Original Paper

Cross-contextual Academic Reading Difficulties: An Exploratory Case Study of Two EFL Doctoral Students

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Abstract

This exploratory case study aims to investigate two Chinese Mainland doctoral students' cross-contextual academic reading difficulties in a northern public Taiwanese university. Drawing on Engeström's (1987) activity theory, this study attempts to address the research question: Why do Chinese Mainland students have academic reading difficulties upon first arrival in Taiwan? Data were collected through oral narratives, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, frequent informal conversations and relevant documents for data triangulation. The results showed that participants' academic reading difficulties were associated with different norms and conventions between Chinese Mainland and Taiwanese academic contexts. Described within two activity systems, the major reasons underlying were attributed to the changed identities, different mediations, goals and distinctive communities where academic rules and teachers' roles differed significantly. Pedagogical implications of institutions, instructors and students were provided.

Keywords

academic reading difficulties, cross-contextual, doctoral students, activity system

1. Introduction

Studies on academic reading difficulties have been proliferating in the past two decades. Researchers adopt quantitative approach or mixed methods to study academic reading difficulties and the influential factors (Alasmari & Sultan, 2021; Atai & Nazari, 2010; Shang & Zhang, 2015; You & Chiang, 2014). Nevertheless, limited studies could be found to explore the contextual impact on students' academic reading difficulties through the lens of a qualitative approach. This exploratory case study aims to investigate academic English reading difficulties of two Chinese Mainland (CM afterwards) doctoral students who pursued their Ph.D. degree in Taiwan region. To highlight the importance of

cross-contextual impact on students' reading difficulties, this study wishes to make a contribution to the field of academic reading from qualitatively in-depth perspectives.

Academic reading in this study is defined as reading in English for Academic Purpose (EAP afterwards). EAP traditionally refers to university-level English learning; however, in modern day it means 'teaching of English in the academy at all ages and proficiency levels' (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 3). In this research, EAP contains English learning from university to PhD study, and EAP reading refers not only to class assignment or test-oriented reading including textbooks, exam papers, literature or book reviews, but also to the major-related readings such as newspaper, magazines, or online reading materials. Besides students' EAP reading difficulties, this study purports to investigate reasons of academic reading difficulties. The reasons are not only limited to language itself, such as small vocabulary, poor grammar knowledge or reading strategies used, but also closely associate with the academic contexts. More importantly, cross-contextual impact from Taiwanese to CM academia would be the research focus in this study.

Taiwanese universities began to enroll CM students for post-graduate and doctoral study in 2011 (UECMCS, 2021). Although inherited from the similar cultural background, there exist many differences between cross-strait contexts in terms of educational system and content, campus culture and environment due to dramatically different sociocultural and historical background (Lee, Lee, Yan & Chao, 2013). Without noticing the differences, CM students easily encountered difficulties once they changed into a new setting. With regard to this, the article intends to investigate what the two academic contexts are and why CM students face challenges or difficulties in EAP reading upon their first arrival in Taiwan region. Meanwhile, this research provides suggestions of EAP reading to CM students who are planning to study cross-contextually such as in Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR in China and other western countries. What's more, valuable implications of teaching pedagogies on EAP reading are illustrated.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Studies on EAP Reading Difficulties

Research on EAP reading difficulties aroused many scholars' interest with the emphasis on quantitative approach from the perspective of cognitive or metacognitive theories. In Shang and Zhang's (2015) article, they conducted an empirical study on college students' English reading difficulty from the psycholinguistic perspective. They studied 90 non-English major freshmen from Chinese northeastern university based on schema and metacognition theory to draw a conclusion that lack of appropriate schemata and metacognitive reading strategies was the main cause of college students' reading difficulty (Shang & Zhang, 2015). Meanwhile, the positive effect of schemata and metacognitive reading strategies on college students' reading comprehension have proved to be effective in their research. With quantitative methods, You and Chiang's (2014) research targeted on Taiwanese business-major graduate students' reading difficulties and strategy use through sending questionnaires to 314 participants. After collecting data, two results were achieved eventually: Firstly, the difficulties subjects always or usually

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encountered during reading were associated with text-based difficulties. Secondly, the business-major graduate students used reading strategies at a higher level compared to other students.

