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**Agency as discursive practice: From 'nobody' to 'somebody' as an  
international student in Australia<sup>1</sup>**

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# **Agency as discursive practice: From ‘nobody’ to ‘somebody’ as an international student in Australia<sup>1</sup>**

## **ABSTRACT**

As more and more students pursue an international education, there is a need to investigate how these students deal with the demands of their study programs in the new academic context. This paper introduces one such student, a Thai English teacher named Woody<sup>2</sup>, and looks at the ways that he engaged with a Master of Education program in Australia. I analyse the transcripts of two interviews that I conducted with Woody in his first semester using Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The analysis is interested in the social and institutional demands that Woody identified as impacting on the course, and the strategic action that he took in response to them. I argue that by undertaking this action, Woody was ‘working’ as an agent of his own change. The analysis highlights a proactive and strategic engagement on Woody’s part, a point that has been missed in much of the literature on the international student experience in Australia.

## INTRODUCTION

International students now comprise 20% of the total tertiary student body in Australia (AVCC, 2003). They are the most visible face of globalised higher education and its movement of people around world in search of the opportunities offered by an international, often western, education. The most obvious and widely publicised result is the increased ethnic and linguistic diversity among student populations on western campuses (Luke, 2001; Singh & Doherty, 2004). To date, much of the Australian research on the academic performance of international students has focused on the differences between the students' educational and cultural backgrounds and the academic requirements of Australian university programs. The focus of this literature has been primarily the problems that these differences present for the university. Various positions have been adopted by researchers working in this field – for some, the 'Asian'<sup>3</sup> student is particularly at odds with Australian academic expectations because of markedly different educational and cultural experiences at home (e.g. Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Burns, 1991; Nixon, 1993; Samuelowicz, 1987). For others, difference is approached from a position of cultural diversity, that irrespective of background, most students ultimately develop the skills needed for the Australian context (e.g. Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Renshaw & Volet, 1995; Volet, Renshaw, & Tietzel, 1994).

Increasingly, researchers are looking beyond these positions and engaging with notions of discourse and power in order to capture the international/ESL student experience (Bullen & Kenway, 2003; Nichols, 2003; Ninnes, 1999). Ninnes (1999) looks at power and the techniques by which universities draw international students into their dominant regime of practices. He argues that little is still known about the ways in which international students actually change and adapt to the Australian academic conditions. In this discussion, I follow Ninnes's concern and use the notion of agency to look at the ways in which a Thai student, Woody, engages with the

practices of a Master of Education course. Difference models have been inadequate in explaining the complexity of the international student's experience. I am interested in how Woody, in the new context, engages with a multiplicity of discourses and produces new, and sometimes contradictory, ways of making sense of himself and his social world. It is hoped that an analysis of agency can 'unpack' some of the complexity in Woody's process of adaptation and at the same time shift the focus from the strategic concerns of the university to those of the international student.

In the next section I define agency and its relation to discourse and power. One of the key factors implicated in Woody's 'program' of agentive action was English and his concerns about his non-native English. For the purposes of this paper, I define English as Woody's second language (ESL/L2), as opposed to his first language (L1) and mother tongue, and refer to Woody as an ESL speaker.<sup>4</sup>

## **DEFINING AGENCY AS DISCURSIVE PRACTICE**

My definition of agency draws on Davies's (1990) notions of agency as a form of discursive practice and Butler's (1997) work around agency and power. An assumption that I bring to the discussion is that discourse as social practice is reflexive - it contributes to the constitution of the social and is simultaneously constituted by the social. The reflexivity of practice means that "all practices have an irreducible discursive aspect, not only in the sense that all practices involve use of language to some degree but also in the sense that discursive constructions of practices are themselves parts of practice" (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 26) . This means that the ways that people represent their social world and what they do, constitute in part that social world and their activity in it. As Fairclough (1992) notes, discourse contributes to the production, transformation and reproduction of objects, subjects and social life. Another point about the reflexivity of social practices is that it links discourse and practice to social struggle. Discursive

representations are always situated; they are located within particular social and institutional constraints which in practice become normal and unmarked. It is in this normalisation process that they are able to do their ideological work of producing and reproducing inequitable power relations. The aim of CDA is to uncover and ultimately destabilise these often opaque relations of power (Fairclough, 2001a).

