ELICOS students' out-of-class language learning experiences: An emerging research agenda

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Introduction

This Brief Report presents some preliminary findings from two exploratory studies investigating the expectations that ELICOS students have about opportunities to use English in Australia in real-life out-of-class settings, and what the reality of out-of-class life is actually like for them.

Background

Recent research suggests that language use outside the classroom is vital for students who want to reach high levels of proficiency and that a balance between classroom and out-of-class learning is important (Lai, 2015). This is all the more so for students of English in Australia, where there is often a strong expectation that students will be 'immersed' in English language environments outside the classroom (Kashiwa & Benson, 2017). Indeed, this is stressed in the marketing promises of many Australian English language colleges. A review of some of the major college websites reveals the use of attractive images of groups of young people happily engaged in indoor and outdoor social activities. Accompanying claims set up expectations of easy access to language environments outside the classroom. For example:

> *'life beyond the classroom is always comfortable and exciting';*

> *'Australians are very friendly and welcoming. In shops, restaurants and on the street you'll be surprised at how easy-going people are. They're always happy to talk so it's a great place to improve your English.';*

> *'If you're going to be living here for a few months (or years) get to know – and speak with – the natives!'*

As ELICOS teachers know, however, out-of-class learning can be problematic for

international students, who often experience difficulty in accessing opportunities to use English. A NEAS survey of ELICOS students, for example, showed that while students were highly satisfied with classroom teaching, they were less satisfied with the support they received for their use of English beyond the classroom (NEAS, 2015). This is by no means a uniquely Australian problem. A recently published international survey of 5,000 students conducted by International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF, 2017) showed that international students were highly satisfied with their schools and teaching, but their experiences of making friends and practising the target language often failed to meet their expectations. This was also linked to concerns about accommodation and the nationality mix on their courses. 'If the research intimated any opportunities for possible improvement', the report stated, 'these were largely tied to out-of-class activities' (ICEF, 2017, p. 16).

Why do international language students find it difficult to access the opportunities for English language use and learning that study in Australia appears to offer? What can schools and teachers do to help improve students' out-of-class language experiences? To dig deeper into these questions, our current research program is investigating whether the key to unlocking the problem of international students' access to English may be found in their daily lives and language learning environments.

From the ecological perspective that guides this research, language learning emerges from interaction between a learner (that is, a person with the intention to learn) and language resources in the environment (van Lier, 2004). This applies to learning in classroom environments (Tudor, 2003), but all the more so to language learning beyond the classroom, where learners must seek out and make use of language resources to support their learning (Kashiwa & Benson, 2017). In a study conducted in Australia and New Zealand, Marginson (2014) described international students as self-directed agents who are engaged in processes of 'self-formation', albeit under social conditions they do not control. The aim of our research is to arrive at a better understanding of ELICOS students' language learning environments, how these environments shape their opportunities to learn, and how students, in turn, shape their learning environments.

Methodology

In our initial study, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 students from a large, private ELICOS college in Sydney's CBD. Questions were developed and pilot-tested to achieve an interview protocol that maximised opportunities for the participants to reflect on their language learning environments. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant, herself an international student, who could empathise with the participants. Our second study involved 11 students, six from a

university language centre and five from a private provider in Sydney. These students used the Diaro app (http://diaroapp.com) on their mobile devices to track how they used languages in their daily lives over a one-week period. The data from the app were then used to promote discussion about the language participants used in different settings. Data analysis was meaning-focused and centred on cases and themes. Several layers of coding were carried out to drill down into the interviews and to achieve some consensus on our interpretations and development of themes.

Emerging themes

Six major areas have emerged from the two studies that will set the agenda for further research.

1. **Settings.** Settings are the building blocks of learning environments. ELICOS students mainly divide their time among three settings: college, home and work (most of the students we interviewed attended college for 4–5 hours a day and have part-time jobs). Most use public transport to travel between these settings and visit supermarkets to shop for food. In addition, they go out with friends, go shopping in the CBD, and less frequently, take excursions to tourist sites. College, home and work are, thus, the main settings in which students encounter English language resources.

