to them even if they don't understand me. (Int 1)

(5)

Because I think they are good at English already because master's degree of Economy, I didn't see the PS 12 [12-week pre-sessional] in so it means they are good at English. I think I didn't have to speak with them. I just say hello and then actually because now it's [inaudible] I have met them. So I just be quiet [laugh]. (Int 1)

These quotes highlight again the very different educational environments of a preparatory English class in contrast with a disciplinary degree course, resulting in an experience of transition and language development that is by no means linear. They also highlight the heavily co-constructed nature of confidence. The factors influencing this co-construction are, as mentioned in (4) and (5), 'perceived' communities in which interactions are either with speakers perceived to have stronger skills (in the degree class) or other non-native speakers perceived to be on an equal par (in the pre-sessional). In Boonsri's case, this led to her focusing her efforts on passive engagement rather than making her own contributions to classroom interaction (6):

(6)

But about discussion, I think I'm afraid of this now because if I have to discuss with the people who good at English, I think, even I know the academy but I think I cannot explain to them if we have to discuss together. (Int1)

In this statement, the word 'now' suggests that Boonsri explicitly compares her confidence in speaking before and after having been confronted with speakers with stronger skills in English. Also, reflecting again on the tutor feedback in the pre-sessionals, Boonsri explicitly points to this feedback as the cause of her lack of speaking contribution(s) (7):

(7)

I think the comment of the tutor is really nice, it makes me know more myself which way I have to improve it but in the same way I also lost confidence, so I think I don't know how to fit in but now I just feel this because I just start Master degree on Monday, two days ago. So I don't know. I realised, I didn't have to ask the question because I be careful about my speaking. (Int 1)

In the same way in which feedback, before the start and at the very beginning of her degree programme, had a very negative effect on Boonsri, at the end of semester 1, there is evidence that the lack of negative feedback, and thus the feeling of being understood, started having a positive and confidence-boosting effect:

(8)

"I need to speak with my class mates, so that is why and then they didn't tell me that they understand me, so I feel more confident. Maybe they don't understand me but they don't show that, they just try to understand me. (Int 2)

Being understood, or the perception of being understood, appears to be key in Boonsri's further development. She highlights this again at another various other points in the interview, including one occasion in which she felt understood by a professor (9):

(9)

Sometime I also rest my hand in the class [laugh] but I speak really, really low and it's not loud because I'm also not quite sure about my language, my pronouncing but the professor also understood me, so that makes you more confident. (Int 2)

However, Boonsri was still worried about her speaking in relation to interactions with native speakers at this stage, with pronunciation a particular concern. On this occasion, she framed pronunciation in terms of comprehension, expressing her concerns about native speakers' lack of clear pronunciation and enunciation (10):

(10)

Boonsri: Plus when I talk to them I can't understand their language because it's quite different from other.

I: Okay, it's quite different, what do you mean?

Boonsri: It's because I'm talking like I'm here they didn't open the mouth, most of then they didn't open the mouth. (Int 2)

In addition, Boonsri also identifies her lack of knowledge of relevant disciplinary vocabulary as an additional reason undermining her confidence in speaking, and talks about plans for reading more widely to build up this knowledge (11):

(11)

Because I can speak but I could not speak wider vocabulary and some vocabulary I couldn't understand. So, maybe reading book can help me, yes. (Int 2)

By the end of semester 2, there was a marked change in Boonsri. Not only did she report that she was now able to understand others, but she also commented on the fact that she actively engages in interaction rather than focusing on listening and comprehension. These new skills appear to be linked to a deepening knowledge and mastery of disciplinary vocabulary (12):

(12)

Actually, in the class I didn't prepare anything because it just happen, it just happen but I don't know but I think it's different to the previous time that I came here. I think that I can answer them. I don't know, maybe I can understand them and then I also know more about vocabulary and show them. The last time I, some time I understood but I don't know how to reply, yeah. (Int 3)

This illustrates that there is potentially a vicious circle: students need to use academic speaking skills to engage with and develop disciplinary understanding, but a lack of disciplinary terminology limits speaking opportunities and opportunities for engagement. Boonsri's use of the phrase 'It just happen' (12) also suggests that she moved from controlled to automatic processing (Saville-Troike, 2006) in language learning terms, possibly facilitated by the earlier-referenced improved knowledge of disciplinary vocabulary.

