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Overseas trained teachers (OTTs): student attitudes and expectations in the context of vocational education.

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1. Abstract

The vocational education and preparation of overseas trained teachers (OTTs) in NSW is a demanding and lengthy process. It involves the development of communicative language ability to a standard equivalent to native-like vocational proficiency in two domains: linguistic and pragmatic. In order to demonstrate competence at this level, OTTs in NSW are required to pass an English language test, the NSW Professional English Assessment for Teachers (PEAT). In the PEAT, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are specifically tested in the context of workplace requirements for the NSW education system. Success in the PEAT leads directly to the DET Pre-Employment Program.

In reality, TAFE NSW courses in which students enrol to prepare for the PEAT are less concerned with test-taking strategies than they are with vocational education, although locally designed PEAT exemplars are used as practice and teaching models. Success in the test is difficult to achieve without knowledge of the reality in NSW public schools while the communication skills which are beneficial to the test taker are equally essential in the workplace.

This paper will outline preliminary findings from research on the attitudes, expectations and vocational learning of a group of OTTs attending Randwick TAFE during Semester 1, 2008. During this semester a specific delivery component was developed that addressed the active skills of Speaking and Writing[1], allowing equal emphasis to be given to both linguistic and pragmatic components of test preparation. The theoretical framework for these materials hypothesised the critical significance of the attitudes held by participants in relation to the test, policy and performance.

[1] Reading and Listening were also taught during the course, but were not part of this research project.

Our approach to this research included qualitative and quantitative data derived from pre and post-course questionnaires, use of a Survey Monkey application to collate students' evaluations and PEAT test results received before the end of 2008. One student's performance will be considered as a case study.

2. Introduction: background and issues in PEAT preparation

2.1 The PEAT

Over the past two decades, the English proficiency of overseas-qualified teachers in NSW has been assessed in several different ways. Prior to 1991, English assessment was carried out through an interview conducted by designated officers of the Department of Education, using the Australian Second Language Proficiency rating scales (ASLPR) (Ingram and Wylie 1984) with Level 4 (Vocational proficiency) being required for entry to the workplace preparation program. Issues with the limited availability of suitably qualified assessors and also with the suitability of the rating scales for the specific language requirements of the educational workplace (McDowell 1995) led to the commissioning in 1991 of the Adult Migrant Education Service (AMES) to research and develop a specific language test for OTTs. This was known as the English Language Skills Assessment or ELSA. The design of ELSA was based on the framework of communicative language ability designed by Bachmann (1990:81) in which language competence was divided into two categories: organisational and pragmatic. In 1996 ELSA was superseded by the Professional English Assessment for Teachers (PEAT), which was designed by the University of New South Wales Institute of Languages according to Department of Education and Training (DET) specifications. This test expressed the candidates' results in the form of 4 band levels, with the A band corresponding broadly to an ISLPR[2] 4 in the context of communication in the educational workplace. The PEAT has been revised twice since its inception, but continues to be strongly focussed on authentic workplace tasks and text types, and to emphasise pragmatic aspects of communicative competence. The test was last redesigned in 2007, with slight adjustments to the band structure. The division of the A-band into A

[2] International Second Language Proficiency Rating Scale, successor to ASLPR

(vocationally proficient) and A+ (nativelike) emphasised that while candidates needed a high level of communicative competence to achieve success, they were not expected to be indistinguishable from native speaker teachers.

Figure 1:

The speaking and writing tasks used for assessment are as shown in the following table:

SPEAKING		WRITING	
1	Interview	1	Incident report
2	Discussion	2	Handout or letter to parents
3	Roleplay(with a parent or colleague)	3	Editing of students' work
4	Presentation (to a class)	4	Comment on students' work

Details of the tasks, the band descriptors and assessment criteria are published in the test exemplar made available to all candidates in print and online (UNSWIL 2007).
Reference is made throughout to 'appropriate' as well as accurate language. As such, any course seeking to prepare candidates for the test needs to have a strong focus in this area.

2.2 PEAT preparation at TAFE

Since the Professional English Assessment for Teachers (PEAT) test was introduced, Randwick TAFE NSW has been conducting PEAT preparation courses to assist prospective applicants.

In 2006 the first full-time PEAT preparation course was offered by Languages at Randwick TAFE, a course that included a work experience component (of one week), access to online practice materials as well as training and certification in Initial Child Protection. The work experience component was so popular with PEAT candidates that it was supported and endorsed by DET: through work experience candidates were able to rekindle their enthusiasm for teaching as well as regain some of their lost confidence in their ability to teach and to enjoy doing so. Moreover, the socio-cultural value of a work placement enabled candidates to appreciate the value of PEAT test items in a way that face-to-face preparation could not do. Feedback (via regular paper and online course evaluations) has shown this component to be highly valued by the candidates.