Davies (1990) also draws on the constitutive nature of discourse, particularly in relation to the social subject, to develop her notion of agency as discursive practice. She argues that agency is made possible in two ways. The first possibility lies in the recognition that some discursive practices constitute some speakers as agents. In being so constituted, these speakers are provided with opportunities to make choices. The second is in the subject recognising the constitutive nature of discursive practices, including their textual elements, and the social positions that they impose. This recognition opens up certain possibilities for resisting and changing unacceptable practices – for refusing particular discourses and one’s positioning in them, for choosing between discourses, and for modifying practices by bringing to bear another set of practices (Davies, 1990). Agency becomes “a matter of position or location within or in relation to particular discourses” (1990, p. 346). The conditions for agency depend upon whether choice is possible and whether among the available discursive practices, there is the possibility for the subject to position themselves as agent, that is, as someone who chooses and carries through a particular line of action. Agency is enacted through certain discursive, personal and social resources which are contingent upon access. The agentive subject must have access to recognised/recognisable discursive practices, to alternative positionings, and to ‘interactive others’ (Davies, 1990). ‘Interactive others’ are the other members of the group, along with the appropriate context and discourse, who legitimate the positioning of the person as agent.

While Davies doesn't engage explicitly with power in this work on agency<sup>5</sup>, her point that agency depends upon whether there is the potential within the constraints of practices for the subject to resist and act agentively recalls Foucault's (1982) work on power relations and freedom. For him, power relations other than total domination always co-exist with what he calls freedom; freedom is the precondition for the exercise of power. This is because "freedom must exist for power to be exerted" in the first place (1982, p. 221). Butler's (1997) work on agency and power elaborates on Foucault's conceptualisation of power and is useful here.

She argues that power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, its formation, and second, as what the subject takes up and reiterates in its 'own' acting. Within the exercise of power, the subject *of* power, that is the subject that both 'belongs to' a particular power regime and 'wields' power, can transcend the conditions of its own emergence: "it eclipses power with power ... the subject emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as *the condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency" (Butler, 1997, pp. 14-15, emphases in original). In this way, agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled and adopts its own purpose, which may diverge from the purposes intended by the power regime. The interesting point made by Butler is not so much how discourses subject people to particular constructions but rather how these positions can be actively taken up and used to advantage. Agency is the process of exploiting power "to generate possibilities ... that move beyond what powerful others could have imagined" (Honan & Davies in Honan, Knobel, Baker, & Davies, 2000, p. 22).

Agency as discursive practice then is the process of discursively producing the self, where the self is the site of multiple subjectivities<sup>6</sup>. Agentive action may involve people being positioned in a certain way within a given discourse but working consciously and strategically to resist and

reconstruct a powerful rather than marginalised position for themselves (Norton Peirce, 1995). In this way agency exploits the power potential in a situation to enact one's purpose. This study is about the ways in which Woody constructed himself as agentive social subject both in and through the discourses of the interviews.

## **CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

In this section I present CDA with a particular focus on the process of analysis. I draw primarily on Fairclough's (2001b) analytical framework because of its explicit focus on power but also overlay some considerations from his later model (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Fairclough, 2003), particularly the way he contextualises analysis. Critical discourse analysis takes as its starting point a discourse-related problem embedded in some part of social life. The first step in the analysis identifies the problem and the ways in which it is part of a particular social practice or practices (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). This stage of the analysis also identifies the ways in which the problem is networked into the social order operating within the wider institutional and social context. The next stage involves the analysis of the discourse. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) identify the process of discourse analysis as being oriented simultaneously to *structure* and *interaction* – to the social resource (orders of discourse) which enables and constrains interaction, and to the way that the resource is interactively worked through the interdiscursive elements of genres, discourse and styles and their linguistic realisations. The *structural* interest is in how a particular discourse is networked within an order of discourse and how the discourse draws from the potential of that network in terms of the genres, discourses (plural form) and styles, or 'voices' that it articulates together in a text. The assumption here is that the discourse is located within a particular social practice which is itself networked within the constraints and controls of a wider social order. The particular 'mixing' of genres, discourses and styles, or the interdiscursive relations which constitute the discourse, is determined by these controls and constraints. From the *interaction* perspective, the analysis is interested in the ways

that the discourse actually manifests in the text of the interaction, that is in the linguistic and other semiotic<sup>7</sup> realisation of the genres, discourses and styles (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

