Intercultural Learning at Home: Promoting internationalisation on campus

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 BACKGROUND

Commissioned by the University of Western Australia’s Alumni Annual Fund Grant, this research has been conducted in conjunction with the *Intercultural Learning at Home: Promoting Internationalisation on Campus* project managed by Professor of Anthropology, Loretta Baldassar. Conducting focus groups acted as a pedagogic tool enabling Anthropology and Sociology Honours students to practice research techniques, simultaneously bringing local and international students together through the development of formal and informal curricula.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

The aim of this research is to:

- Determine the relative value international engineering students place on proficient English as a prerequisite to attain employment in a globalised marketplace.

- Examine if the University of Western Australia provides appropriate aid for international students both on campus and in within the academia.
1.3 PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY

A one-hour focus group was orchestrated and took place at 12.00pm on Thursday 17\textsuperscript{th} of September 2014 in room 1.10 of the Social Sciences Building, on the Nedlands/Crawley campus of the University of Western Australia (UWA). Four bilingual students from three different countries attended the meeting which I moderated. Students offered not only their viewpoints, but also an opportunity for me to practice the craft of conducting a focus group and applied research. A ‘self managed group’ strategy was used (Hollander 2004, p. 612).

Additionally, I attended a series of presentations held at the Harry Perkins Institute on Thomas St, Nedlands. These lectures also focused on Internationalisation of Higher Education. Providing insights with regards to how UWA is positioned on the global scale, the presentations facilitated how information gathered from this investigation was interpreted.

1.4 FINDINGS

From this research the following conclusions were drawn:

- Students considered English to be the essential prerequisite in attaining employment in the global marketplace.
- Speaking English is recognised as a marker of difference both in their own countries and in Australia.
• Levels of English are directly correlated with power, status and hierarchy.
• Students learning capabilities improved more rapidly as socialization outside of the classroom increased.
• Students use UWA as a platform through which to improve their English.
• Self-confidence increased as English levels improved, and students were more enthusiastic to remain in Australia and seek employment.
• Parents were influential in students’ participation in international study abroad at UWA.
• The project was successful in forging new relationships amongst students on both inter- and intra-disciplinary levels.

Major problems and limitations identified within this project were:

• Attendance of students at the focus group was less than anticipated.
• Lack of attendance suggests poor recruiting technique;
• Students class schedule clashed with the allocated focus group time, which truncated the session.

1.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research involving more focus groups, larger sample sizes and a greater diversity of international students, both in background and in their fields of study, would be useful. Comparative studies of the percentage of
international students who attend UWA and follow on to attain employment, which demands the use of English, would also aid the study significantly.

2 INTRODUCTION

‘Approximately one quarter of the world’s population speak and or write English’ (Mattisson 2012, p.118). It is a widespread assumption that employers favour potential employees that can communicate in English also. If we consider that ‘the self represents the other – just as the other represents the self’ (Clark 2009, p. 87) examining opinions of international students, from within an internationalised context, aspiring employment, may offer some insight with regards to this notion. ‘Existing academic research on international students tends to focus on a single aspect of their experience, for example the attractions of the host country, the difficulties encountered by students, or the adaptive strategies they use to negotiate their studies’ (Soonsinpai 2009). This research, observes how students perceive the significance of English in internationalised contexts and how they utilise the University of Western Australia as a vehicle to improve English, acculturation in Australia and future employment opportunities.
In preparing this research I engaged in literature from three main sources, focusing on bilingualism and English as status.

Myers-Scotton defines that bilingualism, is ‘the ability to use two or more languages sufficiently to carry on a limited casual conversation’ (2006, p. 44). Bilinguals rarely have equal control of both languages and rarely use two languages in exactly the same situations (2006, p. 38). Myers-Scotton examines how ‘language may facilitate or limit power in different situations, [maintaining] the capacity to include and exclude’ (2006, p. 116).

Mattisson’s paper on Internationalisation studies ‘the status of English as the language of teaching and learning’ (2012, p. 117), recognising it to be a more ‘desirable lingua franca than any other language’ (Crystal 2000, p.6). Mattisson explores how learner differences are determined primarily by motivation and language aptitude. Drawing on Gardner’s socio-educational model (Ellis 1994), Mattisson ascertains that where motivation is encouraged and proficiency integrated with cultural values, beliefs and attitudes, learning can be increased (2012 p. 118). The model explains the relationship between setting and proficiency ‘by identifying a number if intervening variables, including attitudes, motivation and self-confidence’ (2012 p. 119).