Overall, Randwick TAFE courses have received consistent positive evaluations from overseas trained teachers, but if their success is also to be judged in terms of increased test success, significant obstacles remain. Overall, the aggregate pass rate of PEAT (that is the percentage of candidates who achieve an A band in each of the 4 skills) is around 15% per administration. The demanding nature of the test takes its toll on candidates, who frequently sit a number of times before achieving success.

3. The Project: "the secret rules of language" and attitude change

The project had two components, the results of which we will discuss in this paper:

[a] a quantitative analysis of 75 teachers at the beginning of the course;

[b] a qualitative study of how the beliefs of a small group of these teachers changed during the 18 week preparation course, including a detailed report on one student.

3.1 Survey of attitudes, expectations and beliefs

Firstly, a pre-course questionnaire was given to candidates embarking on a range of TAFE PEAT preparation courses at Randwick, Liverpool and Blacktown. This was designed to obtain information about the candidates' pre-existing attitudes, expectations and beliefs. A total of 75 surveys were returned, a response rate of around 80%. The resulting data provided a useful backdrop to the smaller group of five students who completed all stages of an amended teaching program, and whose changes in attitudes were examined after the end of the course. The case study discussed later in this paper applies to one student in this smaller group. It was hypothesised that attending the Randwick TAFE course with its explicit pragmatic dimension would lead to improvement in expectations of their success in the test.

The cohort: A questionnaire was designed and piloted on an initial group of 30 students. The amended questionnaire was then applied to 75 test candidates who had just commenced a course of study at Liverpool, Blacktown and Randwick TAFE.

Demographic information: The group consisted of 8 males and 64 females[3], from a total of 23 counties. The most strongly represented were India, (44%) China (9.3%) Iraq (5.3%) and Bangladesh (4.0%). The period of time they had lived in Australia varied from 2 months to 17 years, with a mean of 4 years (SD 4) and mode of 2.

Experience: Relatively few of the group had direct experience teaching in Australian schools, with 9.3% having taught in DET schools, and 10% in the private sector. A larger proportion had indirect experience through having their children attend school (38% in DET and 14% in private schools).

Experience of test: The current form of the PEAT involves 4 separate skills areas, reading writing speaking and listening, in all of which an A-band must be achieved within a two year period. It is common for candidates to sit repeatedly for individual components until they are successful, their time period expires or they give up.

Within the group we surveyed, the majority (66.7%) had not attempted the reading test at all, while 13.3% had attempted it once only. Two of the group (2.7%) had attempted the reading paper more than 4 times. Eleven candidates (14.7%) had already passed the reading. The experience of the group on the listening paper was comparable – with 66.7% never having attempted it, 14.7% having attempted once, 2.7% more than 4 times. The number who had already obtained a pass was slightly lower than for reading, at 12.0%. While 65% of the group reported they had never attempted the speaking test, 18.7% had attempted it once, and 1.3% reported 4 times or more. 65% had never attempted the writing test, while 13.3% had attempted it once.

The candidates were also asked how difficult they found each of the tasks. This was measured by their reaction to the statement "The interview/ discussion, role play/presentation, report, handout or comment is easy". Some tasks were found to be perceived as more difficult than others, for example in the speaking test, the interview

[3] 3 students did not volunteer information about their gender.

and discussion were thought to be easy by more than 40% of the cohort, whereas less than 17% thought the role play was easy.

Expectations: According to our questionnaire, expectations of the candidates at the beginning of the course were overall positive. The statement, "I expect to pass PEAT at some time in the future" was agreed or strongly agreed to by 85% of the cohort, with only 4 candidates (2 males, 2 females) registering disagreement. 68% of the candidates agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I think I will pass the PEAT soon".

Despite the reported positive expectations, affective reactions to PEAT were largely negative, with 45.2% admitting they felt angry at having to do the PEAT, 66.7% feeling anxious, 61.6% agreeing with the statement "The PEAT makes me depressed", 35.1% feeling embarrassed because they hadn't yet passed the PEAT and 59.7% agreeing that they sometimes felt like giving up.

The questionnaire also explored a range of potentially self defeating beliefs and attitudes, which it was thought, although not empirically demonstrated, may have influenced performance. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these results in detail, and they will be reported elsewhere, but areas investigated included:

- Beliefs about the necessity for the test to exist;
- Beliefs about the effectiveness and fairness of the test;
- Beliefs about the attitudes of the community to migrants in general;
- Beliefs about the attitudes of the community to OTTS;
- Success in integration with broader community;
- Opinion about own level of English proficiency;
- Attitude to migration to Australia;
- Prior knowledge of PEAT;
- Attitude to Australian born teachers;
- Attitudes to standard of English required.

