TAKING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS SERIOUSLY

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Abstract

With Australia an attractive and highly sought after educational destination for many international students, consideration should be given to the difficulties experienced by this important student cohort. This paper aims to identify classroom teaching strategies and techniques that can assist in making study at an Australian university a more positive experience for international students from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESBs). The paper highlights three main focus areas that have been identified as those causing greatest difficulty for international students namely: (1) second-language assurance , (2) note-taking and listening comprehension, and (3) cultural differences between Australian academics and students from NESBs. Whilst the authors acknowledge that multiple factors affect an international student's study experience they, nevertheless, aim to explore these three areas and put forward pedagogical strategies and techniques that can be applied in the classroom by lecturers and tutors to help create a more positive learning environment.

Introduction and Background

Australia is an attractive and highly sought after educational destination for many international students (Smith, Morey & Teece 2002). This significantly influences the mix of students traditionally occupying the lecture theatres and classrooms in Australian universities. The character of the student population has shifted "from one of primarily Anglo-Celtic English speaking origins, to one which also includes a large and increasing percentage of students who come from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESBs)" (Phillips 1990, p.765). With the increasing proportion of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds converging on

our shores, consideration should be given to the difficulties experienced by this student mix. While it has been argued that many of the issues confronting international students are also experienced by domestic students, research suggests that particular difficulties and needs are unique to non-native English language speakers (Chur-Hansen 1999; Holmes 2004; Belcher 2005). For instance, Belcher (2005, p5) claims that "domestic students may choose not to participate in class discussion because of being introverted, uninterested in the subject matter, or unprepared for that day's lesson". International students, on the other hand, "may be silent for any of those reasons too, or for other quite different reasons having to do with linguistic proficiency, cultural conventions, or educational background" (Belcher 2005, p5).

Expectations at the level of course outcomes will also have a marked effect on levels and modes of student participation and approaches to learning. Richardson (1994) assembles a three-framed view of approach to learning that is driven by the student's underlying expectation regarding outcomes. For some students a deeper learning, sometimes for the sake thereof, and personal growth are the central reason for undertaking higher study, for others the benefits to be taken from attaining the qualification itself is the core motivator, and a third group are motivated by competition (ibid). These driving factors correspond to distinct approaches to learning itself, those interested in deeper learning seek to question, understand and interrelate what they learn, those motivated to achieve qualifications will take an approach that lends to rote learning and a close focus on academic outcomes, and those motivated by competition will take a very strategic approach to their work (Richardson 1994). Particular traits, says Richardson (1994), can be attributed to, and generalized by, nationality of students. The consequence of this, and the particular challenge for academic staff, is that in context of the broad mix of nationalities present in our classrooms, we are faced with a polyphony of expectations and approaches to learning, all of whom we must somehow meet.

The degree to which students of varying nationalities group together, or do not as it were, for the purpose of group assignment

work is also of note. It seems universally accepted that local and international students will not mix together without somehow being compelled to do so (Briguglio 2000; Volet & Ang 1998; Choi 1997). Australian university campuses, with their large numbers of international students and high level of cultural diversity, are ideal places for cross-cultural learning to take place, but students appear to revert to their own cultures after an initial level of enthusiasm (Volet & Ang 1998). This would seem to indicate that an early intervention is necessary, but even so, students who had worked together in culturally mixed groups with positive outcomes often expressed no intention to seek to repeat the experience later in their courses of study (ibid). Students do hold the opportunity for cultural and language learning as a key goal for their international studies but they require help to achieve the aim (Briguglio 2000).

Intrinsic cultural conditions have a notable effect on learning and student grouping. Volet (1998) observes that assumptions about the nature of classmates from different backgrounds, often quite stereotypical, often serve as an impediment to relations. Presumptions such as "Australians are lazy" and "Asians prefer to work alone" interfere with the possibility of cross-cultural collaboration, but if and when those barriers are surpassed, they are often recognized as invalid (Volet & Ang 1998). The concern extends to the use of particular language in the classroom: students who are deemed by virtue of their admission to their courses of study to be competent users of the English language struggle with course-specific terminology and use of colloquialisms in the classroom to the extent that comprehension may be significantly impaired (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick 2000; Briguglio 2000).