Amit’s study on Student Mobility and Internationalisation (2010) addresses English language and employment. ‘Employers like these kind of [language] skills in the labour market and that they see it as something that strengthens
the quality of the employee that they bring on…” (2010, p. 11). Amit argues that ‘internationalism is not simply a response to global connectedness but to the diffusion of a particular ideological paradigm of the university in a ‘global marketplace’ (Amit 2010, Brody 2007).

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 RECRUITMENT

Two techniques were employed to recruit participants for the focus group:

- A Professor of Engineering at UWA sent two separate emails to her class members informing them of the project. Eighteen students received these emails. Of those eighteen, five responded showing interest and voiced the possibility of attending.

- Colleagues from Applied Anthropology and Practice 2 who know international students studying engineering were asked to contact their friends on my behalf. When three more contacts were made, the ‘snowball technique’ was put into action, whereby contacts ask more people that they know that also fit the demographic, to attend.

4.2 PARTICIPANTS

Four students attended the focus group, comprising equally, both genders. Participants were between the ages of 19 and 24. For ethical reasons,
students assigned themselves pseudonyms: Pete (Saudi Arabia), Gemma (Nepal) and Soo-Li and Jon (China).

Soo-Li and Jon study together and have been friends since their arrival in Australia in January 2013. Gemma, Pete and myself, were unacquainted until the focus group commenced.

4.3 LOCATION/SETTING/DURATION

The focus group was scheduled to start at 12.00pm on Thursday 17th of September 2014, in room 1.10 of the Social Sciences Building, on the Nedlands/Crawley campus of the University of Western Australia (UWA). The room was booked until 1.30pm.

Attendees, being from a different faculty and unfamiliar with the Social Sciences building, encountered difficulty finding the room and so arrived between 12.09pm and 12.20pm. Because fewer students arrived than anticipated it was necessary to rearrange the room. I guided them to one end of the table, to occupy only one corner. Being aware of the ‘hierarchy that is evident in the social organisation of the focus group – the facilitator is often seen as authoritative’ (Kratz 2010, p. 810), thus I endeavoured to create even spacing between all participants and was careful to maintain a relaxed seating posture.

Students had class at 1.00pm, so could not stay for the entire duration. They left at 12.48pm.
4.4 DATA GATHERING

The focus group followed a ‘self managed group’ strategy, where the moderator initiate[s] the discussion but allows the conversation be run by the group (Hollander 2004, p. 612).

Two techniques were employed throughout the session to gather data:

- The discussion was recorded
- Shorthand notes were taken, recording the order in which participants spoke throughout the conversation.

The session plan I had pre-emptively devised was useful only in terms of providing the next question to ask the group. Although I had ample space in which I intended to write notes, I felt I could not note-take and offer genuine attention. ‘When participants see that the researcher[s] [is] genuinely interested in learning as much as possible about their experiences and feelings, then conformity is seldom a problem’ (Hollander 2004, p. 610). It was equally important to observe the participants throughout the discussion to detect meaning from non-verbal communication gestures.

As moderator, I aimed to ‘achieve a communicative democracy in which all participants can and should speak equally’ (Kratz 2010, p. 811), although the fact that all students agreed on most topics, led me to question the focus group as an appropriate method of eliciting information. Clark cautions against the ‘homogenising of group experience’ (2009, p. 87), however upon
reflection and during analysis of the focus group transcripts, I recognised that no participant was 'too silent or too dominant' (Kratz 2010).

Noting the order by which students spoke (albeit by jotting down students initials) was beneficial when it came to transcribing the recorded data.

4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Recordings were listened to several times before and during transcription. This aided in familiarisation of the session and the primary identification of emerging themes. How individuals responded to each question or topic was then analysed and the data was organised according to consistencies or differences.

Recurrent responses were then grouped together, and coded with abbreviated letters or colours signifying separate categories and related themes. From emergent themes arose patterns and connections. These were significant because they illustrated the reasoning behind the major themes. As analysis became more intricate, I found it useful to draw diagrams connecting patterns and themes. This illustrative model was also helpful in revealing gaps in the investigation and areas in which further study may be required.
5 RESULTS

5.1 KEY FINDINGS

Responses were both verbal and non-verbal and often demonstrated multiple recurrent themes.

- Students universally agreed that English was a prerequisite for obtaining a ‘good job’ in a global market.

The students themselves expressed this view and again at various intervals throughout the session, three of four participants made references to the fact that their parents believed the same to be true. This suggests that students had parental support to participate in the UWA study abroad program. Peter for example, stated, “My father says speaking proper English, is the most important thing for international business. You don’t want to be making mistakes in a business meeting. People will focus more on the mistake than what you are trying to get across… He said it’s best to come to Australia versus Germany, because English is native here”.

