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Internationalisation of the Curriculum: meeting the challenge of student diversity

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This paper deals with issues arising from the continuing rise in international student numbers in Australian universities. While the growing diversity in student populations may represent enormous educational potential for tertiary institutions, the advantages to be gained are still only partially explored. At the same time the new mix of university students also presents a series of disadvantages. In this paper I outline these and explore some curriculum-based strategies which could be undertaken, not only to counteract the negatives, but to represent a purposeful step in the direction of internationalising a university's curricula. These strategies would be designed to remove some of the cross-cultural barriers experienced in Australian universities and should result both in broadening the horizons of local students, and in assisting the bicultural and bilingual development of international students. I suggest that these strategies could serve as a foundation for the development of further aspects of internationalisation of the curriculum.

Keywords: internationalisation of the curriculum, student diversity, English as an additional language (EAL)

Introduction

A continuing rise in international student numbers – welcomed by governments and universities – has been phenomenally successful in Australian universities, to the point that some report international enrolments as high as 20% and more of their student population (Bain, 2007). The obvious advantage to the institutions is a financial one, as the international education dollar continues to supplement the Australian federal government funding of the tertiary sector. Indeed, the income from international students has recently been cited as Australia's fourth largest export dollar, being 'worth approximately \$10 billion to the economy each year' (Bishop, 2007).

However, less obvious is the potential educational advantage offered by this growing diversity to a country that has a history of monocultural and monolingual isolation in its institutional structures and educational policies. Acceptance of monolingualism has persisted in Australia, in spite of the country's internal multicultural composition and heritage (Clyne & Kipp, 2002) and strenuous efforts in the public sector, particularly since the 1980s, to raise the profile of the diverse ethnic backgrounds that form the basis of the Australian population and to grasp the potential advantages of the community's hidden cultural and language potential (Australian Council on Population and Ethnic Affairs, 1982, Education Department of South Australia, 1982, Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). Indeed, the actual disadvantages experienced as a result of the current internationalisation boom are easily discerned. In universities that boast of almost one in 4 students from overseas, and with classes where the proportion of international students may be as high as 50% to 99% (Bain 2007), it is not surprising that there may be reports of overwhelming workloads for staff, particularly in having to cope with their students' varying levels of English on top of the challenges of the

normal curriculum. In addition, there is the probing interest by the media in scandal ‘scoops’ involving possible cases of plagiarism and the likelihood that international students may be receiving preferential treatment in such cases.

Vision of internationalisation

To counter such perceived negatives I wish to start with a vision of the potential advantages of the cultural and linguistic diversity in the tertiary sector. Ideally, the presence of students from diverse backgrounds on our campuses would go beyond the opportunity of ‘wealth creation’ to become a powerful factor in broadening horizons and diminishing the cultural isolation of local students – as they experience attitudes and customs, forge friendships, and in turn share their own values and customs (Ramburuth, 2001, Leask, 2001). The vision which I share with these and other writers is that the potential for removing cross-cultural barriers and enhancing intercultural understandings should become a reality. This would be achieved by means of a curriculum that purposefully aimed to reduce stereotypes, develop interpersonal understandings and promote cross-cultural communication skills, and thus enriched the experience for both local and international students.

However, this is a vision that is destined to remain unfulfilled while the currently perceived disadvantages predominate and are not addressed. In this paper I will not deal with the issues of workload and overcrowding, as the means for addressing these are in the hands of those who deal with the management of finances. My focus is on staff development to promote approaches that support the internationalisation of the curriculum. While this task includes ‘broadening the scope of the subject to include content and contact’ (Leask, 2001 p1), the focus of the current paper is restricted to addressing the issue of cross-cultural English language development and the potential for integrating this into the core curriculum.

Language problems with internationalisation

Ramburuth (2001) outlines strategies for dealing with the dual problems that international students face, of overcoming both “culture shock” and “study shock”. However, in my experience as academic staff developer and learning adviser for students with English as an additional language (EAL), I have found that an overriding ‘shock’ both for students and staff is the students’ entrance levels of English proficiency. I have heard many academics complain that students arrive with levels of English that are too low for their educational demands, and in particular for their written assignments. Many international students who have attended workshops or helpdesk in our Centre have confirmed this. They, too, have often expressed concern, not only about their own sense of inadequacy in the written language that is required, but also their problems in understanding their lectures which may be too fast, or too technical, or too idiomatically Australian.

Understanding spoken language

The factors contributing to students’ problems affect their progress on all fronts. In finding it difficult to follow a lecture they are at an overall disadvantage, unable to make sense of the material during the lecture, and therefore hampered in the pace with which they can follow up in their own time. Ideally, students would have a good sense of what the lecture will be about beforehand, but not all academics are prepared to provide their notes in advance. Another element that hampers progress is a student’s lack of oral fluency. Their hesitation in asking questions during tutorials and even socially means that they are denied a valuable learning strategy of trying out ideas and taking risks.