Studies on EAP reading difficulties have burgeoned in recent years with the participants mainly centering on graduate students or undergraduates (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Chen & Chung, 2005; Evans & Green, 2007; Singh, 2014; Zhao, 2012). Singh (2014) focused on international graduate students' academic reading practices in a Malaysian university intending to examine the challenges or difficulties they faced as well as the strategies they employed to overcome the challenges or difficulties. Through sending the "Academic Literacies Questionnaire (ALQ)" to 203 international graduate students, Singh's (2014) quantitative study found that challenges were attributed to the fact that English was not their first language; meanwhile the strategies used by students were highlighted. Similarly for the undergraduates, Zhao (2012) conducted a study aiming to explore CM non-English major students' English reading difficulties. After examining 502 students from three groups, higher, intermediate and lower achiever groups, and results showed that vocabulary, grammar, discourse and thinking were the three overarching aspects that imposed non-English majors intermediate difficulties. Among the three ones, they had greater difficulties in vocabulary and grammar. What's more, significant differences among the three groups in aspects of vocabulary, grammar, discourse and thinking were justified. Last but not least, Zhao (2012) concluded that there existed almost no difference between literal arts students and science students, nor between male and female students.

Previous studies on EAP reading difficulties were closely related to coping strategies used by participants to overcome the challenges while investigating reasons underlying these difficulties (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Shang & Zhang, 2015; Singh, 2014; You & Chiang, 2014). Based on the results of most research, EAP reading difficulties were mainly attributed to students' language learning problems or lack of appropriate reading strategies. Different from the research, several scholars have paid their attention to academic contexts or environments. Of the limited research on EAP reading difficulties or reading transition considering learning contexts, Liu (2015) drew the attention to the differences between eastern and western settings, i.e., from EFL contexts to English as a L1 contexts. Through the lens of activity system theory, she explored the reading transition in Chinese international students from CM to the U.K. to illustrate how participants transformed in reading approaches across two different contexts. After interviewing 15 students and 8 lecturers, she investigated that a change of learning environment from China to the UK triggers a transition in students' English reading from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" (Liu, 2015, p. 1). Similarly, Hirano (2014) investigated the experience of seven refugee students with academic reading during their first year of college, with a focus on challenges they faced completing assigned readings and the strategies they used to cope with these challenges. Adopting a qualitative study through interviews, classroom observations and written documents, the researcher laid emphasis on the students' school settings and family literacy contexts to investigate why they faced reading challenges. Although scholars began to concern the contexts or environment where students belong, their research focus represented different scopes. Some focused on the change from EFL context to English as a

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first/native language context (Gao, 2006; Liu, 2015), while some stressed on the fixed setting such as a private college in United States (Hirano, 2014). Additionally, several researchers emphasized on the shift from EFL to ESL contexts. In Gao's (2010) book, he explored CM students' language learning experiences with a focus on their shifting strategies used prior to and after their arrival in an English-medium university in Hong Kong. Different from the Hong Kong setting where English is one of its official languages (Gao, 2010), however, Taiwanese context shares a lot of similarities while great differences with CM. For example, Mandarin Chinese is the native language in both contexts and two sides share the same ethnic origin and a similar cultural heritage, but English application in Taiwanese higher education exerts differences concerning the level of internationalization. For instance, globalization in Taiwanese high education is three decades earlier than that of CM (Lu, 2013). Taking these similarities and differences of both contexts into consideration, this article endeavors to investigate why CM EFL and non-English major doctoral students have EAP reading difficulties upon their first arrival in Taiwan region. Moreover, the activity system built on sociocultural theory serves as the theoretical framework.