In this context, it is perhaps also not surprising that Boonsri's overall emphasis has shifted from a concern about accuracy—in particular in pronunciation—in semester 1 to a concern about intelligibility at the end of semester 2 (13). This was accompanied by growing mastery, and insight into the importance of strategies for negotiation of meaning—such as adapting the pace of talk, and asking comprehension questions—to identify and resolve communicative breakdowns (Ellis, 2003, 346) (14):

(13)

Then I try to speak clearly and slowly (Int 3)

(14)

Boonsri: I think more easy now but also feel really difficult for me, but now I thing I get used and I dare to ask them.

I: So, what sort of things do you ask? Can you repeat that or what do you ask?

Boonsri: I ask them that, 'Do you mean this?' (Int 3)

By the end of semester 2, when the final interview was conducted, Boonsri's overall reported confidence in speaking had noticeably increased. She summarized her experience of the pre-sessional and disciplinary study as follows (15):

(15)

I think that pre-sessional course is really good, just only one thing, one period that we can learn more about English language. Just only that time because we need to go to the class, English class, and learn more about English language but after that we didn't do that [inaudible] we just go to the class and come back. Sometimes we didn't do any [inaudible], we didn't practice or didn't improve, just because of the environment that improve us. (Int 3)

Boonsri's summary depicts her development as ongoing, fluid and contextual. She emphasized not only that the pre-sessional is just one short, limited aspect of the learning experience—'just one thing, one period that we can learn'—but also confirmed that her learning continued through the environment to which she was exposed after the pre-sessional rather than formal classes: 'it's the environment that improve us'. Transition is portrayed not as a process that can be considered complete after the pre-sessional phase, but as an ongoing and evolving process subject to many contextual factors. In Boonsri's case, transition is also interwoven with confidence. The most important defining factors were the negative feedback by the pre-sessional tutor, leading her to initially lose all confidence in speaking, and subsequently the (indirect) positive feedback by peers and disciplinary tutors, which involved simply a perception of being understood. As the academic year went on, learning to successfully negotiate meaning, and extending disciplinary vocabulary were further important factors for developing confidence.

Case study 2: using opportunities for academic speaking to develop skills and confidence (Ayesha, Saudi Arabia)

Ayesha was a mature PhD student from Saudi Arabia, enrolled in an engineering Masters programme. Before the start of her degree programme, she had completed the shortest (5 week) pre-sessional course. At the beginning of her degree programme, she started off with a very positive opinion of her own speaking skills, guided mainly by a subtle awareness of the 'usual' difficulties faced by Saudi students and thus of her own likely strengths and weaknesses (1):

(1)

I don't know, maybe because I have heard that Saudi students are good at speaking more than any skills. I don't know why. Yeah, and the pronunciation is easier for me, different region in the world, pronunciation is easier. I don't know, maybe related to my

mother tongue, the speaking is easier. I found difficulties in writing and listening and speaking is the most strong. (Int 1)

This again shows that confidence in language skills such as speaking is a fluid construct, with temporary feelings influenced by and influencing moment-by-moment experience. In addition, having studied a similar subject (engineering) for her undergraduate degree also supported Ayesha's positive self-perception as she felt familiar with the relevant disciplinary vocabulary (2):

(2)

Yes, I don't have to translate every key word because I already have a background about it. (Int 1)

Whilst Ayesha felt that the pre-sessional course prepared her well for aspects of 'accountable talk' (Wolf et al., 2006), such as the presentation of ideas in a more academically productive way (3), at the beginning of the academic year she was mainly concerned about the accuracy of her contributions (4):

(3)

I didn't know how to lead a similar discussion and this was very helpful for me, how to politely ask, how to politely interrupting and another person, how to politely add a point and this was very helpful and presentation, this is the most important thing that I need during my study here [...]. You know, just to be more precise and deliver that information in short time. (Int 1)

(4)

I don't want to do a mistake. I would feel ashamed. So I used to think a lot about my question, I shall say it in this order, ask it this way, yeah. (Int 1)

Ayesha's concern for accuracy centred upon pronunciation, where she strove for equivalence to native speakers (5):

(5)

It would be a shame if I have the same level, yeah. I am looking forward to improving my speaking in terms of pronunciation, I wanted to have a UK accent. (Int 1)

Ultimately, Ayesha was, at the start of her disciplinary studies, confident about her speaking skills and keen to improve them. However, by the end of semester 1, when the second interview took place, this had changed. Ayesha now reported feeling more confident about writing rather than speaking, a change that appears to be strongly linked to the assessment design of her course (6):

(6)

Because I have a lot of assessment to write about and I build up from what I have learnt from pre-sessional course, so now I am just adding a new technique and a new way of appraising. Each time I have another assessment I find it easier to do it, it's like building up. (Int 2)

Moreover, Ayesha also found that the teaching design of her classes, which was centred around lectures, provided her with very few opportunities to speak, imbuing speaking

with high risk and generating a perception that asking questions in class may impose on lecturers and thus present a threat (7):

(7)

Because the time is two hours for the professor to give us the lectures and I don't want to disturb lecturer and keep asking. It would be annoying. (Int 2)

The only opportunities that Ayesha had for speaking were in lab time, when students were able to ask supervisors questions. Ayesha found this challenging because she feared not being understood, particularly by the native speakers in her course. This led to her remaining largely silent (8).

