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Helen Smith

University of Wollongong

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Abstract
Every new student experiences some difficulty in learning to operate effectively in a university, but the overseas student faces many additional problems and dearly the capacity to adjust can affect academic performance. Some may encounter prejudice, stereotyping and ignorance about his/her cultural background. For some, another dimension is added: physical characteristics which immediately single him/her out. Before even a word is spoken, others may have made assumptions which can be especially disconcerting and may also be quite mistaken. It is easy to assume, for example, that a particular student must be an overseas student when judging by physical appearance alone, but that student may be a second, third or fourth generation Australian, who may then be justifiably irritated by not being accepted as such.
Working with overseas students

by Helen Smith

Every new student experiences some difficulty in learning to operate effectively in a university, but the overseas student faces many additional problems and clearly the capacity to adjust can affect academic performance. Some may encounter prejudice, stereotyping and ignorance about his/her cultural background. For some, another dimension is added: physical characteristics which immediately single him/her out. Before even a word is spoken, others may have made assumptions which can be especially disconcerting and may also be quite mistaken. It is easy to assume, for example, that a particular student must be an overseas student when judging by physical appearance alone, but that student may be a second, third or fourth generation Australian, who may then be justifiably irritated by not being accepted as such.

Overseas students have many adjustments to make. The immediate problem of change of climate and change of diet may seem unimportant, but constantly underline the strangeness of the environment. In adapting to the general environment students may encounter prejudicial attitudes. If these are found in the general community, the students seem to cope fairly well (they have been expecting to find such attitudes in Australia), but they find it much less easy to cope with racist attitudes among fellow-students, and, if they perceive these attitudes in the teaching staff, they find it very difficult indeed. Most have been taught to respect teachers and to value education which has long been the means of increasing the family status and wealth. Academic achievement is highly prized. In addition, most Asians have been taught to respect their elders, so the teacher occupies a very special position.

Overseas students also have to adjust to their fellow-students, and even students from the same country do not necessarily relate easily to each other for the usual reasons (personality, political or religious beliefs, social status).

Suggestion

In forming tutorial groups/study groups allow students to select, where possible, their own group. Some will feel most comfortable in a group which contains another person who speaks the same language; while others will prefer to be separated from any student who speaks the same language, or from particular students.

It is difficult for many Australians to comprehend the formality in the home environment of many overseas students, and, consequently a most usual expectation is that the students must make all the adjustments, but the benefits of university staff making some simple modifications are worth considering. Small changes may help to reduce the inevitable “culture shock”.

Overview
For example, if a staff member habitually uses a formal mode of address to all students, there is no problem: all students are addressed as 'Mr', 'Miss', or 'Ms', but if a less formal mode is used, problems can arise. It is a matter of courtesy to learn the correct pronunciation, but some care is advised in the use of given names. For many overseas students the given name is a private possession, not to be used by other than one's family and most intimate friends. This may seem to be a very trivial matter, but that is our perception. To ignore this 'small' matter may lead to giving a constant offence.

Korean students, for example, are accustomed to being called 'Mr' or 'Miss' and if one were teaching in Korea, it would be appropriate to adopt that formula, but as students in Australia use each other's given name, and many staff too prefer this kind of informality, it is important to tell students how you wish to be addressed and ask them to select a name by which they would like to be addressed.

At Charles Sturt University - Riverina, I was intrigued to find that Korean students address the eldest male Korean student as 'elder brother', because to use his given name would be disrespectful and to use the formal 'Mr Lee' would also be inappropriate in the Australian context. Allowing students to make the choice of name makes everyone feel comfortable. The names selected are frequently 'English' names which sound something like their own given name, or which they find attractive (e.g. 'Sae-Ha' became 'Sarah'); some choose a combination of family name and given name ('LEE Sang Ho' became 'Leeho'); sometimes initials are preferred ('J.J.' for Kim Jung-Jin); and, one decided, with a touch of bravado, to be known as 'McGyver'.

We may find it quaint or even preposterous that many a student does not address his father without kneeling before him; that it would be impolite in the extreme to smoke in his father's presence (even if the father is himself a 'chain-smoker'); and that the father's word is law. Students accustomed to such a conservative society, when deprived of the father's rule-making and the mother's emotional support, frequently suffer extreme loneliness and feelings of uncertainty and isolation. At the same time, they are shocked by the apparent casualness of their own given name, or which they find attractive (e.g. 'Sae-Ha' became 'Sarah'); some choose a combination of family name and given name ('LEE Sang Ho' became 'Leeho'); sometimes initials are preferred ('J.J.' for Kim Jung-Jin); and, one decided, with a touch of bravado, to be known as 'McGyver'.