2.2 Activity System

As a widely used theory concerning the contexts or environment, Lev Vygotsky's (1981) sociocultural theory describes learning as an individual's developmental change in relation to the social-cultural environment. As a core concept and a unit of analysis in sociocultural theory, *mediation* refers to the establishment of the connections from the brain to the outside (Vygotsky, 1997). Based on the concept of mediation, Vygotsky proposed cultural and historical activity theory in 1920s and early 1930s which stresses on five important factors, i.e., historical character, social interaction, human culture, collaboration with other people and people's internalization in activities (Davydov & Kerr, 1995).

Developed from activity theory, Engeström (1987) established activity system highlighting the specific social contexts in which goal-directed actions are embedded (Liu, 2015). Six elements in the system (Figure 1) are closely related and interactive. Through the mediational tools (artifacts or concepts), subjects conducted actions in order to fulfill the goal (objects) which is molded or transformed into outcomes (Engeström, 1987). Based on the first generation, Engeström (1987) added another three elements (rule, community and division of labor) to form a new activity system as the second generation that is universally applied in current research. With the rules (explicit/implicit regulations, norms, conventions) shared by subjects or other members in the community (individuals/subgroups who share the same general object), the final outcome could be realized through division of labor between members of the community (Engeström, 1987).
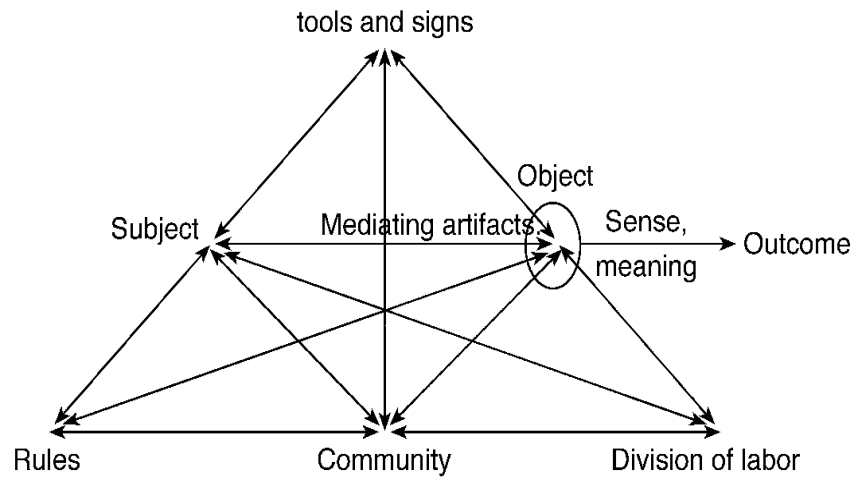
Figure 1. Activity System (Engeström, 1987)

2.3 Research Question

While previous quantitative research investigating EAP reading difficulties was bounded within cognitive or metacognitive constructs, few scholars took the social and cultural contexts into consideration; for example, their previous reading experience, teachers' scaffolding, peers or family members' influence. Meanwhile, prior studies on EAP reading emphasized the participants of undergraduate or postgraduate students (Chen & Chung, 2005; Zhao, 2012). Nevertheless, doctoral students could rarely be found. In fact, EAP reading plays an indispensable role in PhD. students' academic life. Therefore, the participants of this study focus on non-English major CM doctoral students in Taiwanese academia to explore their EAP reading difficulties cross-contextually through a qualitative study from a holistic and in-depth perspective (Lieblick, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). As special members in Taiwan region, CM cross-border students received little attention from previous research in academic literacy. Even though they shared the same language and similar cultural heritage with Taiwanese students, their English learning backgrounds and experiences presented distinctive features due to the different educational and developmental experiences.

