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Agency and Accountability in the Academic Reading of International Graduate Students Using English as an Additional Language

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ABSTRACT

This grounded theory study explores the academic English reading practices of six English-as-an-additional-language students from China and Japan in a graduate course in their first semester at a U.S. university. Academic reading is an understudied yet foundational literacy practice for graduate students. Data include classroom observations of the graduate course during one semester, individual interviews with six students and the course instructor, and the collection of documents. Drawing on the analytic lenses of agency and accountability, the findings show that while the requirements established by the instructor and syllabus explicitly or implicitly held students accountable for the work, students also responded strategically to the course's accountability structure. They agentively made choices about how to engage with the readings in terms of the purposes for which they read and how much time they spent on the readings.

Keywords: academic reading, English as an additional language, graduate students, literacy practices

International graduate students around the world continue to travel to enroll in higher education institutions in English-speaking countries in high numbers. In 2019, over 5 million students were internationally mobile (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019b). In the United States, which has the largest overseas study market of more than 1 million international students, 34% are

graduate students (IIE, 2019a). These students choose universities in English-speaking countries for several reasons, including the global status of the English language, the quality of education provided, the highly resourced research infrastructures available, and, for some students, the availability of funding (Kim, 2011). Most international students come from countries where English is an additional language (IIE, 2019b), which shapes their academic experiences, including academic communication practices (i.e., reading, writing, and speaking).

Learning to succeed in English-speaking universities can be complex for many international students, not only because they have to use English as an additional language (EAL) but also because they often need to learn and use new communication practices of a new academic context (Seloni, 2012) and of their specific discipline. They may also be asked to do larger quantities of reading and writing than in their undergraduate programs (Singh, 2015). Considerable research has explored how international graduate students learn the writing practices of their disciplines in Anglophone contexts, focusing on how students write genres such as academic essays (e.g., Bauer & Picciotto, 2013), articles for publication (e.g., Tardy, 2005), and dissertations (e.g., Chou, 2011). To date, more research has focused on writing in an additional language rather than on reading or other communication practices. This study contributes to the underresearched area examining EAL graduate students' academic reading at Anglophone universities. Because reading is a foundation for success across all disciplines and across academic levels (Grabe & Zhang, 2013), there is a need for it to be more visible in both research and discussions of pedagogical practice.

This article is part of a larger study that explores how international EAL graduate students engage with disciplinary readings in their graduate coursework at a U.S. university. In this article, I present findings that answer the following research questions:

1. How do EAL graduate students' academic reading practices inform their contributions to classroom discussions?
2. How do EAL graduate students' academic reading practices inform their contributions to written assignments?

Drawing on the analytic lenses of agency and accountability (Archer, 2003; Bourdieu, 1990), my findings show that the graduate course held students accountable for the requirements as established by the syllabus and mediated by the instructor. While establishing varying degrees of accountability for the assigned readings, the structure also enabled students' agency. Before doing specific readings, the students typically set a goal either to read in order to participate in classroom discussions (hereafter "reading to speak") or to write course assignments ("reading to write"). Over time, the students became less concerned about completing reading-to-speak assignments, instead valuing reading to write more highly because they developed a stronger sense or "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 108) of what was required as opposed to recommended by the syllabus and instructor. By identifying their goals for

reading and adapting their reading practices, the students made agentic choices within the course's accountability structure.