The concept of 'face' is difficult to comprehend. It may be the basis of the practice of smiling and nodding and saying 'yes' in apparent agreement. It means: 'I hear you, I am listening.' It does not mean: "I understand. I agree." To express disagreement poses a problem for it could imply either: "I am stupid because I do not understand," or "You are not speaking clearly." In the first instance, the student loses 'face', and in the second, causes you to lose 'face'.

The overseas students who come to Australia have invariably been successful in their own country. In many cases the whole family makes great sacrifices to support the student (of course there are some who bear no financial worries) and consequently, these less affluent students are under very great pressure to succeed, and to do so in the shortest possible time. If they are unsuccessful, they often feel that they are total failures and tend to blame themselves without taking into account any other factors.

The students are generally unused to the lecture-tutorial mode; to essay writing; and, to being required to think critically. Note-taking too presents a problem. The difficulty is not only unfamiliarity with the skill, but the problem of understanding the lecturer's accent; choice of words; and, the use of unfamiliar technical and other terms. The students will not ask "What does that mean?", or "Would you repeat that?" To ask would be taken as implied criticism, a 'dumb question', or as causing an
unnecessary interruption to the flow of the discourse. Their understanding of the point being made, however, is impaired.

Suggestion
The increased use of visual aids, 'handout' materials, and more frequent repetition of the main points combined with even more gentle than usual encouragement to participate will assist students in the early stages of their studies.

An underlying premise of 'Western' scholarship is that there is always another view, another solution to a problem, which comes as a surprise to many students as their cultural understanding of the point being made, however, is always another view, another solution to a problem, is moulded accordingly.

In general, Australian institutions expect the adaptations to be made by the students themselves. The staff have the undeniable duty to protect the academic standards of their institutions, but as teachers there is a need to be aware of the difficulties experienced by their students, and, consequently, a need to devise ways to assist all the students in their classes.

Each teacher (given that he/she has completely clear understanding of what he/she wants the students to achieve during each stage of the course; a firm wish to make the course material as comprehensible as possible; and, a desire to assist students to achieve success) will find his/her own methods and techniques but the following ideas may be useful.

The Language Problem
Even the most competent students will have some difficulty in understanding the variety of accents which they will encounter. Especially during the first few months, staff need to speak clearly and at suitable volume, to slow the pace to suit the comprehension rate; to vary tone and emphasis, to use 'markers' (e.g., "This topic involves three main points: first ..., second..., third ..."); to select carefully the choice of vocabulary (slang terms are easy enough to eliminate, but it requires some concentration to avoid using without explanation common terms which are typically Australian, such as, 'Pitt Street farmers', 'breathalyser', 'gold licence'; or, abbreviations, such as, 'Com. Steel', 'The Admin.'; and, acronyms like NRMA, BHP, XPT. Acronyms need to be explained and written on the board or on the overhead projector. It is apparent that we Australians like acronyms. They make for speed of communication, but invariably we tend to increase the pace of delivery when we use them.

Overseas students (and Australian students too) find a lecture or tutorial easiest to understand if they are given:

(a) Very specific preparatory reading or exercises to complete prior to the lecture/tutorial. (That does not mean "Read the next chapter of the textbook, and there are a couple of useful articles you can find in the library." but rather, "Read Chapter 4 of your textbook. Concentrate upon the introduction, the conclusion and paragraph 8. Be sure you understand what is meant by '...').

(b) A brief outline at the beginning of the lecture/tutorial about what will be covered in the session, and a brief summary at the end which again emphasises the chief points.

(c) A clear presentation of the material with the essential points shown on the chalkboard or OHP, or on a 'handout'. (The 'handout' should contain some of the information only. It may be a 'framework' which requires the student to add information given during the class. This helps to overcome the note-taking difficulty.)

(d) A review of the main points at the end of the session and some questions to check understanding of the main concepts. Avoid asking: "Any questions?" or, "Do you understand?" because these are unlikely to produce any useful response. Instead ask, for example, "What would happen if we omitted Step 3?"; "Does this mean that the same results could be achieved by ....?"; "What, then, is the main use of this procedure?", etc.

(e) Visual aids to expand or demonstrate the point being made, but also to provide a brief 'break' during the lecture/tutorial.

(f) The opportunity to review the lecture/tutorial via audio-tape. It is especially helpful in the early stages of the course for students to have access to a tape of exactly what was said so that they can listen as often as necessary to ensure comprehension. Students could be encouraged to make their own tapes, or better still, have these produced professionally by the university.