According to activity system, academic reading is viewed as a practice undertook within a specific social context (Hirano, 2014). Students' EAP reading difficulties are not only related to language itself but also closely associated with the academic contexts. Thus the main research question guides this study:

Why do CM students have EAP reading difficulties upon their first arrival in Taiwanese academia?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study focuses on CM students' EAP reading difficulties in Taiwan with regard to different academic contexts. Different from previous quantitative studies conducted through questionnaires which may not receive much integrated and profound information, a qualitative exploratory case study was adopted since it would help get detailed and in-depth data from a holistic perspective (Yin, 2009). Defined by

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Merriam (1998), a case study is a bounded system which is composed of an individual or institution and the site and context in which social action takes place (Heigham & Croker, 2009). Based on the research question, the "bounded system" in the study is why CM doctoral students have EAP reading difficulties when they come to Taiwan, by taking their previous EAP reading experiences in CM into consideration as well as the current sociocultural factors affecting EAP reading. What's more, a case study is exploratory, descriptive or explanatory with intrinsic, instrumental and multiple features based on purposes (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). This study is an exploratory case study because little is known about CM students' EAP reading difficulties in Taiwanese academia.

3.2 Context and Participants

The study was carried out in a well-known public university in northern Taiwanese region. Famous for its internationalization and globalization, the university has enrolled many CM students from undergraduate to doctoral degree every year. In the past five years, the number of CM students at this university has ranked top two in Taiwanese universities (UECMCS, 2021), ensuring a large pool for participant collection.

The participants of the study are two first-year non-English major doctoral students, Mary and Amy (pseudonyms) from CM. By definition, my study requires the engagement of the students who have EAP reading difficulties. There are over 20 CM PhD students in the university in the same grade, the reason for these two participants lay in that they are homogeneous individuals who have strong willingness and interest in my study. Meanwhile, since I am a friend of both participants, it is likely to get their trust and receive more detailed and rich data. The specific information is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Detailed Information of Mary and Amy

	Mary	**Amy**
Educational background	College of social science majoring in politics	College of social science majoring in sociology
Year in Ph.D. program	1st year in PhD	1st year in PhD
Age	35	32
Gender	F	F
Hometown	Fujian	Jiangsu
Places for getting master degree	CM University	CM University
English level	CET 6*	CET 6
IELTS / TOEFL	None	None
Working experiences	7 years as a teacher	5 years as a teacher
Family conditions	Married with one daughter of 5 years old	Married with one daughter of 2 years old

* CET: College English Test, Band 6.

As the table shown above, Mary and Amy have many similar features: Firstly, they share a similar age range who studied in the same college living in the same dormitory building. They never have the experience of studying in Taiwan before. Both of them got their master degrees in CM universities, and they came to Taiwan to pursue doctoral degrees after several years' teaching experiences. Moreover, both of them were married with a lovely daughter, one is 2 years old, and another is 5. Secondly, their English learning experiences shared several similarities. They only passed CET 6 which is not difficult for CM graduate students. As Taiwan is a Mandarin-spoken context, they were not required to get IELTS or TOEFL certifications before enrolment. According to them, their English ability lagged behind greatly after several years' working without access to English. They forgot a lot of simple words, failing to speak in English and even being unable to finish English assignments despite the help of translation software. While in doctoral study, EAP reading possesses a critical part of their academic life owing to the abundant English academic materials and the demand to publish international papers. Thus, two participants encountered different levels of EAP reading difficulties in their first-semester study.

3.3 Data Collection

The data was collected via two semi-structured interviews with each participant. It took nearly 40 minutes for the first interview in Chinese, the native language of the researcher and participants. Since the first interview didn't contain much desired information, the second interview was conducted for about half an hour as a supplement. All interview accounts were audio taped. For the interview type, an interview protocol was formulated to guide direction of the interview but allowed flexibility during the interview (Carspecken, 1996). The interview protocol, according to Carspecken's (1996) recommends, includes two topic domains, one lead-off question, a list of covert categories and a set of possible follow-up questions for each domain (see Appendix).

