

Self directed learning is fine - if you know the destination!

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Many international students in Australian tertiary institutions are studying in what may be their second or third language. While the current status of English as a 'world language' makes it highly desirable to have a degree in that language, undertaking tertiary study in a second/ foreign language is no easy matter, nor should some of the difficulties be underestimated.

This paper supports the view that the aim of tertiary study is to develop learners who are independent, confident and self directed. However, it raises the issue that international students, at least in the initial stages of their sojourn in Australia, may require a more structured approach than self directed learning would seem to imply. The paper then describes some of the strategies that support international students in making the transition to study in an Australian tertiary institution and suggests further steps that will, gradually, lead such students to become confident and independent learners who will develop their full potential.

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 as at August '99 show that it has 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 'The Experiences of International Students Survey', 1996. Several staff have also undertaken research into the needs of non English speaking background (NESB) students, including international students (for example, Bell, 1994; Chung 1995; Hall 1996; Parker, Kirkpatrick & Kisane, 1997; Mulligan & Kirkpatrick 1997; Reid, Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 1998).

This paper is based on the findings of two further Curtin research projects undertaken in 1998. They are:

- a study examining NESB/ international student perceptions of their linguistic and other education needs (Briguglio, 1998); and
- a study examining assessment practices in the Curtin Business School (CBS) which also focussed on the needs of students whose first language is other than English (Jones, 1999).

The first study presents the perceptions of some 18 students, who were interviewed in some depth, while the second is based on interviews with 23 academic staff from the Curtin

Business School. In both cases the majority of students concerned were international students.

The findings of the above projects indicate that international students, particularly in their first and second year of university in Australia, require more, rather than less, assistance and support. 'Self directed' learning is certainly a desirable goal of tertiary education, but it would be erroneous to assume that international students could be self directed upon arrival in an Australian tertiary context. And while it is likely that all first year tertiary students experience an adjustment period of some sort, for international students the adjustment is likely to be greater and to extend over a longer period of time.

There has also been some discussion about whether the 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 to the author and from further interaction with international students, it would seem quite clear that culture and language 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). Nevertheless, For the purposes of this paper, an attempt will be made to discuss language and culture issues separately.

Language issues

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.

Students who reported they needed to improve their speaking skills indicated they did not always feel competent enough in their speech to be easily understood by local staff and students. 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, in Briguglio, 1998, p 8)

Students who experienced problems with reading indicated that they found reading in English time consuming and difficult. For other students, the problem was becoming familiar with the language of different disciplines.

There was some evidence, too, that students have some difficulty with comprehension in lectures and tutorials. This finding is supported by the earlier Mulligan and Kirkpatrick study (1997) and is emphasised strongly in Jones (1999, p 35). As for writing, apart from a concern to write in "grammatically correct" English, a more subtle need was expressed by students, 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).

Several students said 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). Other English language needs reported by students included help required with note taking, with reading of specialist texts and with essay writing format.

Tutorials were of more concern than lectures to students, many of whom said that they found it very difficult to participate in them fully. 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.

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 reasons proffered by staff, we can see from the analysis of student responses, above, that the reasons are somewhat more complex.

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 international students in several ways:

- students tended to find it difficult to express themselves in their own words instead of those used in texts;
- they tended to 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 based on 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 international students require assistance in related areas, such as academic skills/ concepts. For example, one student indicated that 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, on the whole local students feel less reluctant to approach lecturers and tutors and they tend to be more knowledgeable about where they can turn to access the necessary information. Staff need to provide very clear instructions about academic tasks, particularly since there are variations about similar tasks between disciplines and even between Schools in the same Division.

Among the students interviewed in the Briguglio study (1998) there was a feeling that they should not always be left to their own devices and be forced to find out things by trial and error for themselves. One aspect which was sometimes overlooked in regard to international students was, they felt, the time they needed to become familiar with bureaucratic processes or 'systems' within the University. This was an issue, for example, in regard to learning how the library functioned, what services (such as counseling) were available, and in regard to access to computers.

Providing better English language and other support for international students

It can be concluded, then, that a fairly structured and guided approach might be more advisable for international students, at least in their first year in an Australian tertiary institution. This is not to say that eventually they should not become self directed learners, but simply that in their case, the process will need to be more gradual and structured.

There are many support measures already in place at Curtin and other universities, though they are not necessarily widespread in all teaching and learning areas. A few strategies that students have indicated they find useful are described briefly below.

In regard to English language support, the assistance being provided by the author to Curtin Business School students is proving to be very useful and is certainly welcomed by international students. This consists of in context support at point of need, in the form of communication skills/ study skills seminars and one to one consultations.

In regard to lectures, students indicated that they found practical examples which illustrate theoretical aspects very useful. They found it particularly helpful when examples were not only local or Australian based but also international, where appropriate. Also considered helpful were: the use of overhead transparencies (which are not whipped away before students have time to copy from them); lecture notes or lecture outlines; very detailed unit outlines; lecturers who spoke slowly and clearly and did not use 'slang'; and lecturers who had 'good teaching skills'.

Students also indicated that they would welcome advice and mentoring from other senior/ more experienced international students from a similar cultural background. This might assist them in making some of the cultural transitions, in particular.

In conclusion, staff need to become more aware of the language and culture needs of international students so that they can be better equipped to assist them in becoming self directed learners.

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