Jon offered that “employers want to see that you can live and adapt to other cultures, and of course speak English…. this is very important…” To which Gemma responded, “[Y]eah… not speaking English it’s… it’s like a road-block. There is no room for mobility… If an employer has two people for a job and one of them speaks English, and one doesn’t… of course he will take the person who speaks [English]”.

Gemma’s comparative example was reiterated by Soo-Li’s response:
Soo-Li: “...my sister does not speak English, and I doubt she can get a job outside of anywhere... she will always be in China without speaking English... I think it will be hard for her... hard to get a good job I mean...”

- Speaking English, and levels of English is recognised as a marker of difference both in their own countries and in Australia.

The aforementioned response of Soo-Li’s, simultaneously highlighted English as a marker of difference, status and hierarchy. When she spoke of her sister not speaking English, she was frowning. Her frown suggested frustration and or worry. Later, Soo-Li nodded in agreement when Gemma voiced, “I have friends back home who can’t speak English... I feel sorry for them, they will get left behind...” ... Peter also supported this view, stating “it’s hard if you don’t speak English in this day and age, so easy for you to be left out...”. Later in the session, Jon joked about his Mother saying, “Yeah... my poor Mum, she misses all the jokes...”. Repetitive reference to notions of exclusion and underlying feelings of sympathy, worry and pity for those who cannot participate during communication in English accentuate how language can be limiting or empowering.

- Levels of English are directly correlated with power, status and hierarchy.

When talking about working within the classroom two of the four students expressed feelings of marginalisation because of their English levels.
Soo-Li: “Jon and I worked together because our English was the same level... I got the feeling people didn’t want to go in groups with me because things take, or took – well... sometimes I struggle still...[giggles] – but I found it way more hard at the start. I felt other people don’t want to go with me because my English was not so good as theirs...”

Jon: “Yeah. It was like this a lot at the start. But it’s much better now...”

Furthermore, during the Q&A at the Harry Perkins Institute presentations, an Australian student expressed that if a group project was being graded as a collective, he would position himself with the most proficient students possible, so as to give himself the best opportunity to gain the highest grade, “it's not that I wouldn’t make friends with them [L2 English speakers], not at all... it just makes sense to do what is best for me and my marks”.

When comparing themselves to native English speakers, students’ self-assurance was weaker. Peter admitted, “I got so nervous when I first arrived because Australians speak so fast”. In contrast, whilst in their native countries, the fact that they speak English is credited. Gemma said “Everybody at school used to ask me how to say things [in English]... I helped them [friends] with words and spelling and stuff”.

- Students learning capabilities improved more rapidly as socialisation outside of the classroom increased.

- As English levels improved with time spent at UWA, so did self-assurance and confidence in future employment opportunities.
Gemma said that although it took some time, she now has many new friends from both Australia and abroad, “the Facebook PI page was really helpful… I found my tutor through somebody else on the page”. Peter said, “I went to some of the social events posted on PI and joined a mixed netball team, I made friends fast… they helped me by introducing me to friends of theirs that also study engineering…. I got help with the homework, and my English improved a lot… and fast”. All students commented on their improved standards of English, and how speaking English has reshaped their identities in a positive manner. Jon best expressed this by saying “I am not worried anymore... when I first came here it was a struggle, but the whole [UWA] experience has changed me so much… I can see myself working anywhere” (Peter, Soo-Li and Gemma nod in agreement).

- The focus group aided in integrating international and local students.

The focus group ended with a positive tone. Students were appreciative of being able to voice their perspectives and contact has been maintained amongst all participants.

6 CONCLUSION

It is clear that students place high importance on the significance of speaking English with proficiency. More significantly, study abroad programs offered at the University of Western Australia are instrumental in assisting students to achieve this proficiency. In addition, students view their experiences at UWA as a means through which to broaden intercultural experiences, develop their sense of self and identity as well as advance future job
prospects. A pre-requisite for successful internationalisation is that the intercultural higher education landscape is presented not as a binary on international and home or self and other, but as a complex site of struggle, tension and conflict. Mattisson observes that ‘far from being problematic – as some might assume, this site is both useful and transformative’ (Mattisson 2012, p. 118).

7 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

An important goal of higher education is to achieve an understanding of what international university experience entails for both students and teachers. More thorough investigations in the future and a greater focus on improving language assistance programs and integrated learning experiences, could significantly aid the motivations and productivity of student learning curves at UWA.
8 REFERENCES


Soonsinpaï, Tannikarn. ‘A transnational rite of passage: lived experiences of Thai international students in Perth, Western Australia’. University Of Western Australia. School Of Social And Cultural Studies ; University Of Western Australia. Anthropology And Sociology Discipline Group 2009
APPENDIX

Appendix 1:

FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

Topic: International students studying Engineering (and English) at the University of Western Australia.