While much of the research in this area has aimed to enhance understanding of the learning process and challenges faced by international students, little emphasis has been placed on pedagogical strategies and techniques that can be applied in the classroom by lecturers and tutors to help create a more positive learning environment (Niles 1995; Burns 1991; Mulligan & Kirkpatrick 2000; Omeri, Malcolm, Ahern & Wellington 2003). Findings of an exploratory study into the difficulties experienced by international students from NESBs at the University of Technology,

Sydney are presented in this paper. The research aims to further increase understanding about what international students' want, expect and require from their lecturers and tutors in order to help make their learning experience at Australian universities not only more effective but also more enjoyable. The researchers do this by building on existing research knowledge and teaching experience as well as by using naturalistic research methods to develop pedagogical strategies and techniques that can be applied in the classroom.

Research Design

As the research was essentially exploratory, an open naturalistic framework with no preconceived hypotheses was adopted, thus allowing the teaching strategies to emerge from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986). In order to best capture the subtle and multi-faceted cultural nuances, the study approach taken was therefore qualitative with focus groups and in-depth interviews being used along with in-class observations.

Focus Group Interviews
Thirty-six (20 male and 16 female) undergraduate students at the University of Technology, Sydney volunteered to participate in one of six focus groups (each focus group consisted of five to seven students) lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. Their ages ranged from 19 to 29 years old, with average age of 21. The participants were all undertaking a Bachelor of Business and all had been enrolled in the subject of Employment Relations in a Global Context in Autumn 2005. All students spoke English as a second language and all were from one of the following nationalities: Malay, Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi, Lebanese, Persian and French. All participants were temporary residents who intend to return to their country of origin after graduation.

Each focus group set out to explore and identify teaching approaches that were seen to impede the study process. All groups followed a set of open-ended questions in the same sequence to maintain a similar standard and to allow the same information to be

drawn from all groups. Questions addressed such issues as challenges faced when learning in another language and culture as well as experiences in the classroom. Answers that required further probing were followed up in an unstructured manner, making the interview style semi-structured, conversational and therefore, likely to illicit candid responses in a non-threatening manner.

In-depth Interviews
Eight (5 male and 3 female) students volunteered to participate in additional one-on-one, in-depth interviews that each went for approximately 40 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured and used open-ended questions to allow the students' voices and stories to emerge. The aim of these interviews was to confirm and clarify the focus group data by further probing and following up on responses obtained from the focus groups. The in-depth interviews also allowed the researchers to explore the underlying perceptions and feelings of individual participants. Extracts from the interviews have been selected for inclusion in the findings and discussion section of this paper on the basis that they help illustrate the identified theme.

In-class observations
The researchers have taught at University of Technology, Sydney for some five and eight years respectively. Building on this previous teaching experience. After reflection, it was decided to actively observe in-class and out-of-class interactions with international students from NESBs in order to identify those strategies which are best received. Observations were made across three classes during one semester. Each class consisted of both domestic and international students of between 33 and 35 students. After every class the researchers recorded a set of reflective notes detailing data gathered during the in-class observations. Data from the reflective notes was later categorised into three main conceptual themes by the researchers. These three themes and the generalized findings are discussed in the following section of the paper.

Findings and Discussion

The exploratory research found that there were principally three key issues that made the learning experience at an Australian university less effective and less enjoyable for international students from a NESB:

1. Second-language assurance,
2. Note-taking and listening comprehension, and
3. Problems associated with cultural differences between Australian academics and students from NESBs.

These issues are examined below and a range of suggested teaching strategies are outlined for each issue.