2. **Location of settings.** The locations of college, home and work can be mapped as triangles of different shapes and sizes, superimposed on different areas of the map of the city. These triangles are important for two reasons. First, journeys between home, college and work map out the rhythm of students' daily routines. Second, ELICOS students tend to live, study and work alongside other international students and recent migrants. While we might encourage students to 'get out and meet the local English speakers', we also need to take account of the ways in which their daily routines are embedded in the multilingual geography of the city. From the perspective of an ELICOS student's daily life, a city such as Sydney may be more 'multilingual' than 'English-speaking.'

3. **Social networks.** The settings in which students spend their time largely determine who they meet and the language resources they encounter. The students that we interviewed spend most of their time with other international students at home, in college, and at work. Encounters with local speakers of English are relatively infrequent, and often most frequent at college. College can also be an important setting for informal interaction with English speaking teachers, if there are opportunities for socialising in and out of the classroom. Interactions with local speakers outside college tend to be transactional and brief. In many cases, extensive use of English occurs among international student friends who do not share a first language.

4. **Information technology.** Students use information technology in four contexts: for English language study and homework; for entertainment and relaxation;

to maintain contact with family and friends overseas; and to navigate the city. Both English and home languages are used according to the context. Information technology use overlays the settings of college, home and work, and intersects with them at various points.

5. **Finance, time and purpose** are three interlocking factors that constrain ELICOS students' language learning environments. Students work because they need to earn money to live and to pay college fees. Finance also conditions where and with whom students live. Most students comment that Sydney is an expensive city, and cost also constrains opportunities to engage in leisure activities. ELICOS students also lead busy lives, leaving little quality time for informal learning activities – partly because of the need to work, partly because of pressure of homework. International students who share a house may talk to each other infrequently because they spend much of their time studying in their rooms. The purpose for living and studying in Australia is also an important factor as many students prioritise formal study over informal language use due to the pressure of obtaining English language qualifications.

6. **Agency.** Students exercise agency within the constraints of time, finance and purpose in two ways. First, in the language practices that they employ in order to exploit environmental resources. For example, a student may take the initiative to create situations for interaction with housemates (e.g., by suggesting that they cook together), rather than tolerate a situation where they rarely talk to each other. Students may vary in their ability to create such opportunities for learning. Second, some students take steps to change the settings of their daily lives, for example, by moving house or changing job. One of our interviewees had taken the step of moving from Brisbane, where she found it difficult to break out of a group of co-national friends, to Sydney, where she would be more isolated from people who shared her first language.

Implications for research and for ELICOS practice

Further research with a larger cohort of English language learners is needed to explore these emerging themes and their relationship with the quality of English language interactions that learners experience outside the classroom. A city's multilingual geography has emerged as an important factor in out-of-class language learning; therefore, we plan to include other multilingual cities, both in Australia and other parts of the world, in our research agenda. The nature and role of students' social networks and how they support or hinder their language learning also deserves further attention, as does the impact the use of a particular device or app on the quality of interactions in English or other languages. Since the need for students to work to support their lives in Sydney emerged as an important theme, it would be useful to explore how far out-of-class interactions are constrained by financial considerations, the impact of their working life on the free time available to them

and on how they construe their purposes for learning English. Finally, since students are in a process of self-formation, our preliminary findings suggest that the role of agency, how it may vary across individuals and impact their out-of-class learning opportunities would be a particularly fruitful area to pursue.

In the meantime, the main questions for ELICOS practitioners are whether they should be talking more with their students about their out-of-class lives, and what opportunities present themselves for supporting their English language proficiency. We suggest that talking about the six areas outlined above might be a useful starting point for all stakeholders to support language learning and students' overall ELICOS experience. Practitioners might also start a dialogue with college management about representing the out-of-class situation more realistically in marketing collateral.

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