In what follows, I review the literature about the academic reading practices of international graduate students in Anglophone and non-Anglophone universities. Then I discuss the theoretical framework and methodological approach adopted in this study. The findings are then presented and supported by illustrative examples from observational field notes, interviews, and documents. Finally, limitations and implications arising from the findings are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic reading encompasses a set of complex, interrelated components related to the expectations and practices of a particular context, including the quantity of reading and academic vocabulary. Indeed, many graduate programs require large quantities of reading. In the results of an online survey of 744 doctoral students in clinical psychology across the United States, an average of 330 pages per week was assigned (McMinn et al., 2009). These assigned readings aim to help students achieve other academic purposes such as participating in class discussions (Lee, 2015) and writing in academic genres (Bauer & Picciotto, 2013). However, many EAL graduate students across disciplines find it difficult to find enough time to complete the significant amounts of reading required (e.g., Kuzborska, 2015; Singh, 2015). The four graduate student participants (three from China and one from Taiwan) in Kuzborska (2015), majoring in management, international education, marketing, and mass communication, reported that they had no time to do a lot of required reading at a British university. Similarly, Singh's (2015) qualitative data through 17 focus groups of graduate students at a Malaysian university with three to seven participants in each group showed that lack of time is a major issue graduate EAL students face due to lots of readings and lack of discipline-specific vocabulary. Indeed, disciplines use technical vocabulary that EAL graduate students may need to learn (Hyland & Tse, 2007) and use in writing and speaking (Altalouli, 2020). Most students in these studies depend on re-reading, translating, and guessing word meaning from context as strategies to approach unknown words at the beginning of their graduate programs (Iwai, 2008; Singh, 2015).

To deal with large volumes of reading, many undergraduate students tend to avoid doing or completing the reading assignments, a phenomenon that many studies of undergraduate students have called "noncompliance" (e.g., Brost & Bradley, 2006; Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Clump et al., 2004; Hoeft, 2012). In Clump et al.'s (2004) study, about 27.5% of undergraduates (n = 423) across disciplines at a U.S. university completed their assigned reading to prepare for classroom discussion, while almost 70% completed the reading before a test. That is, without a reason other than preparation for class, most students would not complete the reading. In these studies, the students reported "lack of time" as a reason for reading noncompliance. Few studies of graduate students have found similar results (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Clump & Doll, 2007). Clump and Doll (2007) found that only 54% of 193 masters-level students in six forensic

psychology courses at a U.S. university completed their assigned reading before class. Researchers conclude that such reading noncompliance negatively affects students' achievement (e.g., Brost & Bradley, 2006) and classroom participation (Hoeft, 2012), however. As a result, these researchers have called teaching staff to use strategies for getting students to read what's assigned, such as taking quizzes, presenting in class, and writing reading journals (Starcher & Proffitt, 2011).

Thus, the above reviewed research shows that reading non-compliance is a problem and that college professors must act to hold students more accountable for doing the assigned readings. However, research seems to ignore students' agency in academic reading. Through the lenses of agency and accountability, I seek to deepen the theoretical understanding of student reading choices in terms of the academic purposes for which they read.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the notions of agency and accountability to address the question of international students' reading practices as they begin graduate study in the United States. Agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act in particular contexts (e.g., Archer, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984). Archer (2003) argued that students can evaluate situations and take strategic actions to support their meaning making within course structures. For example, course instructors may ask students to write a paper of a specific length on a topic of students' interest, citing a certain number sources and using a particular format and style. Nonetheless, the students may decide to use more than eight sources or to overrun a page limit. Such an assignment in the field of higher education institutions is an example of the practices and policies (i.e., rules) that define relations between the agents or players in the field (Bourdieu, 1984). In other words, fields are spaces of power that influence the practices and position of agents, who are engaged in struggle to gain power and position (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, power exists in social spaces and influences the relationships between individuals and institutions and their practices in given spaces (Clayton, 1998); thus, the practices of a social group cannot be explained as only the collective of individual behaviors but also in relation to objective structures within society (Jenkins, 1992).

Bourdieu (1984) used the metaphor of a game to understand agents' practices and positions. Players act according to their understanding of the rules of the game and their "feel for the game," which in turn supports their positions and their gains (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 108). That is, players' practices are not constrained to applying the rules of the game. Instead, their sense of the game can open up possibilities for action. Thus, even though students' decisions may be bounded by institutional policies and course accountability structures, students can decide what works for them. In this study, I construe graduate students, the course instructor, and institutional administrators and policymakers as the players engaged in a higher education institution whose activities comprise the game. The institution has its own rules, nested within the larger "game" of U.S. and global higher education. Therefore, structure and agency are interconnected in terms of

the study participants' social practices in a particular field that can help in understanding how they act.