3.2 The teaching program

While it may not be possible for a course to influence all the beliefs and attitudes that can impact on performance, it was hypothesised that specific measures could be taken to address the feelings of exclusion and discrimination experienced by advanced level students. In the experience of both authors, who have spent many years working with test candidates, a significant number of them consider their English is adequate and ascribe their lack of success in PEAT to flaws in the test design or secondary discriminatory agendas. They are not aware of the pragmatics-based issues that limit the effectiveness of their communication, described by Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) and Yates (2004) as "the secret rules" of language. One aim of this project was to ascertain whether the affective aspects of candidates' test preparation could be positively influenced by awareness-raising about these issues through the explicit teaching of pragmatics.

In schools, the people with whom a teacher needs to be able to communicate effectively (orally and in writing) include three main groups: colleagues and ancillary staff, as well as managers (DET, principals and head teachers); parents and the school community; and, of course, students. Both the PEAT test and our course attempt to address this range of communication needs as regards appropriacy and accuracy.

Eight two-hour sessions in the 18 week program were allocated for explicit pragmatics awareness raising activities. These were held weekly and separated into two four-week blocks in February-March and May-June. The original plan was for these sessions to be focussed on the speaking component of the test, however, because around half the enrolled students had already passed that component, the course content was adjusted to maximise its relevance to the written paper and to speaking contexts encountered within the workplace.

The aims and objectives of the strand were as follows:

"When you complete this unit, you should be able to communicate more effectively across cultures in a workplace, education or community context.

- Articulate some features that characterise your own and other cultures;
- Gain an increased understanding of the key theories underlying the use of language in communication in context (linguistic pragmatics);
- Continue to improve your awareness of your own strengths and weaknesses in communicating in English;
- Become more able to notice and articulate cultural aspects of Australian society; and the language features that characterise them;
- Use language in ways which maximises the effectiveness of communication,
- Use language in ways which minimises the possibility of cross cultural communication problems,
- Apply this knowledge in the PEAT speaking and writing tests;
- Apply this knowledge in the NSW DET workplace."

The broad definition of pragmatics - the branch of linguistics that has to do with what utterances mean in context - was introduced in the first session, as were the notions of "intercultural competence" and "pragmatic transfer", which refers to the carryover of pragmatic knowledge from one culture to another. Misunderstandings or incomplete understandings may occur because of different assumptions about what can be said, when it can be said, to whom it can be said and also how it can be said, as well as what language forms are appropriate to use. Subsequent sessions provided opportunities for learners to explore relevant aspects of speech act theory, the co-operative principle and implicature, politeness theory, time space and person deixis, and to take an ethnographic approach to noticing the differences between pragmatic conventions in a range of cultures.

Based on the input from the pragmatics strand, a specific pragmatic aspect for each PEAT writing genre was explicitly presented, emphasised, recorded and practised in eighteen writing sessions. For example, the Gricean maxims of quantity, quality, relevance (relation) and manner were referred to in the Incident Report where the precise amount of information (quantity), no more and no less, needs to be supplied; also to the Handout that requires clear and direct information (relevance) to be given to parents and/or

students and lastly, to the Comment, which needs to identify truthfully (quality) the negative and positive features of a student's writing. In addition, the maxim of manner (that, unless there is a specific reason for not doing so, information needs to be structured clearly) was addressed when presenting and teaching each of the three genres as the logical ordering for the stages of written genres in English is essential.

Overall, students indicated (in their monthly evaluations at the end of each speaking and writing session and before attempting a practice/revision test) that they were more than satisfied with the content of each session (on a 5 point scale usually "Very Good" to "Excellent" was ticked). They commented further in these evaluations on having learnt many new things, such as "to be appropriate as a teacher", "to differentiate tone from informal to formal", to "learn about writing correctly to the grammatical point of view", "the choice of words", "the special features of each type of writings [sic] and knowing how to write a comment for each type" and that the things they "are learning in one session scaffold and help [them] for another". However, all these aspects of speaking and writing require extensive practice and unfortunately, most students undertaking this PEAT preparation course admitted that they were unable to devote as much time to practice and homework as required or as they would have liked.

