GENERIC SKILLS: ATTENDING TO THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Of all the generic skills and attributes considered necessary for lifelong learning, communication skills are perhaps the most critical. This paper discusses issues of educational support required by Non English-Speaking Background (NESB)/ international students to enable them to become more proficient in English language communication, and offers some suggestions based on the findings of several research projects undertaken at Curtin University of Technology.

INTRODUCTION

Curtin University of Technology is amongst the four largest Australian providers of tertiary education to international students, with numbers having shown a steady growth in recent years. University statistics in August 1999 showed that it had 3531 onshore and 3297 offshore students, making a total of 6828 international students.

Over the last five years, a number of surveys have been undertaken at Curtin University to gauge the satisfaction of international students with their courses and with university services, including issues related to the provision of English language support. Among these is the 1996 'Experiences of International Students Survey'. Several staff have also undertaken research into the needs of NESB/international students, including communication needs (for example, Bell, 1994; Chung 1995; Hall 1996; Parker, Kirkpatrick & Kisane, 1997; Mulligan & Kirkpatrick 1997; and Reid et al., 1998).

This paper is based on two further Curtin research projects undertaken by Briguglio (1998) and Jones (1999).

Methodology

The first study, 'Non English-Speaking Background Students' Perceptions of their Linguistic and Educational Needs' (Briguglio, 1998), aimed to consult a small number of NESB/international students in order to ascertain: their perceptions of their linguistic, cultural and educational needs in the tertiary context; and how well they felt Curtin University was meeting such needs. Eighteen (18) international students, who were contacted through a request to staff, were interviewed in some depth. Before their interviews, students completed a brief questionnaire for which they provided information relating to country and language of instruction for schooling, and completed a brief English language self-rating scale referring to the macro skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). Interviews, which were semi-structured, lasted for between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were taped, transcribed, and analysed to elucidate major themes.

The second project was entitled 'A Study of Assessment Practices in the Curtin Business School, with a Focus on the Needs of Students Whose First Language is Other Than English' (Jones, 1999). Although the focus was on assessment, the study brought to the surface a range of other issues related to communication. For this study, an extensive survey was undertaken of some 210 undergraduate units in the Curtin Business School to examine assessment tasks and assessment criteria. Twenty-three (23) unit coordinators were surveyed in semi-structured interviews that lasted for between 20 and 60 minutes. This data was also sorted and analysed, and major themes were extracted.

This paper brings together the findings of these two studies to examine and compare student and staff perceptions of the English communication needs of NESB/international students, and draws on suggestions for support and improvement indicated by both groups, but particularly students.

FINDINGS

Both students and staff in these projects agreed that many international students require English language support to make a successful transition to tertiary study, particularly in their first and second year of university in Australia. However, just what sorts of support might be most appropriate and effective remains a complex issue. The findings of these studies are presented under two major

headings: 'English language and culture issues' and 'suggestions for improvement'.

English language and culture issues

There has been some discussion about whether problems faced by international students are English-language related or culture-related or both (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Zhang et al., 1998; Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). From what students revealed in interviews with the author (Briguglio, 1998) it would appear that language and culture issues are extremely closely interwoven, although students themselves may not be aware of the role that culture plays in their 'English language difficulties' (Zhang et al., 1998). Academic staff too, it seems, may be making assumptions about students' cultural beliefs which may account only in part for some of their difficulties in the Australian classroom (Ferris & Tagg, 1996).

For the purposes of this paper, language and culture issues are discussed under separate headings, although their interdependence should be borne in mind.

The macro-skills

In the Briguglio (1998) study, when asked questions relating to their English language needs, almost all students indicated they could use some support in all four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing—with writing and speaking given the highest priority. A self-rating scale that students were asked to complete produced similar results, with writing ranked as the skill students thought they most needed to improve.