This twin orientation to analysis is predicated on a core assumption in CDA that discourse, as one element of social practice, is in a dialectical relationship with other elements (Fairclough, 2000, 2003). This means that the linguistic and the social ‘internalise’ each other without being reduced to the other. In this way, changes in the social can constitute and be constituted by shifts in the linguistic and vice versa. This dialectic provides a useful foundation for analysis. In this discussion, shifting patterns in Woody’s choices of linguistic elements could be indications of evolving patterns of practice.

The analytical approach involves a three-stage process which commits the analyst to “analysing the relationship between texts, processes, and their social conditions, both the immediate conditions of the situational context and the more remote conditions of institutional and social structures” (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 21). The stages are: *description*, *interpretation* and *explanation*. *Description* is particularly interested in the ways that social constraints, that is contents (or ways of representing the world), relations (ways of acting and relating) and subjects (ways of identifying oneself and taking up particular subject positions) are articulated in the text (Fairclough, 2001b). *Interpretation* examines how the social factors within the interaction impact on the production and interpretation of the text, and *explanation* involves a process of translation, where the analyst re-describes the interactional choices as they manifest in the text in terms of a particular orientation towards power (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Janks (1997) maintains that Fairclough’s approach is useful because it provides multiple points of entry into the analysis. It is unimportant what stage of analysis the researcher begins with, as long as all the stages are included and that they are shown to be mutually explanatory (Janks, 1997). She prefers

to begin with a description of the text, which is also the point where I start my analysis.

Beforehand, however, I need to present ‘the problem’, that is the nature of my interviews with Woody, and the context in which they were situated.

## **CONTEXTUALISING THE INTERVIEWS**

### ***The interviews***

The interviews with Woody were part of a larger study I conducted in 2003 examining the ways that a group of international students engaged with the discursive practices of a course titled Debates in Educational Leadership. They were part of a suite of data gathering methods including videoed class observations, fieldnotes and a collection of written materials. I conducted the interviews in Woody’s first semester - the first, after he had been immersed in the course for just one month and the second, at the end of the semester. The focus was his interpretation of his engagement with the course and his ‘practices of subjectivity’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000) as he negotiated the new academic demands.

Before coming to Australia, Woody worked as an English communication skills teacher at a sports institute in northern Thailand. He was 33 years old and completing the degree on an AusAid scholarship. Previously he had completed a Bachelor of Education (English) in Thailand. As part of his application for the Master’s program, he was required to demonstrate a certain level of English proficiency – in the case of his university, a score of 6.5 or above on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS)<sup>8</sup>. He scored 7, which rated his ability as ‘good’: “Has operational command, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations” (IELTS, 2003, p. 4). During his first semester, Woody shared a house with seven other students from China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Singapore and Australia. The lingua franca of the house was English. He anglicised his name and preferred it to his Thai name. In the Leadership course, Woody rarely contributed to class discussion, although he did

participate several times on the margins of group discussions. He failed the first assignment but passed on resubmission. He also failed the second but rather than resubmit, he chose to repeat the entire course the following year, so that he could “learn more” (personal communication: July 2003).

### ***The wider social context***

Woody’s time in Australia coincided with increased momentum among universities to ‘internationalise’, which in substance often meant greater effort in the recruitment of international students. In 2002, the top ten source countries for Australian universities were Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, China, Indonesia and India, with Thailand ranked 8<sup>th</sup> (AVCC, 2003, p. 5). A number of recurring concerns appear to preoccupy academics in response to the increased numbers of overseas students, particularly non-native English speaking ‘Asian’ students, in lectures and tutorials. These include reproductive and surface-level approaches to learning, passivity in group discussions and inability to think critically and speculatively (e.g. Auditor-General, 2002; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987). The assumption is that the approaches to study that arise out of the students’ cultural, social, political, economic and educational backgrounds, while valid at home, are inappropriate in the Australian context (Ninnes, 1999). Kubota (2001) makes the point that such assumptions arise out of discourses which idealise native, in her case U.S., speakers and serve to make ‘other’ students from ‘Asian’ backgrounds.

