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Overview - University of Wollongong Teaching & Learning Journal

Volume 4 | Issue 2 Article 9

1997

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Yuko Ramzan
University of Wollongong

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Recommended Citation
Ramzan, Yuko, Dealing with International students, *Overview - University of Wollongong Teaching & Learning Journal*, 4(2), 1997, 44-47.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/overview/vol4/iss2/9

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Dealing with International students

Abstract
There are increasing numbers of International students studying at the University of Wollongong. Out of the total number of students about 10% do not share their first language or culture with the majority. When I look at this figure, my concern focuses on these students and their real ability to learn while studying at university. Language is a learning tool and those International students whose first language is not English need to strengthen their use of this tool in order to learn at the University. It is important that all administrators and lecturers be prepared to take the necessary steps to meet the needs of this linguistically diverse population so that the University can develop as an internationalised academic institution. International students should be encouraged to take the English for Academic Purposes course presented by Modern Languages along with their subject speciality to sharpen their knowledge of English and enhance learning in their specialised subject.

This journal article is available in Overview - University of Wollongong Teaching & Learning Journal: http://ro.uow.edu.au/overview/vol4/iss2/9

Dealing with International students

Yuko Ramzan

There are increasing numbers of International students studying at the University of Wollongong. Out of the total number of students about 10% do not share their first language or culture with the majority. When I look at this figure, my concern focuses on these students and their real ability to learn while studying at university. Language is a learning tool and those International students whose first language is not English need to strengthen their use of this tool in order to learn at the University. It is important that all administrators and lecturers be prepared to take the necessary steps to meet the needs of this linguistically diverse population so that the University can develop as an internationalised academic institution. International students should be encouraged to take the English for Academic Purposes course presented by Modern Languages along with their subject speciality to sharpen their knowledge of English and enhance learning in their specialised subject.

Some lecturers say that they do not wish to differentiate when teaching foreign students, however, differentiation is not discrimination. It is not discrimination to employ different approaches to meet the needs of students. It is a part of the duties of teaching staff to recognise the diversity of students, and their needs, in order to facilitate their learning.

In this article I would like to discuss those students who study in post graduate courses, especially Masters courses which are usually completed within one to two years, and particularly those who are studying in English when English is not their mother tongue. Often their English language proficiency is not advanced enough to enable them to understand a lecture. Therefore the lecturer's awareness of students' needs is an essential element for these students to learn as much as possible while studying in the Australian university system.

What are the current difficulties facing International students who are doing a one or two year post graduate course?

Students from a variety of countries in Asia have cultural differences which may inhibit their oral participation in class, have been seen by some lecturers as lacking in communication skills including willingness and ability to ask questions. In my culture, the Japanese culture, students are generally brought up within an institutional authority, whose rules and regulations are commonly repeated in all facets of Japanese culture, both private and public. They are often prepared to accept strict instructions from this authority, and may not be prepared to act without the backing of authority. Therefore when it is necessary

to present their own opinion freely they may not be skilful participants in the tutorial situation. They may not speak up unless directed or they feel that it is their duty to speak.

The ability to be a capable communicator depends on the culture you have acquired. The so called good mannered student in Japan is a student who waits to be asked a question. A good participant in a discussion class is a person who can give their opinion in very vague way, so that it does not sound as if they are attacking another participant. The values of the students have been acquired from the time they were born. There is not enough time during the length of the average post graduate course for the students to identify expectations that may be obvious to Australian students. For the entire time I was studying, I could not call lecturers by their first name because it made me feel uncomfortable. I was brought up to always address my teachers by their title rather than their first name.

The learning styles of International students are different from those of many Australian students. Some students from Asian countries are brought up using only memorisation and rote learning style, and they may not feel secure employing different learning techniques. Japanese university graduates may not have experienced writing essays as often as Australian university students do, even during the study of a special field. Typically Japanese university students have to write a graduation thesis in their final year at the university, and that most likely is the only thesis or essay they will have written. This lack of academic writing experience makes it difficult for those students who graduate from a overseas university and then undertake post graduate courses in Australia.

Due to the wide range of post graduate courses and the part time nature of some of the subjects which are often aimed at the students already in the work place, International students cannot easily build a sense of community in this university over one or two years study. In this situation it is easy to feel like a visitor rather than a member of the university. Students need to learn from each other, share knowledge, and then develop a sense of being a member of the university community.

What can the lecturers do to facilitate the student's learning?

It is important that lecturers look for and value students' differences. Understanding differences and difficulties helps the lecturer determine where and how instruction can facilitate learning. Knowledge of the teaching and assessment techniques in some overseas universities may help teachers at Wollongong understand the differing capabilities of some international students when compared to their Australian counterparts.

I well remember when I was first studying in Australia. I used to read the set text for the class, listen to the lecture and tutorial, go back home to read again. I could not join in the discussion because I sometimes simply did not understand the text or concept for the weekly topic when it was actually being discussed. It was only after reading the material again that I understood. This can be particularly stressful to students because they may be confused as to whether it is the language that is too difficult, the concept, or both.

Providing written and visual materials is very helpful for students trying to follow lectures or tutorials. Written material such as a simple summary of key words is extremely useful because it helps students to keep themselves on the right track when they are working on weekly readings. It is particularly useful if the lecturer provides key questions for them to think about during the reading process. Key questions help students to better focus on the issues and to more easily join the discussion or ask questions.