(8)

Speaking with a native because I am not feeling very confident to speak, I'm afraid they maybe don't understand me. I try to avoid speaking. (Int 2)

In the first semester of her degree studies, Ayesha's experience was thus strongly shaped by the disciplinary context she found herself in. By the end of the semester, Ayesha felt that she was losing her speaking capability and that she has had little opportunity to apply her pre-sessional learning (9):

(9)

I: Is there anything else you would like to say about your academic speaking skills?

Ayesha: No, because no at the moment I can't zero because there is nothing that I have, I haven't used anything that I learnt from pre-sessional course, so I hope next semester I will have them, the skills [laugh]. I don't know how to develop it during my spare time, how I can read or do imaginary conversations. I don't know. (Int 2)

Hence, a lack of opportunity to use spoken English had eroded Ayesha's initial confidence. Differences between the pre-sessional and realities of disciplinary studies are also important here, including differences in how classes were composed. Whereas in the pre-sessional, Ayesha was forced to speak English to other non-native speakers, many of her peers in the degree class now share the same native language, Arabic. It is not surprising that Ayesha felt that she had 'forgotten' how to use spoken English, and that she associated her lack of confidence to a lack of exercise of her speaking muscles which she can only counteract by speaking English with her children (10):

(10)

Speaking, I notice that at the beginning of this semester, so when I start to speak I start mumbling and so, 'Oh my god', and I forget everything, almost, yeah. So I do recover by listening and the speaking at home with my kids with English. I want to have a balance in everything. (Int 3)

In semester 2, the assessment design of some modules finally gave Ayesha a chance to engage in academic speaking through the form of end-of-year presentations. Despite her general lack of confidence, Ayesha felt confident about speaking in these more monologic events as she believed that her preparation for speaking received through the pre-sessional, in this case on technical aspects of presenting, had prepared her well for

these presentations and even lifted her own skills beyond those of classmates who had not taken such a course (11):

(11)

How to introduce yourself, how to move from point to point during the presentation, [inaudible] a style, how to mention the first while you are speaking. Yeah I found myself better than my colleagues or they didn't take this course, even native people, yeah, because they didn't know this trick because it was first time and they like to do poster and I had an experience and I had feedback and I looked at feedback and I avoided stare [inaudible]. I avoided the mistake that I have done before. (Int 3)

This, along with interactions with native speakers as part of the preparation for the presentations in a group setting also allowed Ayesha to develop strategies for negotiation of meaning (11). Combined with a passion for the subject and a willingness to discuss disciplinary issues, Ayesha's concerns shifted towards the effective communication of meaning in a disciplinary context (12):

(11)

Even if they didn't understand, they said, 'What do you mean?', and I explain again and again and with the confidence, yeah, because I have no choice. So yeah, they are patient for me and they used to be understanding of my situation. (Int 3)

(12)

Because we are so excited about something we forget about language and you just speak and it's welcome. (Int 3)

In summary, Ayesha's reported experience, like that of Boonsri, does not portray a straightforward transition journey from pre-sessional classes. She drew on the pre-sessional at key points during the academic year—for example, assessments—while her general lack of confidence in speaking during her disciplinary studies was primarily influenced by the teaching design and assessment design of the disciplinary modules she was enrolled in. Ayesha's confidence in speaking only developed when some modules provided her with opportunities for preparing presentations in a group setting and consequently also allowed her to develop her ability to negotiate meaning. As a result, her personal goals shifted from a focus on accuracy to a concern for communication of meaning. This highlights how curriculum design in different academic disciplines has the potential to influence international postgraduate students' transition experiences, although individuals' experiences will vary.

Discussion

Through case studies, this paper has explored how two postgraduate international students experience their transitions into disciplinary studies in terms of their academic speaking skills. In this section, we explore further some of the factors, or 'transition moments' (Ploner, 2018, 170), that may have influenced these students' transitions. We discuss how transitions might be as rhizomatic reconceptualised in order to reflect a more generative account of students' linguistic development which recognises the non-linear and fluid nature of their experiences, and we consider the critical role that confidence has played in these students' transitions. We close by discussing implications for individuals and institutions.