Recently, more studies in Australia and overseas have investigated how international/ESL students actually engage with the dominant academic practices of their university programs (Benesch, 1999; Leki, 2001; Ninnes, 1999). Ninnes (1999) found mostly acquiescence but some resistance among Indian students enrolled in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program at the University of Western Sydney. In the U.S. context, Benesch (1999) found that the



(Interview 1: April 2003)

He constructs the process diachronically; it is inextricably linked to time. At the beginning of his time in Australia, it was difficult for him to get involved in class activity (turn 1). (Hereafter turns are identified simply by numbers.) Woody refers to himself as nobody because he fails to participate. The paralinguistic features suggest that this turn was difficult for Woody – rising intonation, increased loudness and staccato delivery marked by a large number of fillers, false starts and repetition. A transitivity analysis on his statement *I am NOBODY* shows a relational process in which a state of affairs is described with one participant and an attribution (Goatly, 2000). ‘Nobody’ is the attribute that Woody ascribes himself. The attribution that he is ‘no person’ is linked to his lack of participation in class. The verbs, or process types, in the clauses reaffirm Woody’s recognition of the need to express his ideas in class and also indicate an orientation in the interviews towards Woody’s state of being in his new academic surroundings. They are overwhelmingly existential (*was, am, I’m better*), mental (*don’t even know, think*) and verbal (*can’t even express, express*).

But there is a radical change in turn 4 when Woody invokes time and indicates a substantive shift in positioning - *but right now I think I’m better* (4). By using the time phrase *right now*, he is indicating that his improved situation is linked to time – at this moment in time, he is *better*. The attribution in this case is *better*, which Woody seems to be using adjectivally to indicate an improvement on what was before, rather than adverbially to mean a full recovery. He makes the point that he still has problems. His use of *but* is significant; it sets up a contrastive link with the time in the past when he was ‘not better’ – *for the first time, it was very difficult ...*(1). The cohesive link between the two turns is time:

1. ...for the first time ...very difficult
4. ... but right now ...I’m better ...

Given that Woody's *right now* is just one month into his study program, it is likely that *the first time* refers to his situation on immediate entry. The dramatic repositioning has been achieved in just a month. It is positive and linked to an increased knowledge of what is required in class - *I'm know more what they want to express* (4).

***Subject: Goals and purposes***

On a number of occasions in the two interviews, Woody describes his purposes and goals for his master's program and more specifically, the Educational Leadership course. He maintains that the course will inform his teaching as well as the other job that he holds at the sports institute:

... I know that ah how can I apply this knowledge to ah my field, how to apply to my class and my lessons, to my experience ah because I still have a special job in my college. It's about how to ah (.) how to ah (.) my (.) my work deal with ah how to allocate resources in the school so I think it will be helpful for me to know about that. (Interview 1: April 2003)

He indicates indirectly that he has goals for his time in Australia but expects that their accomplishment will be difficult:

Yeah, because I always think that ah everything is not ah just like a smooth road so that everything has problems itself. So how we can pass this point in order to just like complete our goal and achieve our goals. (Interview 1: April 2003)

In line with Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999) advice to attend to the silences in the text, it is interesting to note that Woody does not contemplate defeat. The silent assumption is that despite the problems, he will achieve his goals. In the second interview, after the course had finished and he had returned from a trip to Sydney and Melbourne, Woody explains that the focus of his time in Australia extends beyond study. Below he is responding to a request to choose the word which best sums up his life in Australia.

... I think it's 'changeable' because I don't focus not only on my studies but also focus on the life in Australia. Once in my life I have time to stay abroad. So I want to know how the life is of that country and how the educational system goes on in that country. There are two things that I focus on that. I think this is area for me because I'm not sure that I have time to go abroad in the future so this chance is the only chance in my life. So I think I have to learn more. (Interview 2: July 2003)

*Subject: Understanding discourses*

In the extract below, Woody indicates an understanding of the constitutive power of discourses.

He feels a responsibility towards Thailand, to ensure its presence within class discussions.

However, he is aware of the inherent perils in attempting such a task because the image he presents will influence the impressions that people retain of Thailand.