(g) A clear, specific and accurate course outline. This allows students to read in advance and to plan a workable study schedule. No important information (e.g., date for submission of an assignment or test; cancellation of a lecture; change of room, etc.) should be given verbally. Information given in writing precludes the possibility of misunderstanding.

Study Skills
A problem for staff is how to help the student move from dependent learning to being an independent learner. This problem is not only a feature of working with overseas students, but exists to some extent with all undergraduates. Awareness that one is teaching not only subject matter but people and procedures is the key, but if the subject matter is not taught then the student is 'short changed'. Overseas students pay dearly for their degrees and the Australian community suffers if Australian students do not acquire the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes expected of graduates. If one regards a first degree as a proof that the student has undergone a study of basic concepts and procedures, has followed a path of guided reading, writing, interpretation and analysis, has examined
opposing points of view has some understanding of what the 'leaders' in the field have believed/discovered/achieved - in short, that the first degree provides a starting point for later individual work - then, it is clear that lecturers are required to teach more than just subject matter. The clearer the objective the more likely it is that the desired results will be achieved. (This applies both to the teaching process and the learning process.)

It is sometimes difficult for the academic, expert in the area chosen for his/her Masters degree or PhD, to remember the stages gone through in the first degree which made possible the later specialist study. Interest becomes focused on the particular, narrow area of expertise (it may be, after all, that academic's chief interest) but the undergraduate first has to go through a similar kind of general and basic 'training'. For an undergraduate to spend a disproportionate amount of time on a narrow aspect of the discipline is inappropriate, rather like beginning a course in diving with a triple somersault. Equally to be avoided, if one wishes to inculcate clear thinking, analysis and interpretation, is the undergraduate course which is presented from a narrow viewpoint where each of the required texts follows the same 'party line'.

Very useful for the teacher of undergraduates would be a review of the basic courses he/she undertook, combined with a thoughtful review of which aspects were helpful, relevant and provided a suitable basis for later studies; an analysis of the difficulties; and consideration of how these difficulties may be removed or reduced.

A Problem of Assessment

Each country from which overseas students are drawn has its own system of education. This makes the task of the admissions officer very difficult indeed. Comparison between different examination scores between the various Australian States is difficult enough, but between diverse countries it is a very complex problem. Mistakes will and do occur. Keeping a careful account of what level of success is achieved by students who were admitted at a particular score, will reveal something, but it does not take into account the different levels of motivation and the problems individual students may have had in adaptation to Australian tertiary studies. Such a study is worth doing, however, and should include a comparison of English scores upon entry.

Staff frequently express concern about the level of English and struggle to decide upon a policy of assessment which does or does not take level of English into account. Opinions differ, but at least it is worth considering that course assessment should be based upon understanding of concepts and that marks should not be deducted for overseas students for faulty English.

It is essential, however, to indicate the errors which occur. This does not mean that each tortuous sentence must be unscrambled by the marker, and each grammatical or spelling error corrected, but so that the student is aware that errors are being made, some system of indicating them needs to be adopted.

Staff are invariably aware of the need to make assignment and examination questions completely clear, simple and unambiguous, but these same carefully worded questions can nevertheless totally confuse the students. If a colleague in another Faculty or department, who has NO knowledge of (or as slight as possible an acquaintance with) the subject, reads the question, any lack of clarity is more likely to be detected.

It goes without saying that any comments written upon work submitted by students should be very carefully expressed and legible.

Although there is little enough time to complete all the tasks associated with teaching, great benefits can result when staff seek out students with difficulties and encourage them to attend interviews; when additional time is given to discuss issues; when staff realise that language acquisition and proficiency develop slowly and gradually; and finally, when staff are prepared to consider different styles of teaching, different support services and different course offerings. There is an undeniable duty to protect academic standards, but as teachers, there is also the responsibility for ensuring awareness of the difficulties experienced by their students, and, consequently, for devising appropriate assistance based upon awareness of the needs, problems and expectations of all students in their classes.

Helen Smith, after a long career in Teachers Colleges and Colleges of Advanced Education in NSW, is now retired and lives in Canberra. She has travelled widely and has lived and studied in a number of countries acquiring, therefore, first-hand experience of the problem of being an "overseas student".

While at Goulburn CAE she was involved in the introduction of two graduate diplomas in Intercultural Communication. In 1984 she transferred to Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education and after 6 months as Acting Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and a further period as Acting Dean of Studies, she established and directed what is now the Charles Sturt University (Wagga Campus) English Language Centre.

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