4. Findings: The post-course questionnaire and the case study of "J"

Five students with high levels of attendance at the course completed both the voluntary pre and post-course questionnaires measuring expectations, attitudes and beliefs about the PEAT. It was hoped that the experience of undertaking the course would have led to improved attitudes and more positive expectations, but at least for the small group in the sample this was not the case. Immediately after the course, all of the 5 students showed an overall deterioration in attitude and an increase in negative beliefs. This change was not always very large, and the sample of students investigated was too low for generalisations to be made, but it was alarmingly consistent. This was a surprising result, especially as it had been expected that addition of the pragmatics component to the course would lead to an enhanced understanding of the reasons for their difficulty up to that point and provide a direction to work towards. As discussed above, course

evaluations for the pragmatics strand had been consistently very positive and candidates' overall evaluation of the whole preparation course also indicated that they had found it highly beneficial. Fortnightly evaluation surveys returned results, which were consistently at points 4 & 5 ('Very Good' or 'Excellent') from a five point scale. However, as later events indicated, one factor that needs to be taken into account in evaluation of these results is the timeframe.

In this section, one case will be examined in detail, that of J, who had qualified as a teacher in India. First we will consider her immediate post-course results and then discuss what happened in the following three months.

The data on ***expectations*** clearly reveal that J initially felt she would pass the PEAT sometime in the near future, but at the end of the program she no longer felt sure she would ever pass the test. Overall, her expectations were lower at the end of the program.

J entered the program with a very high level of negative ***feelings***, which decreased only very slightly during the course. However the strength of her agreement with the statement "I feel like giving up" increased in intensity. J perceived that her feelings about the PEAT were becoming more negative.

J's ***opinion about her own ability*** in English was moderate at the beginning of the program but decreased significantly, as she became more aware of her communication problems, particularly in grammatical accuracy. Although J had come from a country in which the use of English is widespread, she did not feel that she should be exempt from the PEAT on the basis of this. This opinion did not change.

There were some apparent inconsistencies in several of J's responses regarding the test. By the end of the course, her overall opinion regarding the ***need for existence of the test*** changed from approval to disapproval. It appeared that she believed some teachers should be exempt, but perhaps this was on the basis of other factors, rather than the country of origin.

J's beliefs about the ***effectiveness and integrity of the test*** were moderately positive at the beginning of the program and remained so. By the end she still felt it was possible that people could pass the test without having appropriate levels of language ability but considered it less likely than she had at the outset.

However, some of the other key questions concerning the underlying agenda were particularly revealing. Overall, she went from believing the PEAT to be a fair test at the outset, to expressing uncertainty by the end. She still considered it to be a way of excluding migrant professionals from the workplace. By the end of the course J's responses indicated that her ***general beliefs about the opportunities available to migrants*** had become more negative. J experienced a decline in her beliefs about OTTS being welcome in Australian schools, which was in line with her changes in feelings about the treatment of migrants in general. The strongest change was in the perception of parental attitudes, which went from moderately positive to moderately negative.

Regarding ***integration with the broader community***, this score did not change and indicates perception of moderate success in integration; further, there was no overall change in her ***desire to improve her speaking ability*** although there was some change in emphasis. She went from moderate disagreement with the statement "I wish I could change the way I speak English" to moderate agreement. She was also more likely to see the way she spoke as a marker of her identity, but because of the phrasing of the questionnaire item we were not able to determine whether or not she viewed this fact in positive or negative terms.

At the beginning of the program J was neutral as regards her feelings about her ***decision to migrate,*** but by the end her attitude had worsened considerably. J's response also indicated a strong feeling that she had not had adequate ***prior knowledge*** of the PEAT before migration. These answers did not change during the course.

An unambiguously negative attitude to ***the language skills of Australian teachers*** intensified slightly during the course. Nevertheless, during the program, J retained her initial overall moderate belief that it was justifiable for DET to require a high standard of language competency. While conceding that it was unfair for students, she still considered that teachers whose language was not accurate should be employed by DET.

At this stage of administrating the post-course questionnaire, the anticipated improvements in J's attitudes and expectations had failed to eventuate. She appeared to be better informed about the PEAT although this did not translate into a more positive attitude to her ability to pass. However, the case study of J is worthy of further investigation in that she did finally achieve an A in all four skills and because her reported feelings underwent an apparent reversal six months after the course finished at the end of July 2008. As outlined above, J, who was one of the five OTTs who completed both questionnaires as well as the first semester of PEAT Preparation at Randwick TAFE, had actually displayed a significant increase in the negative feelings she held towards the PEAT. Furthermore, J told one of the authors privately when she rejoined PEAT Preparation at Randwick TAFE for a second semester in 2008, that the result she had received for her PEAT Writing result (after the first semester of study preparation she had done at Randwick TAFE) had gone down from a B+ to a B. This deterioration in test performance had thrown her into a state of "depression" and she described herself as being a "failure". However, during the same conversation, she mentioned that she would be a much more empathic teacher in future as she could now understand how her previous low achieving students had felt while they had been struggling with concepts and problems in her teaching subject. She insisted that she was very happy with the PEAT Preparation course she had re-enrolled in and promised that, she would not only attend regularly, but also complete regular written homework tasks for which she hoped to receive feedback. J kept her promise.