Students who reported they needed to improve their speaking skills said they did not always feel competent enough in their speech to be easily understood by local staff and students. Students who experienced problems with reading indicated that they found reading in English time-consuming and difficult. For other students, becoming familiar with the language of different disciplines was the problem.
There was some evidence, too, that students have some difficulty with comprehension in lectures and tutorials. This finding is supported by the earlier Mulligan & Kirkpatrick (1997) study, and is

emphasised strongly in Jones (1999). As for writing, apart from a concern to write in 'grammatically correct' English, a more subtle need was expressed by one student, as follows.

"And not just [*assistance with*] writing, but expressing myself in intellectually mature language, in academic language. Because

sometimes, that's what I think is a bit difficult for non English-speaking background people, to make a distinction between, for example, academic language, non-academic language and slang" (student, cited in Briguglio, 1998, p 6).

Other English language needs reported by students included help required with note-taking, with reading of specialist texts, with essay writing format, and with thesis editing. Lecturers also mentioned that support is required with oral presentations.

Several students indicated that they could comprehend formal registers of language (e.g. in lectures) more easily than more casual registers. For this reason, they sometimes had difficulty in tutorials following Australian students who, according to them, spoke 'slang' (but who may have been speaking in informal registers). They also perceived 'Australian' students as speaking faster and less clearly than lecturers and tutors. The views expressed by academics in the second study would seem to support this and indicate that some academics, at least, do make adjustments:

"Some of them [*international students*] don't understand the local students. They don't have such a difficulty with me, I generally speak quite slowly. When other students are presenting they can't always get the answers from that and they will come and see me afterwards and tell me that they didn't understand" (lecturer cited in Jones, 1999, p 36).

However, not all staff were perceived as being so accommodating. One student reported that,

"[*staff*] think their main duty is to come to the lecture and give the lecture; then besides that we don't have any direct interaction with them" (Student, cited in Briguglio, p 18).

Several students spoke of their frustration when they felt unable to express certain more complex ideas fluently in English. One student expressed it thus:

"I want to contribute during the tutorial. I got an idea inside me that I want to get through, but the problem is I don't know how to express it, in a way. The problem with us from overseas, we tend to think in our native tongue and when we speak, sometimes, we can't put our thoughts into words. We sort of can't speak up. We've got the idea, we want to contribute but we don't

know how to express it. That's the problem, I think" (student, cited in Briguglio, 1998, p 8).

Lectures and tutorials

In regard to lectures, students indicated that they sometimes had trouble following lectures, especially mass lectures. A study by Mulligan & Kirkpatrick (1998) indicates that quite a number of international students may be experiencing such difficulties, with 22% of international students surveyed (compared with 8% of local students) indicating they 'did not understand a lot' in lectures (p 23).

Students in the Briguglio (1998) study were asked what sorts of lecturing styles or techniques they found particularly helpful and easy to follow. Students indicated that they found practical examples which illustrate theoretical aspects particularly useful. Other things which were considered helpful included:

- use of overhead transparencies (which are not whipped away before students have time to copy from them),
- lecture notes or lecture outlines and,
- lecturers' use of concrete examples to which students could relate (i.e. not just Australian and local examples).

Students reported that in many cases they were already receiving the lecture support indicated in the first two points above. Other useful things were, very detailed unit outlines, lecturers who spoke slowly and clearly and did not use 'slang', and lecturers who had 'good teaching skills'.

Tutorials were of more concern than lectures to students, many of whom said that they found it very difficult to participate in them fully: that is, they had trouble understanding everything that was being said as well as contributing ideas. The reasons for this were complex. Generally, students indicated that they were reluctant to take a more active part in tutorials because:

- they were used to being 'spoon-fed' in their previous schooling system,
- they were shy about speaking up,
- they felt their spoken English was not as fluent as that of 'Australian students',
- they were not used to the Australian tutorial system.

One student put it thus:

"The way and style of teaching and corresponding with the tutors [here] is very different, because we tend to be spoon-fed back home. So when we go to class [here] we just sit and write notes and copy notes but we never tend to interact with the lecturer. But the tutorials here, there are higher expectations. Like, they expect you to sort of consult them and, you know, be more open in class and speak up. But back home, it's like everything is just spoon-fed so there's nothing much to ask. Here we tend to feel shy. It's difficult for us, you know..... I'm facing this problem" (student, cited in Briguglio, p 9).

