

Classroom Teaching Strategies for International Students

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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 in exploratory research that have been identified as those causing greatest difficulty for international students namely: (1) second-language conviction, (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 students' 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

Australia is an attractive and highly sought after educational destination for many international students (Smith, Morey and Teece, 2002). This significantly influences the mix of students traditionally occupying the lecture theaters 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: 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) 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: 5).

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 given to putting forward 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 and Kirkpatrick, 2000; Omeri, Malcolm, Ahern and 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 and 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 (twenty male and sixteen 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 forty-five and sixty minutes. Their ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-nine years old, with average age of twenty-one. 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 (five male and three female) students volunteered to participate in additional one-on-one, in-depth interviews that each went for approximately forty 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 thirty-three and thirty-five 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 generalised 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 conviction,
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 Conviction

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 conviction. 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'.

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 and Louie, 1984; Jin and Cortazzi, 1998). Whereas, 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 conviction 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 discussions 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.

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 and Hannafin, 1983; Smith and 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 specialised 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 specialised 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 minimise 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 summarised 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: 36) 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 utilised 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.

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 them 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 culture 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 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'squite 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 to 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'

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-generalise).

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 students' learning environments 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.

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