3.4 Data Analysis

In this session, data analysis went through five stages: Transcribing the interviews, intensive reading of the transcription, preliminary reconstructive analysis and coding schemes until themes were found eventually. After the interview, the first task was to transcribe. With the abundant first-hand material, the researcher conducted intensive reading of the transcription. While conducting preliminary reconstructive analysis, two critical steps would be initial meaning reconstruction from meaning field and validity reconstruction (Carspecken, 1996). As for the meaning field, underlying possibilities should be paid special attention to. Since the study focused on why students have EAP reading difficulties in terms of two contexts, possible objective claims in validity reconstruction were laid emphasis on. During data analysis, the most important step was coding which intended to establish coding schemes and find themes to answer the research question. In this study, I undertook initial coding, i.e. word-by-word and line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006). After finishing initial coding, subcategories, categories and the final themes or concepts were achieved from the collected data. Last but not least, to ensure trustworthiness of the study, data collection lasted for half a semester with two participants while allowing peer debriefing and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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4. Results and Discussion

Based on activity theory (Engeström, 1987), two activity systems describing CM and Taiwanese academia within seven elements are established in Table 2.

Table 2. CM and Taiwanese Academia as the Separate Activity Systems

	CM academia as an activity system	Taiwanese academia as an activity system
Agents/ subjects	From university students to college instructors in CM	CM doctoral students or novice researchers in Taiwan
Mediational tools	1. Test-taking strategies 2. Tutoring books 3. Dictionaries and translation software	1. Previous test-taking strategies 2. Related materials: Chinese references 3. Seek for author's background information from the internet
Goal/object	1. Passing CET-4/6 2. Finish final MA thesis	1. Finish reading tasks 2. Engage interactions between teachers and peers
Outcome	1. Fulfill graduation requirement for job hunting 2. Mastery of test-taking reading strategies	1. Adapt to current EAP reading requirements 2. Improve EAP reading ability for future research
Rules	1. Instructors' lecture-oriented teaching with limited interactions 2. School's no requirements on EAP reading 3. CET 4/6 or other exam-oriented English learning	1. Student-oriented teaching focusing on presentation and discussion 2. EAP reading be important part of PhD learning 3. Learn by reading
Community	CM teachers, undergraduate and postgraduate students who are preparing for the CET 4/6 and finishing final thesis	Taiwanese teachers, peers and CM students who try to adapt to new academic context
Division of Labor	1. University offers compulsory English class 2. Teachers help students pass CET 4/6 3. Students prepare for CET 4/6 under teachers' test-taking instruction but learn on EAP reading independently	1. College offers professional courses conducted by English 2. Teachers provide scaffolding 3. Students read English papers to make guiding report in class 4. Peers' great reading ability play a facilitating role

4.1 Discussion on Agents/Subjects

For agents or subjects in CM academic context, participants were non-English major undergraduate and

post-graduate students in higher education with learning English for passing CET 4/6 and meeting graduate requirements. In postgraduate study, they still had little EAP reading experience due to limited requirements from teachers. Just as Amy said:

"I seldom read English papers in my graduate study except for my final thesis writing; actually I don't think it is important for my majors." Amy, Interview 1

When they graduated from university, they chose to be college teachers in CM higher education. During their teaching period, they had little access to English but to teach discipline-related courses in Chinese at daily working routines.

While as CM doctoral students in Taiwan, their roles have changed from previous common university students or college teachers to novice researchers. For them, EAP reading was part of their academic life and they needed to accumulate discipline knowledge to conduct academic research. This is especially true for them as social science students (McAlpine, 2012). However, both of them suffered a lot from the abundant EAP reading tasks and they began to realize that their poor reading abilities were far from the requirement of academic research. Knowing that their peers seemed to be skillful in reading papers, two participants recognized that they greatly lagged behind in the target new academic context.