Towards the end of J's second semester of PEAT Preparation, she again only scored a B in her in-class Trial Writing test at Randwick. During the class in which she received this

result from the test she had sat the week before, she was nevertheless also the one who best demonstrated in the in-class comment activity she wrote that day how she had incorporated an understanding of the pragmatic considerations of this task; that is, the comment needs to identify truthfully (maxim of quality) and in a politely structured face-saving manner both the positive and negative features of a student's writing for which feedback is being provided. J was then asked to write her practice comment on the whiteboard, with its lexico-grammar errors already corrected. With J's text as a model, it was then explained to the class that such a text, with appropriate pragmatic understandings and accurate use of lexico-grammatical features, would be worthy of being awarded an A+ (nativelike proficiency). This observation was promptly picked up and queried with interest by another candidate, N (who had joined the PEAT Preparation class only in Semester 2 but was one of the students who regularly did written homework for which she received feedback before rewriting). Some class-time was then spent in discussing how students' aims might be set higher so that they not only worked towards achieving a pass at A level, but aimed at excelling and achieving an A+ result. After this class discussion, both J and N appeared elated. Both J and N sat their PEAT writing tests the following week and both passed at the required A level.

The initially disappointing results for the 5 students surveyed at the end of the course, plus the positive outcome for J suggests several possible interpretations:

1. It is possible that the addition of an explicit pragmatics component had no beneficial effect on attitudes and expectations, although this would not constitute evidence that they failed to have a beneficial effect on learning. As the only real indicator of learning is workplace success, it is difficult to measure it definitively. However the consistent positive evaluations suggested that the students perceived the sessions to be beneficial.
2. It is possible that raising students' awareness of the "gap" between their pragmatic competence and the required level had a temporary negative effect on their expectations, by making them realise how much they needed to strive to achieve success.
3. It is also possible that the pragmatics component had a positive effect but there were other factors (increasing experience of failure, awareness of other aspects of language

proficiency that needed significant effort to improve, contagious negative attitudes of other course participants) which outweighed any positive effect.

5. Conclusions

The case study of J and her development in the six months after the conclusion of the study also provided the following insights:

- regular written practice that receives feedback and is then rewritten is valuable for accuracy concerning lexico-grammatical features;
- feedback for one student can be a model whose benefits can be shared;
- raising the goal posts could positively motivate students;
- positive experiences of having one's responses valued can be inspirational

One semester may not be a sufficient length of time to grasp the cultural underpinnings of key English and education-related words, understanding of the pragmatic significance of expressions in context and level of lexico-grammatical accuracy required by the PEAT. However we believe that the journey of discovery is nevertheless a valuable undertaking. As expressed by the words found in the guidelines of a successful small business, aiming for "the pursuit of excellence in the joy of understanding" can be applied to advanced language learners and may be an important aspect to consider in the future vocational training and preparation of OTTs.

In conclusion, the contradiction that we found between the enthusiastic participation in the pragmatics strand, with its highly positive formative and summative course evaluations, and the lack of evident change in affective variables, gave us pause for thought. The post-course sample of 5 was of course too small for any meaningful generalisations to be made about whether the teaching of pragmatics had any impact on how students felt about the social role of the test, or whether an increased sensitivity to the "secret rules" of language was likely to be liberating or merely daunting. One important point that was revealed by the study of J was that timeframe is something that must be taken into account in the measurement of affective outcomes.

We now have a fully validated questionnaire that can now be used for every cohort pre and post course, (i.e. both immediately post course and after a longer period of time has elapsed) that can be used to gain greater insights into the affective outcomes of subsequent programs. This will be especially useful when the new PEAT Syllabus is introduced to TAFE NSW in Semester 2 2009. Moreover, these questionnaires will allow us to examine the correlation between factors (demographic, experiential and attitudinal) that may indicate which students are most at risk of having their competencies undermined by negative self-defeating beliefs and expectations, and as a result, strategies for dealing with these factors can be further refined. While this project may have raised more questions than it answered, we believe it has helped us to take the first steps towards implementing beneficial change.

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