METHOD

To answer my research questions about the role that academic reading played in spoken and written activities in a graduate course, I gathered qualitative data in a graduate-level course during one semester. Data included classroom observations, interviews, and document collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

To analyze the data, I used constructivist grounded theory (CGT; Charmaz, 2014), which enables researchers to synthesize, analyze, and build theory from qualitative data. Grounded theory studies generally focus on social actions and seek to explain how and why people act in certain ways (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 2001). CGT acknowledges that the researcher brings underlying assumptions that can be framed ontologically and epistemologically. My understanding of reading as a socially situated practice led me to choose CGT as a research methodology. As a doctoral student using EAL at a U.S. university, and a writing center tutor, I realized that academic reading is purposive and that reading practices change across contexts: from one course to another, one discipline to another, one institution to another, and one culture to another.

Research Context and Site

The study was conducted in Fall 2018 at a research university in the United States. At the time of the study, the university enrolled about 2,000 graduate students. I selected the first semester of a master's level course on theories of second language learning. The course is required for some programs, particularly those preparing teachers of English and other languages. It met once a week for 2 hr and 45 min, over a 14-week semester. The course reading requirements included the textbook Understanding Second Language Acquisition written by Ortega (2009) as well as 29 journal articles (including literature reviews and empirical studies) with an average of three readings per week assigned. The average length of each reading was 15 pages. The course aimed to develop students' understanding of issues influencing second-language acquisition and topics in language teaching, and to consider these topics for use in their future classrooms.

Participants

Following the approval of the University's Research Subjects Review Board, including the instructor's agreement to participate in the study, I invited the students in the course to participate. The course had 19 students, five domestic and 14 international students (10 new and four recurrent). Among the 14 international students, 12 were from China, one was from Japan, and one was from Turkey. Ultimately all 19 students consented to participate in the study, and

I started to observe the class and take notes. I invited six international students to be the focal student participants (hereafter "focal students").

Thus, the analyses in this paper relate to the instructor and the six focal students. The instructor, Sandra (pseudonym), was an advanced doctoral student from South Korea when data were collected. Sandra had completed her undergraduate degree in English literature in South Korea and earned her master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from an American graduate school. She had taught the course two times previously. All of the focal students had completed their undergraduate studies in different home universities (see Table 1) and had no previous experience of studying or living abroad.

Table 1: Focal Student Profiles

Student (pseudonym)	Country	Undergraduate major	Age
Carol	China	Translation	23
Kate	China	Broadcasting	23
Mai	China	Marketing	23
Coco	China	English literature	22
Han	China	Economics	22
Sally[a]	Japan	English literature	26

[a] Sally had also earned a master's degree in English literature.

Data Collection and Analysis

Sources of data included classroom observations, interviews with the focal students and the course instructor, and the collection of documents. I engaged in participant observation of each class meeting and made field notes of my observations (Emerson et al., 2011). Field notes included documentation of informal conversations with the focal students and records of the course activities. In addition, I conducted two semistructured interviews lasting 60–70 min with each focal student and the instructor, in the middle and end of the semester. Each interview was audiorecorded and transcribed. Also, I collected the written assignments produced by all focal students for the course, the syllabus, and the assigned readings. These documents contributed information to the rich picture of the social, cultural, and political context of the course that I constructed and developed to understand students' various reading practices (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Several steps were taken to analyze data using CGT, which allows researchers to develop a general explanation (theory) built on their views, feelings, and ideologies and is shaped by the views and experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2014). I engaged in the process of coding the interview transcripts and field notes with pen and paper (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Initial codes included examples such as "time," "quantity of reading," "lack of content knowledge," "the syllabus," and "deadlines." I synthesized these codes as analytic categories of "reading challenges," "course requirements," and "purpose for

reading." Next, I compared these codes and categories to those used for other data sources to determine if the emerging categories were linked to others or were discrete. I wrote analytic memos reflecting on the emerging codes and categories (Saldaña, 2013), then I identified the most significant and/or frequent codes to sift through the data (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, I identified the themes of how students engaged in reading practices to meet the course accountability structure, while exerting their personal power (agency) by setting goals for reading (reading to write and reading to speak).