Second-Language Assurance
Throughout the study, almost all of the students who participated in the focus groups and the in-depth interviews expressed feelings of apprehension when having to answer questions or participate in class discussion. Part of this apprehension appeared to stem from the students perceptions of their own communicative assurance. This can be illustrated by the following student comments:

"I'm frightened to answer questions…… I could say the wrong words and look stupid",

"The other students [domestic students] don't understand me; I look like an idiot and sometimes they laugh"

"It is very difficult and it can be frustrating when you can't say what you want to say".

"I'm afraid to ask questions because I don't want to look stupid or lose face",

Linguistic proficiency was a particular concern raised by Choi's (1997) Korean students in Australian universities, many of whom expressed an ambivalence in that on the other hand, because they needed some time to assemble what they wanted to say in English they often missed out on opportunities to participate in classroom

discussions and, there is a concern that they might make errors of pronunciation or grammar when speaking. The fear of being ridiculed led them to feel anxiety at speaking aloud in class. A NESB PhD student stated in a research class (2007),

> *"I .. (pause)… very difficult to express what I want to say in English. I know limited words and I know none of them express what I want to say. I feel uncomfortable to discuss in class. I feel I am being examined. I have to force myself to overcome this feeling whenever I am asked to give an opinion or I want to give my opinion."*

The above student comments lend support to previous research findings that international students place a great deal of importance on correctness and as a result are afraid of making mistakes when they speak the English language as well as afraid of the correctness of their actual answer (Brick & Louie 1984; Jin and Cortazzi 1998). In contrast, domestic students need only be concerned with the latter. During in-class observations it was apparent that this fear of correctness of English speaking prevented many international students from NESBs from asking questions or participating in class discussion. This can be illustrated by the following student comments:

> *"I'm afraid of saying the wrong words, so I say nothing"*

> *"I try to look busy writing so that I don't have to talk"*

In an effort to reduce the level of fear associated with second-language assurance when students are required to answer questions and/or participate in class discussion, where possible and/or appropriate, the following teaching strategies and techniques are suggested:

- Moderating the pace of discussion to ensure that it does not get too fast;
- Regularly halting discussion to repeat/paraphrase/summarise what other students have said;
- Using structured small-group activities;

- Conducting mini-surveys of class to identify preferences for discussion/questioning modes;
- Reinforcing to the entire class the importance of everyone contributing to discussion;
- Letting students form their own discussion groups;
- Providing tutorial questions and/or discussion material to students in advance;
- Providing feedback to the students at the end of each discussion session;
- Offering alternative discussion group forums, such as online discussion rooms;
- Starting class discussions online and then moving them 'in-class';
- Using collective and indirect means of constructive criticism; and
- Avoiding criticising and/or correcting pronunciation, grammar or tense;
- Creating humour to ease out the tension at the beginning of class.

Note-Taking and Listening Comprehension

Note-taking is a complex skill that calls upon a variety of talents, including listening, comprehension, discriminating between relevant and irrelevant information, processing and personalising information (e.g. paraphrasing) as well as organising and recording commentary in a legible and fluent fashion (LeBauer, 1984; Peck & Hannafin, 1983; Smith & Tompkins 1988).

During both the focus groups and the in-depth interviews, this complex skill frequently emerged as the cause of much heartache for international students from NESBs. The following comments demonstrate the difficulty in knowing just what to write down during class discussion:

"During the lecture we get given copies of slides. This is good. But when the teacher talks about the topic by including the class I struggle to know what to write. I don't know what is important as it all happens so fast."

"On one hand you are madly writing and on one hand you try to understand what the teacher is saying. It is hard to do both."

"By the time I finish writing, the lecturer is already talking about something different so I get confused because I have missed part of what is being said"

In the Australian university environment, the use of simultaneous lecturing and class discussion is a familiar teaching strategy (White 2003). For many of the international students who chose to participate in this study, there was a greater familiarity with sequential lecturing followed by discussion. This latter approach emphasises single tasking i.e. either being lectured to or being questioned rather than a simultaneous combination of the two. This could help explain the reason why many of the students who chose to participate in this study expressed apprehension about taking notes at the same time as having to understand the subject matter.