"I am really shocked by the massive EAP reading tasks. Unlike my classmates who can finish one paper in just several hours, I read them for the whole week and still haven't finished it. …… I have to recognize the huge differences…….. And as an elite student with scholarships every year in CM, I cannot finish my homework currently..." Mary, Interview 1

4.2 Discussion on Mediational Tools

From Table 2, the same mediational tool *test-taking reading strategies* that two CM students used in both academic contexts may explain the reason why they suffered from frustration in academic reading. In CM, their English learning in university concentrated on passing CET 4/6; thus test-taking reading strategies, i.e. word-by-word or grammar translation was of great help for them. However, this mediational tool was no longer suitable for the current academic reading practices that were linked to conduct research and obtain knowledge. Just as Amy said in the interview:

"I have the strong feeling of avoiding the EAP reading. Although I spend much more time reading them word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence, or even translating some paragraphs that I feel are important, I cannot fully understand the content and finish the reading tasks eventually". Amy, Interview 1

"Due to low reading speed and small vocabulary, I spend much more time reading those English papers and still cannot understand them totally." Mary, Interview 1

Having realized the present troubles, they would seek helpful methods such as reading Chinese references as the mediational tool firstly and then seeking for the authors' information to get a general idea on the papers.

"In order to enhance my understanding, I read the related Chinese references firstly to get a general idea and this method really did a great help for me." Amy, Interview 2

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"Sometimes before reading the paper, I surf the internet to find some useful information about the author's background to help me understand the paper." Mary, Interview 2

4.3 Discussion on Goal and Outcome

For the outcomes in two academic contexts, they are totally different due to the distinctive goals (objects). In undergraduate study, their ultimate goal for learning English targeted around passing CET 4/6, which was one of the important requirements for graduation and job hunting (Gao, 2008). With the English certification, they gained some advantages for job hunting. In the interview, both participants succeeded in CET 6 with the help of test-taking strategies.

"At that time, teachers taught me how to grasp the main ideas and find the exact paragraph where the answer belongs to; …… teachers' reading method is actually of great help for passing the test ……our English class in university mainly centered on CET 4/6……after passing it, there is no proper English class in university". Mary, Interview 1

In postgraduate study, participants read EAP materials for the purpose of finishing the final thesis because school required that all theses should contain several English articles in the reference.

"When writing my final thesis in graduate study, our school's requirement is that several English papers should be contained in our thesis, they (the school) believe the thesis with English references would be qualified; thus my first EAP reading experience occurs on my final thesis writing." Amy, Interview 1

Nevertheless, when entering in Taiwanese academic context, EAP reading no longer meant passing a test or adding English articles in the final thesis, it was an inseparable part for doctoral study and students needed to finish reading a large amount of reading materials for knowledge acquisition (McMinn et al., 2009). Teachers not only required them to make a biweekly presentation on the English papers but also asked them to write down their own comments or critical thinking. Moreover, interaction and communication between teachers and students often occurred in the research classroom. With large quantities of EAP reading materials, they suddenly felt it difficult to finish the reading task due to low reading speed and small vocabulary. Meanwhile, the lack of academic genre and topic knowledge would be a critical obstacle to their reading practices (Shang & Zhang, 2015). Because of the poor English ability, they were afraid of interacting with teachers and communicating with peers, which would constitute a major hinder to socialize themselves into the host academia (Nagao, 2014).

"Due to poor English reading ability, I find it hard to understand the articles. After abandoning English for several years, I couldn't remember any simple words……when I saw my classmates freely communicate with teachers, I really appreciated their great English ability." Mary, Interview 2

Based on these factors, their current outcome was to adapt to EAP reading requirements and to improve EAP reading ability for future research.

4.4 Discussion on Rules and Community

With the limitation of the first generation in activity system which remained individually focused, the

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concept of the second generation in activity system turned the focus on complex interrelations between the individual subject and his or her community (Engeström, 2001). Under the community, subjects, together with other members, need to obey several rules. Since CM context highlights a hierarchical social structure (Liu, 2015), instructors adopted lectures to dispatch knowledge while the interactions between students and teachers were not sufficient in the classroom. According to the interview, students have limited dialogues with their teachers or classmates:

> "When we conduct English class in university, teachers stand in front of the classroom and read PPTs for the whole class……there is limited interaction between teachers and students, as you know, the students are just listening and writing some notes." Mary, Interview 1

In terms of school's requirements in CM, EAP reading practice was students' own responsibility while passing exams such as CET 4/6 had close relationship with school's prestige ranking (Liu, 2015). Under these circumstances, the design of English class, teaching content and students' English learning would be closely centered on the examinations like CET4/6.