Question: How does the UWA program and or experience assists ESL students in achieving optimal levels of English?

Significance: To understand the ways in which students are utilising their study abroad experiences to gain international job offers/improve future job prospects.

Group Demographic:

10 international, English-second-language (ESL) engineering students

(I have a contact within the Engineering Dept. of UWA. (Professor Melinda Hodkiewicz).

Professor Hodkiewicz is aiding me with my Honours thesis and has informed me she has many international students, predominantly from China, in her classes).

I would, if possible like my students to come from different countries, allowing me a broader scope of response focusing on difference of experience, rather than similarity. This will essentially depend upon the number of students I am able to recruit. I do not mind whether some of the students are friends/acquaintances.

NOTES TO SELF:

- Prior to focus group participants arriving, organize the furniture of the room, keep it evenly spaced
- Consider my positioning, where will I sit?
- Have questions written clearly and well spaced ie. 1-2 (max)/page, leaving appropriate space for note taking, jotting down of non-verbal gestures.
- Consider dividing up page; verbal/non-verbal communication.
- Take a second recording device as back-up or in case of soft voices/large room.
- Test recording equipment before starting.
- Take name tags or cards to prop up names (or pseudonyms).
• Consider culture specific refreshments – something to break the ice… ??
• Take a personal watch/timing device that is in time with the other recorders, so that notes can correlate with transcript better.
• Be aware of time – one hr can go very quickly.
• Take a post- Focus Group reflection survey as an option for participants to fill out/or mock up an email.
• Try to get all participants involved with the discussion.

Preparing to start the session

As people assemble try to offer them some refreshment.

Once people are settled, check with the group whether they all know each other. If not, start by going round the group and getting everyone to introduce themselves. Draw a ‘map’ of where everyone is sitting. You may not be able to do this if the group all know one another beforehand.

• Make sure that everyone is comfortable and that everyone can see each other
• Ask students to sign participant consent form
• Reassure students that:
  • Opinions expressed will be treated in confidence
  • All responses will remain anonymous
  • Participants are able to withdraw from the FG if they so desire at any given time without consequences
  • All results will be destroyed at the termination of the project

Introduction to the session

“Hi everyone… I’m Bonita, and am very grateful to you all for sparing time to talk about your study abroad experiences here at UWA and in WA… The purpose of this focus group is to learn more about the quality of your experience learning English within the university, more specifically whilst studying an engineering degree, and whether you think your time here will aid in future employment, here or elsewhere. This information will help to inform my Supervisor Loretta Baldassar in the future development of research assessment.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estimated Time &amp; Topic</th>
<th>Question/Topic</th>
<th>Anticipated Response</th>
<th>First Words</th>
<th>Speaker No.</th>
<th>Notes…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12.00-12.10</td>
<td>Introduction: “Thank you for your time… Purpose of FG is to learn more about your experience being an international student, learning English @ UWA and whether you think it will aid in future employment, here or elsewhere.</td>
<td>Some jokes/banter re: pseudonyms…</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>* Make a map of seating arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.10-12.13</td>
<td>In one word, describe your experience of being an intl st. here at UWA</td>
<td>Varied responses</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Warm-up</td>
<td>First off, lets discuss any language difficulties encountered upon arriving in WA, eg. on flight/campus? Engineering is a highly specialized field of study, have you all aspired to become engineers for some time?</td>
<td>A few humorous stories…</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12.13-12.23</td>
<td>….Is it engineering you actually want to do, or is this degree just a platform for another field?</td>
<td>Sts. may go into detail telling background/family stories… reasons for study…</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breaking the ice</td>
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<td>Hopefully sharing experiences and reasons for</td>
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<td>12.23-12.40</td>
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<td>Warming into focus topics</td>
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<td>Time</td>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Question/Comment</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.40-12.50</td>
<td>Marrying both topics together</td>
<td>Surely, it must have been a little difficult to start with – studying a course in a different language, what were some of the difficulties you went through, with regards to communicating in class, with professors, vocab, communication in general... Did the university aid you?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.50-1.10</td>
<td>Looking to the future</td>
<td>-(Why engineering@UWA...?) How important do you think your experience/s here is in terms of getting a job in the future? ... Australia has a lot of job opportunities etc.... Did they come here to learn English and or engineering and or Australian culture...??</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.10-1.15</td>
<td>Rounding up</td>
<td>Thank all sts. once again for coming, reassure them that all responses are confidential.. and that they can contact me at any time choosing engineering as a degree... Speaking more freely and specifically about experiences within class and the university Personal/parental influence Some will say imperative (as I imagine Eng. is a pre-req for some of the jobs they may want)... Others may be looking to stay in Australia after this experience...</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>