Interviews with the students also revealed that many were reluctant to participate in class discussion due to an inability to mentally prepare answers in English during the course of a fast paced discussion. The highly conceptual nature of the subject (which is not dissimilar in conceptual complexity to other undergraduate subjects offered at this and at other universities) contributed to the difficulties faced by students.

In interviews, students highlighted the difficulties associated with interpreting *'common'* words that are often given a more specialized meaning when studying business subjects such as Employment Relations. This appeared to become even more problematic when words were combined with other words (e.g. 'collective or enterprise bargaining', 'industrial matter', 'log of claims', 'safety net') as students were not always able to interpret the individual words from the specialized meaning of the term or phrase. This issue therefore prevented students from immediately processing and internalising the language used during class, thus causing a barrier to the learning process.

The difficulties experienced by students when simultaneously taking notes and listening to lecturers primarily stem from the interactive class discussions and the language used during such discussions. However, the difficulty for international students from NESBs lies not so much in listening and acquiring definitions, but in simultaneously listening and immediately processing and internalising the words that are commonly used in the classroom. In order to minimize or prevent difficulties associated with note-taking and listening, the following teaching strategies and techniques are suggested:

- Speaking clearly and at a reasonable pace;
- Providing students with an overview of what will be covered during the lecture/tutorial;
- Informing students that key material will be summarized and/or repeated at the end of the session;
- Using visual aids to enhance students' comprehension;
- Writing key terms on the board and asking comprehension-check questions;
- Using legible handwriting on the board (i.e. avoiding cursive script as this can be more difficult to decipher);
- Inviting students to ask questions if there is anything they do not understand;
- During class discussions, writing the key points from the discussion on the board;
- List key terms in handouts, on the whiteboard, and/or in PowerPoint slides;
- Including glossary of key terms in subject readers and/or in closed reserve section of Library and/or on-line;
- Avoiding vocabulary that is difficult to understand (business jargon) and culturally specific;
- Giving students 'permission' to put their pens down and to listen i.e. stop writing;
- When asking questions, showing patience and allowing time for students to prepare mentally before verbally expressing their answer;
- If time permits, allowing students to write down their ideas about questions/subjects prior to commencing discussions;

- Repeating student questions and answers so that the whole class can hear them and
- Making good use of non-verbal communication strategies (e.g. gesture and eye contact).

Cultural differences between Australian academics and international students from NESBs

Jones (1999, p36) highlighted the following cultural aspects as those commonly causing 'problems' for many international students, including the:
- differences between approaches to learning and assessment tasks,
- unstructured experiential teaching methods commonly utilized by Australian academics; and
- differences between the expectations about the role of lecturers.

Consistent with Jones (1999), the students participating in this research saw cultural issues as important in accounting for some of the problems they faced in the Australian university environment. Each of these three aspects will be briefly discussed below.

Students reported problems resultant from different approaches to learning and assessment tasks.

Conflicts between expectations and actualities of relationships between teaching staff and students are also an issue. Again, the Korean students interviewed by Choi raised concerns, noting that in their home country, students will tend to be very deferential towards teaching staff, the situation in Australia is, of course, quite different to the extent that many students felt a level of discomfort with the informality that they were encouraged to adopt by and with Australian academics (Choi 1997). While we agree that the issue of informality identified by Choi is not unique to Korean students (1997) we consider that it is not universally generalisable either, and note the case one of our own students, a Chinese national, who made a point of telling us how much he had enjoyed the way in which we moved to dispense with formalities in a first class. It set, in his view, the scene for a more comfortable semester.

A number of the students who volunteered to participate in this research said that they had not previously given talks or class presentations, neither had they been required to work in groups, participate in debates and/or regularly contribute to class discussions. Many students reported that assessment back home was strongly based on final examinations, where absorption of material outlined in set textbooks prevailed.