However, the rules in Taiwanese higher educational context exert great differences. As a combination of western and eastern culture, Taiwanese emphasized western teaching style as student presentation and group discussion while maintaining traditional grammar-translation learning methods.

> "Teachers in Taiwan emphasize on discussion and interaction with students… The teaching style with a relaxed, free and equal atmosphere contributes to more interaction and communication between students and teachers…However, some professional grammar-translation methods still require us to translate English papers into Chinese…I could not understand the efficiency of this method! " Mary, Interview 2

As a doctoral student, EAP reading is part of their academic life. They read English not for passing exams, but for learning new knowledge and gaining information to acquire creative ideas from these readings.

In terms of the community, students, peers and teachers contributed to the academic context. In CM, university and post-graduate students who had the goal to pass CET 4/6 as well as finished final thesis and teachers who taught general English skills or CET 4/6-related reading strategies constitute an academic community. While in Taiwanese academia, the community of activity system was composed of teachers stressing on class interaction, Taiwanese students who were good at EAP reading and CM students trying to adapt to new academic contexts.

4.5 Discussion on Division of Labor

For the division of labor in two contexts, there are great differences in terms of institution, instructors and students. In CM university, English class was a compulsory class both in undergraduate or postgraduate study. The course was designed to improve students' general language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Since CET 4/6 played a significant role in English learning, students exerted all their energies to pass the exams following teachers' guidance. However, once students passed CET 4/6, they had little motivation to learn English. In two participants' graduate study, both of them indicated that their English ability was greatly decreased.

> *"We have to take the compulsory English class in university……the primary goal for English learning is to pass the CET 4/6……..as for the English reading, it's still test-oriented strategies, to remember new words and do a lot of English comprehension exercises, which is terribly boring for me……at that time, I felt English examination is an inseparable part in every period of learning, from primary school to postgraduate study." Mary, Interview 2*

> *"When I conducted my graduate study, I seldom read English papers due to no requirements from teachers…… Only on thesis writing, I began to read several papers myself, but I didn't quite understand it……..actually, after passing CET 6, I had little time on English learning except the compulsory English class lasting for one semester. I felt deeply regretful for abandoning English at that time since I have much time and good physical conditions for learning it, but now, my bad memory and old age really hindered the study. " Amy, Interview 2*

Nevertheless, when they entered Taiwanese academic context, the division of labor with regard to programs, professors and students totally changed. According to the interview, the participants were required to take the professional courses conducted in English and teachers asked them to read English papers every week. Meanwhile, teachers sometimes provided scaffolding when they encountered troubles in EAP reading, such as carefully reading an abstract or grasping the title or subtitle of each section.

> *"The teachers in Taiwan really stress on the importance of English. They ask you to find the related paper yourself and encourage you to read them. Meanwhile, there is a rule that every assigned writing paper should contain English articles, no matter the term-paper or final thesis. What's more, I was required to take three professional classes conducted in English, which asked me to speak, write or make reports in English. I am shocked by the demanding task and feel difficult and nervous to accomplish the goal" Mary, Interview 2*

Participants felt great pressure not only from teachers' requirements but from peers' impact. They found their classmates were good at reading the papers. In order to catch up with them and discuss with them in class, participants spent much more time on EAP reading.