I added credibility to the study by using multiple data sources from the students and their instructor, as well as course documents (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I also achieved confirmability, defined as a degree of neutrality of the researcher (Schwandt et al., 2007) by involving a group of colleagues to code parts of the data. I then compared their codes with my own coding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite confronting a large quantity of reading in their first semester in graduate school in the United States, the focal students responded strategically to the course's accountability structure. Specifically, they set various purposes for the reading assignments once they understood the patterns and requirements of the course and how the instructor mediated them. Before doing specific readings, for example, the focal students typically set a goal either to read to participate in classroom discussions (what I called reading to speak) or to write course assignments (reading to write). In this article, I discuss the findings related to reading to students' speaking practices.

While the students began the semester anxious to comply with the requirements outlined on the syllabus and explained by the instructor in the first class meeting, over the semester, they became less concerned about completing reading-to-speak assignments, instead valuing reading to write more highly. This shift illustrates how they developed a stronger sense or "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 108) of what was required as opposed to recommended by the syllabus and instructor. By identifying their goals for reading and adapting their reading practices, students made agentic choices within the accountability structure of the course.

To substantiate this argument, I first describe the accountability structure of the course as embodied in the syllabus and explained by Sandra in the first class. Analyzing the syllabus as a course document, I show how the accountability structure provided or enabled students' agency in relation to their reading practices. Then I explore how students exercised their agency.

The Course Accountability Structure: Institutional Power

The course accountability structure was codified in the expectations and practices explained in the syllabus but was put into practice by the instructor. Indeed, the institutional accountability structure empowered Sandra to mediate the requirements of the course, thus influencing students' particular actions and

practices. In this section, I explore how Sandra mediated the course accountability structure by presenting the syllabus as a type of contract that documented the expectations for students' work. Yet Sandra's presentation of the syllabus and how she held students accountable also enabled students to exert agency.

Syllabus Requirements

The syllabus represented a statement of student accountability by delineating the responsibilities of students in attendance, completion of assignments, academic honesty, and other requirements. Requirements for students included preparing and participating in classes, reading an average of three texts weekly, and leading a class discussion of one assigned reading. Table 2 maps out the percentage value of each of the assignments.

While some assignments rested on the assumption of student reading (participation, the literature review), others were explicit about the expectations for reading. For example, in the syllabus, the reading journal assignment instructs students to write a:

> Brief (1 double-spaced page) commentary about the readings for five classes, submitted via Blackboard (BB). Please **do *not* merely summarize the readings**; use this journal as a critical synthesis task— what issues, topics, questions arise? You can use the journal to relate issues in the readings to other things you have read, your own experiences and views. (emphasis in original)

The reading journal assignment offered students several choices for readings and topics. In addition, the syllabus allowed students to choose which ideas or themes to discuss from among 11 weeks of the course in their five journal entries. In these ways the syllabus, although an accountability document, also enabled student agency.

Table 2: Course Requirements and Assignment Weighting

Assignment	Grade percentage
Class attendance, preparation, and participation	15
Reading journals	10
Leading discussion of one reading	20
Interview paper	20
Literature review with these interim assignments	35

Table 2 shows the varying accountability for reading to write and reading to speak. The assignment weighting for the reading journal, interview paper, and the literature review amounted to 65% of the total points available. Thus, reading to write was weighted considerably more than reading to speak.