> "Back home [India] we don't need to analyse, we just need to memorise the textbook"

> "Here we have to do lots of little pieces of work. In France we mainly have big exams"

Similarly, many students indicated that they had not previously been required to undertake literature searches, to analyse research papers or question competing theories on the same topic. For many students, plagiarism remained a foreign concept, as in the past they'd been provided with specific set texts and then rewarded at exam time for accurately repeating, verbatim where possible, the information contained in those texts. Hence, at home, 'good students' were those with good memories, whereas in Australia, 'good students' seemed to be those students who challenged and at times even disagreed with the ideas of the lecturer and/or textbooks. At home, such behaviour would not be tolerated and may also bring shame to their family.

The following comments illustrate how some international students find it difficult to adjust to the different cultural aspects found in many Australian universities:

> "In Australia we have lots of assignments and presentations, back home we have many more tests"

> "While I can read, write and speak basic English, I struggle with reading the textbooks as many require a higher level of comprehension"

Students reported a considerable level of confusion as a result of the seemingly relaxed and rather self-directed style used by many Australian academics.

Students participating in this research reported confusion about what was expected of them by academic staff.

According to White (2003), every country's education system is based on its culture. Teachers and students from within the same culture know what is expected from each other with their expectations defined by the societal values of individualism and equality. These defining qualities mean that students tend to receive less individual attention as they are expected to be more self-disciplined and self-reliant.

The follow comments illustrate how some international students find it difficult to adjust to the more relaxed and self-directed teaching style often used by Australian academics:

"Back home [Indonesia] there's only one way…… the teacher's way. You listen, that's it. You don't question [the] teacher, [as] they know best. They [the teachers'] tell you what to do, you don't need to think, it's …..quite different, confusing"

"Classes here are much more informal compared to classes back home [in Malaysian]. Back home we call the teachers Miss or Mr rather than just by their first name………I still struggle with this [laugh]" simple! Here [in Australia] it's more difficult, you [are] expected to think [for] yourself…

"Sometimes I not sure if what I am doing is right or wrong, cause the tutor say I should use my own words to be critical"

A number of students reported that Australian academic staff acted differently from what they expected and were used to at home. The following comments illustrate the differing expectations about the role of lecturers:

"My words are simple compared to the others [domestic students] yet they [the Australian academics] still expect us to be at the same standard as the other students. This puts greater pressure on me"

"Back home [Indonesia] there's only one way…… the teacher's way. You listen, that's it. You don't question [the] teacher, they know best. Here the teacher likes you to question"

The current research supports Jones' (1999) research findings, whereby cultural differences tend to create a great deal of stress and confusion for many international students from NESBs.

"They [parents] expect that having completed study you will be able to return home and get a white-collar job"

"My parents don't mind paying but for their input of money they expect output of good grades"

These findings highlight the importance of communication. An early interventionist approach that establishes ground rules and manages expectations would, as it did in this example with the formality of relations, suppress perceptions students expectations, and teaching staffs failure to deliver levels of 'spoon feeding' that are inconsistent with each party's expectations (see Choi 1997).

Regardless of a students' background, all new students take some time to learn about the life, practices and culture of the university environment. International students from NESBs, however, should be given time to familiarise themselves with the new and often very different cultural environment. This process of cultural acclimatization and familiarisation can be assisted by academics using the following teaching strategies and techniques:

- Being aware of individual differences and class dynamics;
- Not automatically assuming that international students understand (or for that matter, automatically assuming they don't understand) what is expected from them in the subject;

- Encouraging students to discuss matters of difficulty privately with their lecturer/tutor if they are unclear;
- Making explicit the expectations for all learning tasks and any associated academic standards;
- Providing feedback to the class about common mistakes in assessment tasks before the due date (i.e. give students a chance to avoid common mistakes);
- Providing students with samples of good work to help them understand what is required of them in the subject and/or assessment tasks;
- Providing specific and clear instructions about classroom activities, both in writing and orally at the commencement of each activity;
- Arranging and/or conducting sessions in the library on researching academic literature, referencing and plagiarism;
- Teaming up international students with local students for some but not all class discussions and/or group assessment tasks;
- Being aware that international students may have different prior educational experiences and expectations than domestic students; and
- Familiarizing yourself with the cultural backgrounds of your students (at the same time, being careful not to stereotype or over-generalize).