> *"I feel that my classmates are good at EAP reading since they are practiced to read papers from undergraduate study. They have a solid foundation in reading English with fast speed; I find that they could naturally speak English in daily life, indicating English may be a part of their study. However, I treat English just as a tool to pass examinations. I never speak English in my daily life. That means I learn English with a utilitarian view." Amy, Interview 2*

5. Conclusion, Implications and Limitation

This study aims to explore the EAP reading difficulties of two doctoral CM students studying in Taiwanese university through the lens of activity system. After discussing the results, four critical findings conclusion and implication could be achieved from this study.

Firstly as subjects in CM academic context, their roles have changed from common university students to

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novice researchers, on the one hand. Previously they were non-English major university students with an English learning purpose for passing exams and meeting graduate requirements. While as CM PhD students in Taiwan, EAP reading practices were a part of academic learning that they needed to finish reading tasks to become a novice research. On the other hand, their identities shift from high education teachers in CM to doctoral students in Taiwan. The previous teachers who taught professional courses in sociology or politics featuring little relationship with academic English had to face abundant academic reading practices as doctoral learners. This teacher-student shift required participants to change their previous teaching-oriented life to learning-related academic study.

Secondly, different goals (objects) determine different mediational tools conducted by subjects (Engeström, 1987). In CM, test-taking strategies and tutoring books were the main mediational tools since their goals were exam-oriented English learning without concrete requirements on EAP reading from teachers. While coming to Taiwan, they were required to finish abundant EAP reading tasks and engage interactions with peers and teachers in class. They began to find that previous reading strategies (word-by-word or grammar-translation) were not suitable for the current study; thus they encountered different levels of EAP reading difficulties.

Thirdly, instructors in both contexts played a different role in students' academic reading practices. For instructors in CM, they needed to assign specific reading tasks to train students' EAP reading in CM since few requirements easily resulted in scarce motivation of students. That's why CM learners encountered big challenges in EAP reading practices when they shifted to Taiwanese academic context where EAP reading was an important necessity. Moreover, it is better for instructors of both host and home university to assign content-based language teaching in the classroom for the development of students' academic reading or writing (Yousif, 2020).

Last but not least, institutions in higher education need to highlight the importance of academic reading, such as providing discipline-related academic English classes or taking students' academic needs into consideration, especially those learners who wish to study abroad.

Based on the conclusion above, the study also has two limitations. On the one hand, I only focus on two participants with similar majors, which could not be generalized for all the doctoral students. For future research, participants from different majors, particularly from social sciences, need to be explored by the following researchers. On the other hand, the academic context was limited to Taiwan and CM, which could not represent the situations of other academia. It is suggested for future research that more non-Anglo-American academia need to be incorporated to investigate the EAP reading difficulties among cross-contextual students.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Topic Domain 1: EAP reading in Chinese mainland

Lead-off questions:

Firstly, would you please recall your EAP reading experience in university, please talk about your feeling;

Follow-up questions:

1. What is your purpose when you conduct EAP reading in undergraduate study?

2. How have you been taught to read English articles in undergraduate study?

3. What factors hinder your EAP reading in undergraduate study?

4. What is your purpose when you conduct EAP reading in graduate study?

5. How have you been taught to read English articles in graduate study?

6. What factors hinder your EAP reading in graduate study?

7. What do you think of school's influence in terms of EAP reading?

8. What do you think of teacher's influence in terms of EAP reading?

Covert categories:

1. personal EAP reading experience in undergraduate and graduate study

2. factors hinder EAP reading in undergraduate and graduate study

3. school and teachers' influence on EAP reading

Topic Domain 2: EAP reading in Taiwan region

Lead-off questions:

Firstly, would you please recall your EAP reading experience in Taiwan, please talk about your feeling;

Follow-up questions:

1. What is your purpose when you conduct EAP reading in PhD study?

2. How have you been taught to read English articles in PhD study?

3. What factors hinder your EAP reading in PhD study?

4. What do you think of program's influence in terms of EAP reading?

5. What do you think of professor's influence in terms of EAP reading?

Covert categories:

1. personal EAP reading experience in PhD study

2. factors hinder EAP reading in PhD study

3. school and teachers' influence on EAP reading in PhD study