In effect, the course assignments as outlined on the syllabus provided students with both constraints and possibilities for how to engage with reading. Here, students' reading practices were conditioned by the syllabus, a contract (Singham, 2005) that documents course policies and practices and holds students responsible

for them (Thompson, 2007). As the syllabus was presented to the students by the instructor, next, I discuss the instructor's role in mediating the syllabus.

The Role of the Instructor in Mediating Course Requirements

The instructor played a significant role in mediating the syllabus by drawing on her authoritative role to offer student agentive possibilities. Sandra's own experiences with English academic reading informed her instructional practices. While she was not the ultimate authority on the choice and quantity of the weekly readings assigned on the syllabus, Sandra exercised personal power early in explaining the course requirements while she presented the syllabus and later in holding students accountable for the work. In the first class, Sandra explained the course rules, assignments, and grading scheme while students read the syllabus in hard copy or on screen: "I am strict with deadlines. However, I believe in the power of productive procrastination. So if you need extension, please email me" (Field notes, September 4, 2018).

Here Sandra's emphasis on deadlines exemplifies the structural limitations of courses in higher education (due dates), yet her flexibility in offering the possibility of an extension serves to enable students' agency. That is, the instructor played a role in both limiting and increasing students' agency, as I discuss below.

Next, Sandra explained the course description and objectives, then on a PowerPoint slide presented the major assignments shown in Table 2. In subsequent slides, she presented each assignment with details including its point value. She supplemented the information on each assignment described in the syllabus. For example, she previewed that in the second class she would model the classroom discussion. This presentation of the syllabus established Sandra's authority as the instructor who enforced the power of the syllabus yet mediated it with her own practices.

Instructors often face a tension between communicating the syllabus and its accountability requirements and creating a supportive learning environment (Thompson, 2007). In this case, Sandra also offered students advice on how to succeed in the course. After her descriptions of the assignments and overall course requirements, Sandra presented two slides entitled "academic writing" and "academic reading." Four bullet points were included on the academic writing slide: "Fear not," "We will do this together," "Do your best with in-class activities," and "You can revise your interview paper and final research paper (one time)." While presenting this slide, Sandra previewed how she would support students in meeting the course requirements; for example, in following the format of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) or writing specific assignments:

> Many of you may not be familiar with APA format, how to write a literature review, right, what is an annotated bibliography. That's fine. You have no reason to fear because we will do everything together. Each class, I will spare about 15 to 20 minutes on mini sessions, and if you actively participate in those mini sessions, you'll be ok. We have a

librarian coming to help you find sources. Also, try to use writing support. [The school] has a fantastic writing support center. (Field notes, September 4, 2018)

This extract shows Sandra's strategy of "softening the blow" (Thompson, 2007, p. 61), which can be used by instructors to balance the tension between establishing authority and demonstrating care. Thompson argued that a common softening the blow strategy is to provide information beyond the syllabus and address students' fears. In this course, Sandra also softened the blow by inviting a librarian to the class and a writing consultant to support student research and writing. In those classes, the guests provided additional options for students to find sources and write their literature review papers, thus creating opportunities for student agency.

Also in the first class, Sandra, as an international student herself, explicitly discussed her own experiences with academic reading. The academic reading slide included two bullet points: "Never read word by word" and "Try to get a big picture." While presenting the slide, Sandra stated:

One suggestion or recommendation I received and found helpful in my first semester is, try to spend 30 [minutes] to an hour on each reading. I used skimming and scanning. It takes time to get this kind of reading. But, technically, I do not want you to spend too much time on each reading. Try to see the big picture of what each reading tries to talk about. (Field notes, September 4, 2018)

This explicit sharing of the instructor's perspectives and advice on academic reading may not be typical. However, in an interview discussion about her own experiences as a student, Sandra saw talking about academic reading as useful:

We have about an average of three readings each week. Each is about 40 pages long. It is a lot of reading, and it's not just about someone's anecdote or life experience, it's not a novel, each paper has really heavy information about different theories, right. These theories are not easy to understand, so I don't want [students] to spend too much time on them because they may not be able to understand them. (Interview, December 5, 2018)