Suggestions for Future Research

As Australian university environments become increasingly more diverse, it may prove valuable to approach this subject from another lens – that of the local student. Conversations with local students suggest that even after limited exposure to international students, they are often able to draw upon a range of observations which suggest they may be primed to identify positive strategies to further inform debate about creating more positive learning environment for international students from NESBs. In doing so, it would stand to reason that they may, simultaneously, also improve their own learning environments.

Conclusion

As this study was small in scale and largely exploratory in nature, the findings are indicative only. Nevertheless, the evidence presented supports the underlying principle that international students from NESBs experience particular difficulties and needs that are unique and in addition to those faced by students who are native English language speakers.

While the researchers acknowledge the existence of multiple factors that affect the learning environment for international students, they suggest, nevertheless, that by gaining a better understanding of the educational environment in Australian universities, that the learning experience of international students from NESBs can be made not only more effective but also more enjoyable. The observations, suggested strategies and techniques serve as a useful starting point for discussion and a base for further, more detailed research in the area. Consistent with Choi 1997 and Briguglio 2000 findings, the students interviewed believed they added an additional dimension. This in turn creates a level of organisational accountability that universities are required to provide and therefore compels appropriate learning environments to support NESB students from a human resource management perspective. Given the high volume of students from a NESB, the University of Technology, Sydney has sought to attract a Manager of International Mobility and Service in UTS International. With an executive package of $122,000+ per annum plus 17% superannuation this is a clear attempt to recruit a top talent and evidence that the University takes the issue seriously.

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IERA 2009 17th Annual Conference
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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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Conference convened jointly by
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ADVANCING THE QUALITY OF HRM AND HRD IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

PREFACE

As the globalisation of markets continues at a rapid pace, the challenges for HR managers and those teaching HR increase. Human Resource Management practices vary between countries, sector, size and ownership of organizations. As a result it is important to acknowledge that what are largely considered to be 'Western' style HRM practices may not be relevant in other cultures. Despite this, some lessons may be learned from organizational experiences that can be transferred across countries and cultures through globalisation.

Globalisation is used to define a combination of factors - a single market place with growing free trade among nations; the increasing flow and sharing of information; and connections and opportunities for organisations and people to interact around the world without being constrained by national boundaries. To date globalisation has been a prime force for spreading knowledge through technology. Knowledge about production methods, management techniques, export markets, and economic policies is available at very low cost, and this knowledge represents a valuable resource for both developed and developing countries. It has been suggested that the HRD profession must include not only economic development and workplace learning, but it must also be committed to the political, social, environmental, cultural, and spiritual development of people around the world, particularly, as global success depends on utilizing the resources and diverse talents and capabilities of the broadest possible spectrum of humanity.

This conference draws from the research and experiences of participants to provide lessons and examples regarding how some organizations and individuals are attempting to utilise HRM strategies in order to promote agility and excellence and, in some cases, globalise business through such diverse topics as:

- HRD and HRM policy
- Organisational culture and power
- ER processes: collective and individual
- Community resource development
- HRM outcomes: empowerment, job satisfaction and productivity
- Workplace learning
- Values, politics, power, ethics and HRD
- Employment relations at public policy level
- HR and corporate sustainability
- Leadership and other areas.

The papers presented in these Proceedings have all been subject to peer referee by two reviewers with comments offered to authors.

The conference organisers would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank the College of Management at Mahidol University for generously hosting this 17th Annual Conference of IERA. We also wish to express our thanks to the University of Technology, Sydney for its financial and administrative support of the conference. Special thanks to Virginia Furse, who worked tirelessly to produce these Proceedings and other materials critical to the success of the conference

The Conference Organisers are sure this 17th IERA Conference will be a rich and rewarding learning experience for everyone involved. We look forward to welcoming you to Bangkok.

IERA 2009 Conference Committee
June 2009

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