Student experiences of transitions

As our two case studies suggest, students' experiences are individual, and are constituted by a diversity of 'transition moments'. Confidence in speaking and the development of speaking skills are co-constructed through internal as well as external factors and are subject to change. Our case studies support perspectives of international student experience which align with non-assimilationist perspectives (e.g. Montgomery & Nada, 2019; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005; Ploner, 2018), for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, it is essential to recognise the rich pre-entry experiences which students bring along before starting their degrees, for example Boonsri's experience of using English as a lingua franca in a professional context. And secondly, the pre-sessional itself (and subsequent in-sessional support) singles out international students by implying that they are more disadvantaged than others. Finally, once in the degree programme, discipline-specific teaching and assessment practices have the potential to shape the experiences not only of international students. By acknowledging that all students, whether international or not, are likely to experience transition differently, we have the potential to break through the stigmatisation often experienced by international students and acknowledge the rich experience which they may bring to their disciplines.

The students' experiences discussed above further suggest that the notion of 'transition' itself warrants reinterpretation, owing to its taken-for-granted interpretation as a finite process with a start and end point. Both Boonsri and Ayesha's experiences portray their ongoing becomings (Gravett, 2019): their ongoing, evolving, selves that develop and emerge over time. Our findings therefore resonate with Gravett's (2019) rethinking of transition as a concept; however, our study also builds on this conceptual framework in its surfacing of the interrelationship of confidence and transition, suggesting that confidence too can be understood rhizomatic as fluid, contextual and situated. Our data suggest that students can be understood as always transitioning, their confidence always evolving, and transitions are ongoing—lasting beyond the pre-sessional through both taught semesters of PGT study and beyond.

Transitions are, as we have seen, not linear. Instead, they can be understood as evolving in all directions, with discomfort and fluctuating levels of competence and confidence forming a necessary part of students' learning and development. Students' reflections upon their experiences are shown to be individual. Transitions are shaped by everything students encounter before and during their degree course, they are unique, and they are ongoing.

Implications for educators and institutions

The disconnect between individuals' experience of transition, and the way that transition into disciplinary study is conceptualised, means that current practices may not meet student needs. Whilst we acknowledge that the students in this study grew as a result of their discomfort and disorientation on leaving the protected bubble of the pre-sessional, we would still argue that an embedded discipline-specific language support would more authentically reflect students' experience of transitions and speak to individual needs.

An embedded approach might also be able to focus more specifically on those skills that seem to be most crucial for building and regaining confidence which, based on the analysis of these two case studies, include strategies for negotiating meaning and the mastery of disciplinary vocabulary, countering the narrative frequently followed by international students that accuracy (of pronunciation, grammar) is most important for disciplinary success. In

addition, discipline-specific language support would be able to counteract any omissions in the provision of speaking-focused teaching and assessment practices, as experienced by Ayesha.

In contemporary HE practice, language support in the form of pre-sessional or in-sessional provision remains characterised by a normative approach which favours national varieties of English (Jenkins, 2012; Sifakis, 2019). As the complexities of spoken language are more difficult to grasp and describe this traditionally prioritises writing skills over speaking skills in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching despite the high relevance of speaking for academic achievement (Berman & Cheng, 2010). Secondly, EAP is often perceived to merely ‘enable access to the study content with no further need for language development’ (Bond, 2020, 9), and to enable language remediation when expected standards are not met. It is thus not surprising that, even though some institutions do offer discipline-focused English language support, such support is offered as a ‘top up’ to disciplinary study, with disciplinary teachers holding strong beliefs that their job is teach content, not English (Airey, 2012; Lasagabaster, 2018).

To foster the provision of a more integrative approach, Bond (2020) argues that an increased understanding of university teachers of how language interacts with and underpins the curriculum, and students’ access to it, will allow them ‘to make changes in a way which leads to a fully cohesive, connected understanding of how language works as a *rhizomatic* thread through all teaching practices’ (177, emphasis ours). In addition, embedding academic speaking support into the disciplinary curriculum would ensure that supporting student transition is a ‘distributed responsibility’ (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014) between EAP staff and disciplinary teaching. Moreover, including a focus on academic speaking in the disciplines parallel to writing skills (Hathaway, 2015) will be of benefit to other members of the student cohort who cannot necessarily be assumed to have these skills (Heron & Palfreyman, 2019) and prevent the ‘othering’ of international students as a result of a more inclusive approach.