Sandra's concern for students' understanding of the readings also informed how she mediated the syllabus. At the end of each class, she previewed the next week's assigned readings, which she reported hoping would entice the students into engaging with them:

So I rather want them to come to my class getting gist of each article because … I hope the readings work like a movie teaser or trailers. I give them very short surface level of preview of what's out there, they watch the preview and they get to choose what movie they actually want to watch from beginning to end. (Interview, December 5, 2018)

In addition to offering choices, as discussed, here Sandra provided strategies for students to engage with the readings and made the workload more manageable. Overall, the syllabus, the instructor's presentation, and the instructor's experiences about reading created possibilities for the students to enact agency while being held responsible.

Students' Agency in Reading: Exercising Personal Power

Strategically, the focal students set their own goals for reading, intentionally making their own choices. Once they understood the patterns of the course, they brought different purposes to the reading assignments. Before doing the readings, the focal students typically set a goal, either to read to speak in classroom discussions or to read to write.

All of the focal students realized the role of reading at the beginning of the semester and characterized it as being a requirement of graduate school. As Mai, a marketing major, noted: "It's … an assignment because professor asks us to read before class. There's a grade for it [reading], so we have to read before [class] to participate in the discussions" (Interview, September 17, 2018).

This extract demonstrates academic reading as a practice embedded in relations of power. Specifically, Mai's phrase "have to read" suggests that reading before class is a requirement of a graduate course imposed on students, leaving students with little choice but to read. However, Mai's mention of the purpose of reading, to "participate in the discussions," exemplifies her understanding of the value of reading before class. As a result, she chose to do the reading before class. In fact, at the early stages of the semester, all of the focal students completed the assigned readings before class, even though the amount of reading was a large concern for them.

While the participants intentionally set the goal of reading to prepare for classroom discussions, they became less concerned about reading to speak over the semester. The variation in how much reading they did and how much time they spent on reading during the semester resulted from three major reasons: (a) students' increased knowledge about the content, (b) students' greater attention to written assignments, and (c) the patterns of classroom activities. Here, I explore how these three reasons interacted with students' agency.

In the first four classes of the semester, most of the focal students did all of the assigned readings every week. They reported spending an average of 4 hours on one assigned reading at the beginning of the semester, which dropped to about 2 hours per week for the rest of the semester. In terms of building content knowledge, Carol, an English translation major, explained:

> I had [a] knowledge gap in the beginning, so I needed to do all the readings. I used to spend a lot time to understand a lot of concepts. … But later in the semester I spent less and less time on reading for [the course] because I see the same concepts over and over again. ... So, I don't spend the same time to understand these concepts again. … My reading speed got faster. (Interview, December 1, 2018)

In this extract, Carol associated how much reading she did and how much time she spent on reading to speak with her increased knowledge of the content. Carol's ability to integrate disciplinary information over the semester enabled her to reduce her reading time. Like Carol, Kate's choices about the time she spent on reading depended on her familiarity with the area of second-language acquisition, which developed as the semester progressed. Carol and Kate's accounts suggest that the depth and breadth of knowledge students can develop may increase their agency in a given context.

However, their decisions about reducing reading time were partly conditioned by the course accountability structure. The course readings were connected to one another; these connections represent repeated concepts and ideas discussed in different readings. Thus, the assigned readings helped students to encounter concepts multiple times so that they did not have to spend the same amount of time as when they first came across the concepts. That is, students' agency was enabled by both the course structure and students' awareness of the consequences of their practices that they reflected on.