5. Woody ...it's very hard for Thai people to criticise or participate more in class because of the personality but if I stay here longer, so I think there's no problem about that.
6. MK So what would change? Will you start becoming a little bit Australian? What will happen? (Laughter)
7. Woody It was because everybody in class participates but if we don't participate in class assumption we are nobody. Nobody knows about just ask me. Nobody knows about my country, my background and something. I think it's good to show off...to show what happened with me or with my friends in Australia. I took a course ...last semester and the curriculum here than in my country is different. Nobody knows how different if I don't explain my own context. So I feel I have to.
8. MK And did you?
9. Woody So I did. I did.
- .....
10. Woody Because it's not everyone goes to Thailand. The thing I told them it's like in their mind, affect their attitudes.
11. MK Do you think very carefully about what you say then?
12. Woody Yeah. Yeah. Because it's not always bad, not always good.  
(Interview 2: July 2003)

*Subject: Taking control*

The series of turns below show the hybridity of this interview as a genre and the ways in which multiple subjectivities impact on the interaction. They also indicate how ways of acting and relating are coopted into the processes of constructing a particular discursive self. In turn 13, I abandon the role of interviewer and take up the position of academic counsellor, marked most obviously by my switch to a declarative sentence rather than a question. The sentence is structured as a suggestion through the use of the modal verb *can* but functions as a statement of support, a type of counselling discourse reassuring Woody that it is fine if he wants to wait before embarking on *trying to say things*. Woody, however, refuses this advice; he doesn't want to wait (14). Here and elsewhere in the interviews, the limited time of the master's program contributes to his sense of urgency.

13. MK So, maybe um next semester, you'll have new subjects then you can start trying or even after Easter start trying to say things. It's very difficult what you're doing.

14. Woody Yeah. Because (.) I I don't want to wait until next semester. But this semester I think I try, I try very much and [I
15. MK [What things do you try?
16. Woody so I tried to tell myself that ah so I should show my idea because nobody knows about me ah because nobody knows about ah so it's like ah the situation with Thailand. I want to let them know but ah (2.0) first thing I try to understand myself how to express my idea, how to interrupt in class, how to cope with the problem, how to deal with problems, how to make me ah confident. So don't worry about grammar or everything. I've think ah and sometimes, it takes time for me to formulate my ideas because other students ( ) and I try to concentrate and try to closer to their idea. Sometimes, it's a bit, a little bit takes time for me.  
(Interview 1: April 2003)

In turn 16, he indicates that he recognises the specific discursive practices necessary for successful study in Australia. The manifesto-like zeal of the list derives from the paratactic relations between the clauses; they are set up to indicate that they are grammatically equal (Fairclough, 2003), and therefore, of equal importance to Woody.

### *Relations: The lecturer*

Woody recognises his lecturer's attempts to persuade him to participate in class and views them favourably:

I think (the lecturer) conducts the classes very good because ah I found that she try to motivate students to participate in lessons just like ah she names somebody student to say something. ...she makes me ah try to understand and make me try to say ... But I don't think right or wrong is the issue because just only want to know the idea about that. So it's very good. (Interview 1: April 2003)

He highlights her interventionist approach - *she makes me* - and finds this helpful. He believes that in encouraging him to participate, she is not looking to judge but rather, is interested in his ideas and that he express them publicly to the class. The lecturer, for her part, regarded her classroom as a pedagogical space in which international students were a resource, able to bring a diversity of 'readings' to course content (Interview 1: 17.4.03).

### **Interpretation**

This stage foregrounds the interviews as social practice and examines how social factors within the interaction impacted on the ways that Woody and I produced and interpreted the texts. It is interested in Woody's discursive practice and whether it can be regarded as agentive.

Woody's shifting constructions of himself from 'nobody' to being 'better' point to an understanding that being a person who didn't contribute ideas to the class constituted him as 'no person' and positioned him as marginal. This discursive construction of himself derives from his 'reading' of the constraints operating in the Educational Leadership course on what was acceptable practice. It demonstrates an understanding on his part that discourse is constitutive and has social effects; he recognised the nature of his own practice and 'read' the consequences. This 'reading' indicates that he was aware of the social power invested in participatory practices and also the power potential available in particular ways of self-representing. However a month after this initial difficulty, he identifies himself as 'better'. A positive transition had been enacted and his social positioning restored. He attributes this shift to increased knowledge of the discursive practices that were required in the class. Access to knowledge then was one of the key resources which Woody identifies as assisting his transition.