Finally, this study has shown that student confidence can easily become undermined, but just as easily boosted by a perception of being understood. These experiences can become ‘pivotal moments’ (Dooley, 2010). Peers and educators—both in pre-sessionals and the disciplines—thus need to understand the role their formal and informal feedback may play in students’ development. Developing in all parties’ skills in English as a lingua franca, which includes not only the effective use of strategies for negotiating meaning, but also a move away from a focus on accuracy to one on effectiveness is key to creating a culture of understanding (see Dippold et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This study has explored, using a longitudinal case study design, how international students experience transitioning from pre-sessional English classes into academic disciplines over the course of an academic year. Our findings suggest that transitions may be more usefully conceptualised as individual experiences, as influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, and that the development of confidence and skills is non-linear as a result. There are, of course, limitations to this study. As we drew only on two case studies, the factors we identified to be influencing students’ transition experiences would benefit from further exploration through a larger study.

Nevertheless, this study addresses a gap in the existing literature on academic transitions in an EAP environment in that it takes a longitudinal rather than a ‘snapshot’ approach. As such, it allows us to explore both the micro-moments of students’ learning as well as students’ ongoing becoming and experiences of transitions. Finally, our study also offers

important insight into our participants' evolving confidence, and to the situated, contextual factors that support or inhibit this, as students develop and evolve within higher education.

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00677-9>.

Appendix 1

Interview 1

1. Where are you from? What degree course will you enrol in?
2. Which aspect of English language skill do you feel most/least confident about? Why?
3. In what way did English study in your home country prepare you studies in the UK?
 - When did you have to use spoken academic English?
 - How were you supported in developing the skills for using spoken academic English?
4. How do you expect to have to use spoken English in your degree courses here at [name of university]?
5. How well prepared do you feel for using spoken academic English after your pre-sessional course?
 - Which aspect of English language skill did the course prepare you for most/least effectively?
 - What in particular helped you?
 - Is there anything that might have helped you develop your skills further?
6. What challenges in terms of speaking do you think you might encounter during your studies? Which types of speaking activities are you most looking forward to/least looking forward to?
7. Is there anything else you would like to say about your readiness for speaking during your studies this semester?

Interviews 2 and 3

1. Having studied for almost a full semester/full academic year now, which aspect of English language skill do you feel most/least confident about? Why?
2. Before the interview, you were sent the transcript of your previous interview. Have there been any changes since our last interview in how you think about your spoken academic English skills?
3. When do you use academic speaking skills? Can you give some examples? Are you assessed at all on your speaking skills? Can you describe the assessments?
4. Can you describe a specific speaking activity which you thought was successful? Why was it successful?
5. Can you describe a specific speaking activity which you felt was not successful? Why was it not successful?
6. Let's now move on to talk about the speaking event you have recorded. Is there any specific reason for why you have chosen to record this event?

7. Reflection questions (relating to the speaking event which you have recorded)

- Describe what is happening in this event, from your perspective. Did you feel it is going well, or not? Can you point to specific examples?
- Does everyone contribute equally to the discussion? Why/why not? Can you show me specific examples?
- Are you happy with your OWN interaction in this extract? Why? Is there anything you would like to do differently in terms of your speaking, interaction, participation?

8. What advice would you give to a new student starting in pre-sessional about what academic speaking skills they need to be successful in their studies?

Appendix 2

Table 2 Key factors in Boonsri's transition experiences

Stage	Factor (+) Factor imbuing positive experience or positive impact on developing speaking skills (−) Factor imbuing negative experience of negative impact on developing speaking skills	
Pre-entry to disciplinary study	Professional experience (+)	
	Pre-sessional course	Pre-sessional tutor feedback (−) Sense of security (tutor support, other students) (+) Other non-native speakers (−)
Post-entry to disciplinary study	Composition of the class in the disciplines	Speakers with (perceived) stronger skills (−)
	Personal factors (concerns, goals, awareness of skills)	Fear of not being understood (−)
		Perception of being understood (+)
		Mastery of strategies for negotiation of meaning (+)
		Mastery of disciplinary vocabulary (+)

Table 3 Key factors in Ayesha's transition experiences

Stage	Factor (+) Factor imbuing positive experience or positive impact on developing speaking skills (−) Factor imbuing negative experience of negative impact on developing speaking skills	
Pre-entry to disciplinary study	Experience in degree subject (+)	
	Mastery of disciplinary vocabulary (+)	
Post-entry to disciplinary study	Composition of the class in the disciplines	Native speakers of English (−) Native speakers of own language (−)
	Curriculum design	Teaching design (−/+)
		Assessment design (−/+)
	Personal factors (concerns, goals, awareness of skills)	Focus on accuracy (−)
		Mastery of strategies for negotiation of meaning (+)
		Mastery of disciplinary vocabulary (+)
		Speaking skills/strategies learned in the pre-sessional (+)

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