It is important that visual materials on overhead projections are legible. The English speaking reader can often guess a word when it is illegible, but it is not easy for International students. Therefore the letters should be large enough and clear enough for everyone to read. Rather than line up the sentences, it is

sometimes more effective to show a concept map. It can add appeal to visual impact.

Of course all students find it easy to understand a well structured lecture from a lecturer, but can find it difficult to follow a student led tutorial. Lecturers need to guide students who are presenting each tutorial, so that the students also recognise possible areas which may present confusion to their fellow International students. This guidance is not only useful for the language minority students. Society is so diverse that it is always important that students are aware of this diversity so that they can develop flexibility and appeal to all members of their audience when they present information.

Lecturers who use an informal interactive lecture style may pose more problems for International students as this makes it difficult for them to focus on the key issues. The lecturer can help by writing the key word/s on the white board or OHP, so that the students do not feel threatened or loose track of the discussion. The lecturer needs to help them bridge the gap between and the scary reality of two or three hours of confusion and stress and the safe interactions they ideally should experience in the lecture or tutorial.

Students need to be reminded that they already know many things, particularly those international students who may already be feeling overwhelmed by a lack of English and a different experience of University learning styles. This reminder serves to stimulate students by opening them up to learning, motivates them, and encourages their valuable contribution to the tutorial group. The lecturer can elicit prior knowledge of a topic through, for example, discussion, brain storming and concept mapping. Students will feel safer getting into the new topic if the lecturer uses such a framework to introduce the new knowledge. This is one way the lecturer can help a student become aware of the power of their own thinking, to build their self-esteem and confidence, to develop greater self-understanding.

To provide the opportunities to work with other students is another way to build student self-esteem and confidence. However, International students often tend to show their cultural differences in group work as well as lectures or tutorial discussions, and that can frustrate English speaking students along with lecturers and tutors. International students are often passive and wait to be told to do or say something while English speaking background students are more likely to contribute in group work. This can be overcome if the lecturer supplies structured directions. For example, the lecturer sets the questions in such a way that both the International students and English speaking students must rely on each other to answer these questions. Structured directions can be used to force activity to replace passivity for students who may need such encouragement, and can also stimulate leadership qualities where necessary to enliven group work. Also the lecturer can emphasise the advantage of having a diverse culture as a group learning resource.

Students need the opportunity to assess themselves. If self evaluation is to take place the lecturer will need to provide both structure and time. One possible way to do so is to show the objectives for the lecture at the end of the lesson so that the students can be sure of the key points covered during the lesson.

The students need to be taught, above all, the expectations of the Western learning environment. Cultural values inherent in some Asian cultures may result in a rejection of the value of personal opinion especially in the face of a different opinion from someone in authority. As a result, some students think copying the text is learning from their master, and they do not see the need to acknowledge the master's work. While this may seem like plagiarism in Western eyes, it is more like bowing to superior knowledge in Japanese eyes.

What can the students do to learn more effectively in Australian university?

International students should try to observe their culture as if from the outside, and find out where it is different from the Australian culture especially in the university environment. They need to learn the strategies necessary to deal with the differences. I am not suggesting that they assimilate themselves into Australian culture, but simply that we need to explain to them how important it is to identify the differences, because these affect their learning. This identification will also help to improve their communication skills.

What can the Administrators do to assist both lecturers and students?

In my view it should be made compulsory for International students from non English speaking backgrounds to take the English for Academic Purposes course. The language is a crucial difficulty for many International students, but sometimes they do not realise the importance of improving their English language proficiency at the time they enrol, because they have passed the English proficiency test before qualifying to be a student of this University. When students first enrol in a university course they need time to get to know the real differences that they will confront. As lecturer's time constraints cannot allow them to take responsibility for all International students' difficulties, it is clear that this course will benefit both the lecturers and the students. However I recognise that while an English for Academic Purposes course that has been made compulsory may present complex issues such as relevance to the International student body as a whole versus the special needs of a small group, there are still basic things which can be done for the benefit of international post graduate students. Simple things such as informing the students that such courses are available when they enrol and the need to reinforce such information in a non-threatening manner at the start of the academic session. Such information may be given out to prospective students when they are preparing to enter this university, but often the students who are new to this university culture may miss out on this important information. It seems harsh to expect International students whose first language is not English to have attained the academic language proficiency of the native speaker before they enter post graduate studies conducted in a language other than their own.

The Study Abroad students from Asia, more commonly called exchange students, can be seen as an important resource when trying to identify the needs of non English speaking students. The opportunity exists to use both the Study Abroad students and those students at Wollongong who have studied abroad as part of their study requirements. These groups should be encouraged to present a written report on their experiences of different requirements for students at Asian institutions in comparison to our own. These reports, issued through resources like Campus News and Tertangala would be informative to both academics and students as a means of acknowledging and explaining the differences and may also serve to lessen any misunderstandings which can arise due to different university experiences.

Conclusion

The University advocates internationalisation, and it is clear to every university community in Australia that the number of International students is increasing year after year. It is important that the university community as a whole, administrators, lecturers, and students, including International students, develop skills in cross cultural management, in order to deal with a diverse language community and to communicate with each other. It is not only for the sake of International students. It is beneficial for all of us to learn strategies to deal with the world. As language is one of most important tools for thinking, we need to provide language minority students with the best possible opportunities to enhance their learning while studying in this University.