Woody's situation recalls Miller's (1999) work on audibility in which she argues that becoming a legitimate member and participant in an institution requires becoming 'audible' to mainstream groups. For ESL students, this involves being accepted and acknowledged as a speaker of English with acknowledgment influencing the extent to which a student can participate in institutional practices and the way she/he self-represents. Social rewards are available for complying with institutional expectations. Woody recognised that how he was heard, or not heard, constituted a particular undesirable representation of himself within the class.

Woody's action to construct an alternative social position for himself indicates his refusal of the 'nobody' discourse. To enact the alternative social positioning, he draws on resources that closely resemble those proposed by Davies. He demonstrates a desire to make the change and is obviously convinced that he can bring about this change. At no time does he contemplate that it is

beyond him. He refers to a developing knowledge of the practices and ways of being that constitute his desired position in the Leadership course, among them that he can participate successfully, that he can represent Thailand favourably, and that he is regarded as a legitimate member of the group. He recognises the constraints and impediments to change, principally limited time and his English, but accepts nonetheless that he is responsible for his own transition, and what's more, can make it happen.

Woody's program of agentive action contributes to and constitutes his construction of an evolving subjectivity - a fledgling 'Australian' academic 'self' with its attendant social positioning. The shift in social positions represents a positive realignment for Woody. Together these practices construct a changing and evolving subjectivity – a developing 'Australian' academic subjectivity – with what is for Woody, a positive social repositioning. The reflexivity of discourse means that changing patterns in the discourse indicate changing patterns of practice, although at this early stage of his study, Woody's change is more about recognition than actual live actions.

Woody's desire to master the practices of the Leadership course points to a strategic recognition on his part of what is necessary for success in an Australian postgraduate course. His engagement is best seen not as a desire for success on Australian terms, but rather on his terms as a way of ensuring good returns on his investment (Norton Peirce, 1995). Investment refers to the understanding on the part of 'investors' that through their investment, they will acquire a greater range of symbolic (e.g. language, education and friendship) and material resources. These resources will in turn increase the value of their social and cultural capital. Woody indicates that his investment in acquiring an Australian, English language, postgraduate qualification will inform and improve his practice of English language teaching and resource management in Thailand. He implies that he would like to apply some of the lecturer's teaching methods in his

English classes. Woody also brings his limited Thai resources to bear on his goals for the course. He doesn't think he will be able to travel overseas again and considers the time in Australia to be his last chance to learn first-hand other ways life. His time then is an investment in acquiring greater cultural and social understandings: "It's my point of view as I see it everything broader" (Interview 2: July 2003). And possibly greater understandings of diversity:

I see something different. I can't see different things in my own country and here. And I know why. I try to understand. I don't judge my country is better than here or here is better than mine. But there is something different. (Interview 2: July 2003)

Woody demonstrates that while he is embedded in an Australian context with a desire to acquire the dominant academic practices, he does not do so at the expense of his Thai-ness. His commitment to his Thai-ness is demonstrated in an awareness, again, of the power of discursive constructions and that the way he represents Thailand will be "in (people's) minds, affect their attitudes" (10). In terms of Davies's (1990) model of agency, Woody is someone who can recognise and willingly engage with multiple ways of being. In discursively constituting himself as someone able to take up and enact multiple meanings, he is acting agentively.

While the Leadership course was a repository of social and institutional constraints, it also offered possibilities for agency. Through his lecturer, Woody had direct access to an 'interactive other' who could facilitate his legitimacy as a member of the group. When his lecturer called on him to contribute in discussions, she opened up a space for him to become 'audible'. Her sanctioning of his responses contributed to his positioning as a legitimate member of the group.

### ***Explanation***

In this stage of analysis I look at how power relations at the situational, institutional and societal levels help shape the discourse in the interactions (Fairclough, 2001b). In terms of the power

relations at a situational level, a number of features distinguished the interviews. First, they were conducted in English which was my first language but Woody's L2, which immediately presented a potential power asymmetry and the potential for miscommunication and interaction breakdown<sup>9</sup>. Both Woody and I deployed strategies to maintain the exchange of information and keep the interview afloat. As well I was aware of the importance of keeping Woody's 'face' (Brown & Levinson, 1978) when he had trouble expressing particular ideas in English. This is not to say that the power relations in the interview uniformly positioned me as dominant and Woody as subordinate; rather, they were unstable and constantly shifting. While I generally initiated questions and topic shifts, Woody was also able to carve out a space for himself. He agreed with certain propositions that I offered, and rejected and contradicted others.