Like reading to speak, reading to write was a purpose that all of the participants set before doing the assigned readings. However, it was not an equal practice. As mentioned, in the syllabus, the grade weighting for reading-to-write assignments is 65% of the total. The course accountability structure seemed to account for this disposition. Therefore, the focal students tended to value reading to write more than reading to speak and thus spent more time on reading to write. As Sally, an English literature major, reported toward the end of the semester:

> I cannot spend a lot time to read [the assigned readings] before class. …
> I have to spend more time on [preparing] the annotated bibliography and
> final paper. … Because of these assignments, I do not spent time on the
> readings like before. (Interview, December 1, 2018)

Sally's decisions about how much time to spend on reading shifted because of the demands of other assignments she deemed more important. Sally determined the need to shift her reading focus and time from the assigned readings on the syllabus to her independent reading gathered for her literature review to achieve a specific goal for reading. Unlike Mai's words "have to," which echo the authoritative power of the instructor as discussed above, Sally's words "have to" index her agentive choice about time spent on specific reading goals, even though her actions were influenced by the grading system.

Similarly, other focal students believed more time should be spent on reading to write. Like Sally, as the semester progressed, they all reduced the time spent on reading to speak in favor of doing readings to write. Mai, a marketing major, pointed out:

> Why to spend more time to read before class? I just read quickly to get
> the big picture. … I don't need to read everything to help me speak in
> class. I just need to use my time focusing on reading for the most
> important paper [the final]. (Interview, November 27, 2018)

By "focusing on reading," Mai refers to reading the sources she found for the final literature review. At the beginning of the semester, students focused on reading to speak not only to learn the content but also because the only other assignments were writing journal entries about the same readings from the syllabus. By the fourth class meeting, however, students started to search for literature on their topic of interest for the final paper, and had to submit their topic on BlackBoard after class. After the fourth class, the focal students' time spent on reading to speak started to decline. Thus, reducing their time on the assigned readings became a manifestation of students' exercise of agency.

Moreover, the focal students' observations of the patterns of classroom activities influenced the quantity of reading and the time they spent on reading to speak. The focal students identified three major activities in the class: (a) small group discussions, (b) "discussion workshops" (in the instructor's words), and (c) mini-workshop sessions. After participating in these class activities for a few weeks, students chose not to read as much before coming to class as they did at the beginning of the semester.

In fact, the discussion workshops allowed students to do a quick reading of the assigned texts while in class and to learn from one another. In my observations of the class meetings, Sandra offered six discussion workshops, as she explained:

> I divide the students into small groups of two to four students; each group is assigned a prompt or a theme from the assigned readings. After each group discusses the theme and writes some notes about it, one student is the presenter staying in his or her group station and the others are listeners of other presenters in different workshop stations. The listeners are encouraged to ask questions. After a specific time, the listeners keep rotating until they have been to all workshop stations. After the listeners go back to their own stations, the presenter and listeners change roles. By the end of the discussion workshop, every student has been introduced to all the themes chosen by the instructor in a particular class. (Interview, December 5, 2018)

To participate in this activity, most focal students believed they did not have to read everything or spend a lot of time reading deeply because they were able to do the reading in class to respond to prompts given by the instructor. They felt they learned more about the assigned readings by listening to one another. Coco, an English literature major, reported:

> I don't read [now] like before, no need to do all of the reading and spend too much time reading because in the class we never talked about everything. … In the discussions, we learned from everyone. You know, in our classes in [the course] we discuss each reading in small groups, so I do not worry like before about reading everything. (Interview, November 27, 2018)

Here, Coco became aware of the patterns of discussions facilitated by the instructor and sometimes by students leading the class explorations of a reading. These activities reduced the focal students' concerns about completing the

assigned readings and understanding the writing assignments. Moreover, in small group work, students relied on one another to understand the readings.

These shifts suggest that the focal students made agentive choices about the depth of their engagement with the assigned readings. Indeed, most of the focal students remembered the instructor's advice about academic reading. For example, Sally reported:

> We always discuss some of the readings in class. So if I don't read [closely], I do not think it is a big issue. … The teacher told us we should get the big picture. Maybe if I can read the main concepts, it is enough for me when I listen in the class. (Interview, September 19, 2018)

Sally's words "the teacher told us" suggest the influence of the instructor on participants' practices. Here, the instructor's early emphasis on getting "the big picture" through skimming and scanning encouraged participants to believe the effectiveness of these practices.