Plagiarism and language development

Risk-taking is in fact a problematic issue where written work is concerned. While trial-and-error is encouraged as a useful learning strategy in spoken discourse, errors in paraphrasing and the citing conventions for evidence-based writing may easily be misunderstood as plagiarism and therefore an infringement of academic integrity (Hunt 2002). As a consequence, the language development of international EAL students may be severely hampered. The fear that overhangs students who may be 'informed' about the academic conventions for academic integrity, but who have little concept of either the reasons for these requirements, or the appropriate language with which to fulfil these requirements, can have a paralysing effect and become an impedance to their learning (McGowan 2005a).

Strategies towards the internationalisation of the curriculum

A necessary first step toward internationalisation of the curriculum is to develop strategies that give students an equitable chance alongside native speakers of English. The initial English language proficiency test scores provide the learner only with a general basis for further language development. Discipline-specific language needs to be acquired within each context (IELTS, 2005). I propose two major areas in which work can be undertaken to assist students' language development: 1) a lecture and tutorial based genre-analysis approach to providing guidelines for their written work and 2) an increased use of technological advances to enhance the possibilities for students to understand the spoken language of their lecturers.

A genre-analysis approach to assisting students and staff

A genre based approach has been outlined in papers by McGowan (2005a, 2005b). Genre pedagogy is supported by a wide range of scholarly studies and is based on a theory of linguistics developed by Halliday. (See for example Halliday & Hasan, 1985, Halliday & Martin, 1993, Cargill, 2004). By the use of genre pedagogy students can be provided with an understanding of the nature and purpose of evidence-based writing as a major characteristic of writing within a research context. For this, students need to have access to actual examples of well written assignments that can be annotated to show the stages of the work, and the characteristic language features of the specific genre they are required to produce. Annotated examples would act as models for students to emulate (Ingleton & Wake, 1996).

Use of speech recognition to assist students

The development of students' aural and oral skills could be assisted by systematising the use of a variety of technological advances, many of which are already being applied in lectures, tutorials and learning management systems such as Blackboard. They also include the recording and streaming of lectures, and the use of the Microsoft application PowerPoint or other slide projections of key words, and/or handouts of these, that can be seen simultaneously with the spoken word, and so acquaint the students with the pronunciation of new vocabulary as well as their lecturers' particular accents. A project using voice recognition technology (Liberation Learning Project - LLP) is currently being applied in a number of universities and deserves some investigation in this context. Gordon & Paez (2004) explain the function of this project in assisting EAL students (otherwise also called students from non-English speaking backgrounds – NESB) as follows:

Within the Australian LLP delivery, NESB students found that the real-time digitized screen in the lecture theatre and classroom setting helped them to learn and understand a language by:

- providing a visual support to the rapid pace of content delivery
- assisting with unfamiliar vocabulary by allowing them to match the spoken and written word
- allowing them to locate discourse structure information to track the links in meaning and argument
- assisting with note-taking by providing vocabulary, proper noun and added detail support
- allowing students, through the transcripts, to process information in their own time to assist with deeper comprehension.

The University of the Sunshine Coast is currently using the technology to complement its online delivery of the MBA program into China. The lecturer's English words can be supplemented by a Chinese translation to encourage more understanding of the English language (Gordon & Paez, 2004 p.3).

I also cite three excerpts from Wald (2006) outlining the potential usefulness of ASR (automatic speech recognition) in accommodating the diversity of tertiary students and staff.

Automatic speech recognition offers the potential to provide automatic real time verbatim captioning ... Students, especially those whose first language is not English may ... find it easier to follow the captions and transcript than to follow the speech of the lecturer who may have a dialect, accent or not have English as their first language (p.11).

Wald proposes not only the use of 'live verbatim displayed transcript' but also the archiving of these transcripts for later access.

The automatic provision of a live verbatim displayed transcript of what the teacher is saying, archived as accessible lecture notes would ... enable staff and students to concentrate on learning and teaching issues (e.g. students could be asked searching questions in the knowledge that they had the time to think) ... Lecturers would also have the flexibility to stray from a pre-prepared 'script', safe in the knowledge that their spontaneous communications will be 'captured' permanently (p.11).

The use of automatic speech recognition technology applied in this way would not only assist EAL students but all students from a diversity of backgrounds and varying learning styles. It could also be of considerable use to international lecturers from EAL backgrounds and help students become acquainted with their differing accents. As Wald puts it:

Poor oral presentation skills of teachers can affect all students ... Using ASR to capture all presentations in synchronised and transcribed form allows teachers to monitor and review what they said and reflect on it to improve their teaching and the quality of their spoken communication (p11).

Conclusion

To incorporate into the curriculum language supporting approaches such as these would represent a small but significant step towards effectively internationalising the curriculum. Mainstream strategies aimed at helping international EAL students to understand their lectures and write more appropriately would in fact result in enriching the learning

experiences of all students, local as well as international. The grand vision suggested at the outset, of local and international students reaping the benefits of sharing the experience of many different languages and cultures, rather than suffering from the problems of student diversity on higher education campuses could then be pursued with increased promise of success.

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