The institutional conditions visible in Woody's talk indicate a privileging of class participation. Seminar-style delivery is commonplace in postgraduate Education courses where smaller class sizes promote an emphasis on the presentation and discussion of ideas rather than the traditional monological style of content delivery. For Woody, like many international ESL students (Jones, 1999), the emphasis on 'speaking up' in his second language has effectively silenced him and led to a sense of being marginalised within the class. His program of agentive action is directed at overturning this position and is being assisted by his lecturer's awareness of the need to take affirmative action in the case of ESL students struggling to find a 'voice'.

Woody's Education Leadership course is networked into the wider social and institutional practices of the university, which in turn are part of the social order of globalised higher education. Social practices constituting this organisation of higher education in 'New Times' include greater 'flows' of international students to Australian universities, university teaching being conducted to increasingly diverse student groups, and escalating measures around financial accountability and quality assurance. These practices both constitute and are constituted by a

variety of discourses which are now mixing together and articulating the ‘internationalised’ university. Ascendant are neo-liberal discourses which are prominent in restructuring relations between economic and other domains and are contributing to initiatives in universities directed at corporatisation and commodification. The rescaling imperatives in these discourses have also influenced the transformation of universities from national to international institutions, although some would argue that their goals remain focused on upholding the national interest (Sidhu, 2002).

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have examined the ways in which a Thai postgraduate student, Woody, engaged in discursively producing ‘the self’ in and through two interviews. My analysis was interested in how Woody’s discursive practice constituted a program of agentive action through which he created a new social positioning for himself within an Educational Leadership course. In so doing he demonstrated a developing ‘Australian’ academic subjectivity, brought into being to assist his successful navigation of the new academic context. The analysis challenges the images of international ESL students ‘at sea’ in the western university. Woody was aware of his situation and actively engaged in transforming it. It is hoped that this discussion can contribute to the growing conversation about international students’ engagement with the pedagogical and knowledge practices of the western universities at which they are enrolled. Part of my motivation for this paper was the belief that universities need to look to their practice. Woody’s ‘work’ as an agent was facilitated by his lecturer’s preparedness to be an ‘interactive other’, thus providing him with access to the practices of the course and a sense of legitimacy through her own pedagogical practice. This finding has implications for university teaching and courses aimed at improving teaching in Higher Education. The discussion has demonstrated that such initiatives can benefit international students and would be no doubt helpful for local students as well.

## NOTES

1. My title was suggested by the theme and title of Bronwyn Davies's *Agency as a form of discursive practice: A classroom scene observed* (1990). A version of this paper appeared in Kettle (2004a).
2. This is Woody's real name. He wanted this name and not a pseudonym to be used in my research reports.
3. It is important to acknowledge the contested nature of homogenising terms such as 'Asian'. Ang (2000) maintains that predominant definition of Asianness in Australia still involves lumping all of Asia together as a homogeneous monolithic entity. I use the term 'Asian' in single quotation marks to indicate that it remains a contested term.
4. For more on the politics of English and English language terminology, see (Jenkins, 2003; Kachru, 1992).
5. Davies draws on Butler in later work on agency (Honan et al., 2000).
6. *Subjectivity* here refers to the subject's idea of who they are, "their particular way of making sense of themselves and of the social world" (Davies, 1990, p. 345) with emphasis on the interiority of the self (McKay & Wong, 1996).
7. I acknowledge that linguistic features are just one form of semiotic practice. However, this discussion is mainly concerned with linguistic features and so for the sake of brevity, I use the term 'linguistic'.
8. The university that Woody enrolled at was one of Australia's large, established universities. A group of eight of these universities have formed a strategic alliance called The Group of 8 (Go8). The universities in this group are: The University of New South Wales, The University of Sydney, Monash University, The University of Melbourne, The University of Queensland, The University of Western Australia, Adelaide University and The Australian National University.
9. For more on the negotiation of the interview in terms of meaning and language, see Kettle (2004b)

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