For reasons such as those expressed above, when students had genuine questions, they would tend to first try to work the problem out for themselves and/or contact the tutor or lecturer either after the lecture or at some other time. It is difficult, however, for students to seek help from sessional (part-time) tutors who are not on campus very often or do not have an office where they can be contacted.

Academics, on the other hand, tended to attribute students' reluctance to speak up in class to:

- the previous educational experience of international students which, according to them, favours rote learning,
- cultural reservations about challenging authority figures or authoritative ideas (Jones, 1999).

While there may be some elements of truth in the above reasons proffered by staff, we can see from the student quote above that the reasons are somewhat more complex. Also, academic staff may not be effective in responding to students' needs since, as Ferris & Tagg (1996) note from a study that they conducted:

"[academic staff] often assumed that 'cultural inhibitions' were the reason for ESL students' 'shyness', when perhaps adjustments in their own lecturing or discussion-leading style might cause non-native speakers to comprehend more and gain confidence in their listening and speaking abilities" (p 314).

Other studies by Kirkpatrick & Mulligan (1998) and Reid et al. (1998) also challenge the idea that success in an Australian university depends on the ability to think critically or that all tertiary courses encourage critical thinking. They argue that the problems experienced by international students may have more to do with levels of English language

proficiency than with styles of teaching and learning.

Cultural issues

Both staff and students felt that cultural issues (as they relate to international students) are important, but perhaps in different ways. Academic staff who were interviewed by Jones (1999) tended to give more weight to cultural factors as causing 'problems' for international students. They considered that cultural factors accounted for international students':

- different approaches to learning and assessment tasks,
- difficulty with unstructured experiential teaching methods,
- differing expectation of the role of lecturers (Jones, 1999, p 36).

They believed that this created problems for students in several ways: students tended to find it difficult to express themselves in their own words instead of those used in texts, international students tended be less active participants in class than local students, and they tended to want very structured learning and assessment tasks (Jones, 1999).

Neither staff nor students spoke directly about more subtle cultural variations in styles of thinking and learning that are closely related to 'cultural framing' of reality (Reid et al., 1998; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991) and which have some influence on the way we learn and express ourselves. Kirkpatrick (1999) has also indicated that writing schema of different languages are quite different and lead to a different 'natural logic' in the development of an argument. This is evident not only at the genre level, but even at the sentence level, where the word order of ESL speakers, for example, can sometimes be quite different to that which would seem 'natural' in English.

This issue may cause more than a few problems, with students not understanding why lecturers say students cannot present an argument, or reporting that the essays students write lack a logical sequence. It might also explain why international students keep seeking clarification about assignments, since they may lack specific norms about local 'academic culture' which may be quite different to those in their own cultural background (Jones, 1999, p 40). This is supported by Zhang et al. (1999) who found that Chinese students in an Australian university,

> "found the 'rules' governing their first academic experiences in Australia were considerably different to those evident in their previous study environments. Most

reported that the new rules governing academic culture were not only different but also implicit [....] it appeared to students that they were expected to conform to certain patterns of behaviour which were seldom consciously made clear" (p 5).

Other related issues

The above studies have also indicated that NESB/international students require assistance in related areas, such as academic skills and concepts. For example, one student said she did not know what was required for a literature review, while others said they did not know what was expected for an 'executive summary'. While this can also be a problem for local students, these students would tend to be more knowledgeable about where they can turn to access the necessary information, while international students often expressed their reluctance to approach lecturers. One student, for example, put it thus:

> "Although I don't understand, I wouldn't go straight to the lecturer, because for me, I prefer to go home and learn myself first and try to explore it and then, if you still don't understand it, then you approach the lecturer....that might be a more appropriate way" (student cited in Briguglio, 1998, p 10).