Overall, the focal students' growing content knowledge, their attentiveness to the need to complete other assignments, their experiences with classroom patterns, and their memory of the instructor's explicit comments about academic reading influenced their agentic choices about how to engage with the readings in terms of the purposes for which they read and how much time they spent on the readings.

CONCLUSION

Agency as a complex concept involves not only students' capacity to make choices constrained by the social structural conditions (e.g., Archer, 2003) but also their choices as translated into practices and their understanding that these practices can be consequential. The focal students' reading practices yielded success for them in the graduate course, as they all passed with grades of A, substantiating the role of student agency in reading and learning. To exert agency, the students recognized the rules of the game (e.g., assignment page limits, meeting deadlines, class participation practices) as mediated by the instructor; they engaged in individual purposive practices and ultimately achieved their goals. Moreover, their degree of agency varied over time. Toward the beginning of the semester, the focal students demonstrated low levels of agency in the context of the course requirements as they were still making sense of the game. Over the semester, however, they displayed high levels of agency as they became less concerned about completing the reading and decided to spend decreasing amounts of time on reading to speak.

In contrast to the discourse of compliance in student reading (e.g., Burchfield & Sappington, 2000; Hoeft, 2012), in this study the focal students' decision about doing the reading was conditioned by the course structure as well as their own goals. Previous research has viewed students not completing the reading as a dilemma for faculty, who, it is proposed, need to think of and apply strategies to increase student compliance with course requirements (Hoeft, 2012). The assumption in this discourse is that students must complete all requirements of the

syllabus and the instructor in order to be successful. In this study, however, the instructor's role in mediating the course structure and requirements included giving advice about managing the academic reading. Her mediation was one of the ways that students were able to make choices that supported their learning and their success as indicated by course grades. The notion of compliance in previous research signals a type of pressure on students that can override their ability to choose what makes sense to them—and suggests that they are incapable of making their own decisions. In this study, when students did not complete the reading intended to support the speaking activities, it did not affect their classroom participation. Interestingly, in previous research (e.g., Burchfield & Sappington, 2000) the purpose of reading in the courses studied was not specified. Here, the purposes of reading played an important role in how students approached the readings and how much time they spent on them.

Indeed, the concept of compliance or noncompliance in student work is actually an example of student agency; students have their own reasons whether to complete the assigned readings. Students are agentive in their reading practices (van Pletzen, 2006) in that they can exert control in multiple ways and understand the consequences of their practices. With or without rigid structures that held students accountable for doing every reading, the focal students in this study enacted agency in making rational decisions based on a number of factors.

Limitations and Implications

As a semester-long study of one theory-focused course in one program at one university, the study's findings are not transferable across contexts. However, the study provides an in-depth understanding of the experiences of EAL students in a graduate course in the United States that may be relevant to different contexts. In addition, because this course focused on theories of second-language acquisition, the assigned readings may have been more challenging than readings in other courses. Thus, future studies of the reading practices of EAL international students could investigate their experiences of academic reading in more concrete and practice-based courses as well as in other types of theoretically oriented courses.

Findings of this study may be useful for professionals who intend to help international students adapt to the new environment and for faculty members who teach or mentor international students pursuing graduate degrees in the United States and other English-speaking countries. The quantity of reading can be a concern to many EAL students who have not been required to do large quantities of reading in other contexts or programs (Singh, 2015). In response, faculty members can reduce students' anxiety by providing explicit instruction on academic reading, as Sandra did in this study. She softened the blow (Thompson, 2007, p. 61) by unequivocally advising students not to read word by word and to get the big picture. Sandra also dedicated classroom time to activities in which she talked with students about and explained the disciplinary concepts discussed in the assigned readings. Recognizing students' agency as independent learners

does not obviate the need to provide them with such explicit supports and scaffolds.

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