Several students in the Briguglio (1998) study mentioned that study skills support was available through their school and they had found it helpful. Half of the international students involved in the study were unaware that studies skills classes were offered through the International Office and that they were free of charge. Academic staff also seemed to lack knowledge of the support structures that are in place for students, which sometimes meant that they were unable to refer students to appropriate existing support.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

There are some similarities, though not complete agreement, between the perceptions of academic staff and those of international students themselves about the language and culture issues surrounding international education. The two studies discussed above indicate that much can be done to support international students and point to some major areas for action, which are summarised below. It is pleasing to note that since the above studies were completed, some suggestions have already been implemented.

The issue of English language support for overseas students has been quite well researched in the Australian context (see, for example, Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Guthrie, 1994; Latchem et al., 1994; Parker et al., 1997). The trend at Curtin has been, officially, to opt for 'communication in context' support; that is, providing English language support at point of need. This would mean that all lecturers, in fact, become teachers of language, or teach language skills through their discipline. The staff development implications for this to occur are significant and, in fact, much remains to be done. An 'internationalisation of the curriculum' strategy, which is in the process of being developed, should address this issue more effectively.

There are indications that staff do not feel confident in catering for the linguistic needs of NESB/international students, and are not fully aware of what courses and opportunities there are for them to improve their skills in this area. Comments made by several students during interviews implied that when academic staff were unable to explain things in a way that was more accessible to them, they went for the tried and true method of 'repeat and repeat it louder' or simply became impatient. The situation is thus stressful for both student and staff and is one that needs to be addressed more seriously as international enrolments increase.

The need for continual staff development, and for dissemination of best practice in this area, is advocated in both of the research projects addressed in this paper. In 1995/96 staff were provided with funding for small projects to trial innovative strategies and approaches that would support international students and assist internationalisation of the curriculum. The results of such projects were then disseminated through a series of staff seminars and through a written report, 'Internationalising the Curriculum and the Classroom Project' (Butorac, 1997). Funding for such projects needs to be ongoing in order to maintain momentum and to encourage experimentation.

Perhaps, also, the rewards for staff to become more professionally developed in these areas need to be greater. Skills, activities, and projects contributing towards internationalisation may need to receive greater formal acknowledgement and recognition by the university. For example, during Cross-Cultural Education Week since 1997, a staff prize has been awarded at Curtin for the best curriculum project which promotes internationalisation. Other incentives could be positive weighting, for promotional and other purposes, of activities which promote internationalisation.

Students in this study indicated the desirability of individual or small group extra-curricular tutorial

support. This is something that, with the involvement of local volunteer students as 'tutors', could be tried in university residences, in the first instance, and would supplement mentoring schemes that are already operating in some schools. It might provide the sort of one-to-one linguistic support that some NESB/international students indicated they required, and it could also encourage desirable closer interaction between local and international students.

It also seems that there is a need to convince NESB/international students that since they are studying in a language that is not their first language, English-language support is something they should actively seek and access wherever available, and that this in no way reflects on their academic ability. It may also be necessary to clarify for them that coming from an education system which has used English language as a medium of instruction does not necessarily mean that they will experience no difficulties with Australian English or with English language use in the Australian tertiary context. Comments offered by some students indicate that they might be more open to advice from other senior or more experienced international students. A study by Todd and Nesdale as reported by Maslen (1997) would seem to support this.

Since these studies were undertaken, the Curtin Business School (CBS) has established a Communication Skills Centre (one of the recommendations of the Jones report) and appointed a Communication Skills Consultant (the author of this paper) whose chief role is to provide English language support to CBS students. Many Australian universities have language centres providing studies skills and/or ESL support, usually in a centralised model. International students at Curtin can access such support through the Curtin International Office. An added advantage of the CBS Centre is, perhaps, the fact that it has the ability to provide support specifically within the business context and at point of need.

In conclusion, it would seem that a variety of strategies is needed in order to assist NESB/international students to better develop their communication skills in English. Of crucial importance, however, is the need for academic staff to become more aware of the needs of NESB/international students and to be prepared to adapt and experiment in order to meet such needs and expectations.

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