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Case Study

# Enhancing international student engagement: interpreting business messages in visual approaches

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Abstract

This paper is illustrating diverse visual approaches intended to improving understanding of the relationship between the tutor and students in UK high educational sector. Language barriers and cultural differences are two main problems for teaching international students in business modules. Diverse visual methods are becoming important in interpreting business messages, and also enhancing the communication and interaction between the tutor and students. This research is based on a pilot study with sixteen international students in a postgraduate level business module. The findings clarify four visual approaches, comments feedback, imitation/role play, drawing competition and video quiz can deal with the language barriers and also balance the relationships between the tutor and students in internationalising the curriculum.

## Introduction

Globalisation has had an impact on universities, discipline contents and the teaching and learning process (Jonrd, 2010). This globalised environment also impacts on many universities which attract huge international students studying in the UK. The UK is becoming one of the most popular destinations for international students every year (Moore, Faltin, and Wright, 2010). However, globalisation also brings pressure on UK universities, particularly in facing tough competitions with other European universities in terms of staff, students, funding and ideas (Universities UK, 2010). Internationalising the curriculum thus

can help to improve the competitiveness of UK's universities, as well as addressing three emerging issues: effective communication with intercultural perspectives, increased awareness of students' different experiences and expectations and the development of students' diversified skills (Arkoudis, 2012).

Language can be the first barrier for international students when they start a course. McGee and Lawrence (2009) argue that different language systems may cause difficulty for international students to understand a second language, particularly when they transfer their writing and reading ability from first language to the second language. Indeed, most international students, whose first language is not English, have to take International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and meet certain requirements before going to study in UK universities. The aim of this is to ensure students have basic communication ability. IELTS generally tests for students' language ability in four areas, including listening, speaking, reading and writing.

However, most international students are struggling to engage in the UK teaching and learning environment, even though they have passed IELTS exam. Learning a language is a long-term process if it lacks of enough communicating opportunities. Many cases show that learners have difficulties to accept a foreign language if they cannot always be in a foreign language atmosphere (Arkoudis, 2012; Mezirow, 2000). Many Chinese students, for instance, cannot present their opinions appropriately when they start to participate in a new environment. The Chinese language system is much different from English language system in linguistics, pronunciation and grammar. The language barrier usually causes different interpretations in the communication between tutors and students. Thus, this research associated with four visual approaches, is trying to address the gap in language communication, and also enhance international student engagement in the English language teaching system. There was a pilot study based on a Master level module entitled Sector Industry Analysis, which was taught in Sheffield Business School at Sheffield Hallam University. This module was designed to show students that the service industry, consisting hospitality, tourism, leisure and events, may contribute to or impact on the whole industrial environment. The assessment of this module was composed of two parts: one is individual tasks with four synopses, and the second one is the seen, timed-essay in class. For this research, one seminar group was selected, which included 16 international students mainly from EU and Asian countries. All students started their international study in the UK in the spring term of 2012.

### **Visual approaches in teaching international students**

Visual approaches were applied in order to improve teaching quality and enhance international student engagement. Kraiger, Ford and Salas (1993) argued that applying a skill-based teaching approach will be helpful to achieve cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Teachers could also improve their performances and teaching quality by various creative teaching approaches (Sachs, 2003). These creative approaches may make it easier for international students to communicate with tutor and other classmates with the aid of

visual symbols, images, sounds and other related visual activities. In Foster's (1988: ix) view, 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein' can be constructed through different visions. In other words, visual symbols usually can reflect various meanings through different visual technologies, such as photography, video, TV, and arts performances. Applying visual methods can also understand different meanings and messages in the communication process (Gillian, 2001). Indeed, Ryan (2005) suggests that tutors should fully consider international student expectations and their learning gaps in academic knowledge, language, and culture differences. Thus, this research will employ this assumption to identify visual approaches that may impact on enhancing international student engagement in a business curriculum context. Four visual approaches, including comments feedback, imitating performance/role play, drawing competition and video quiz will be applied for this pilot seminar group.

### **Comments feedback**

McLoughlin and Luca (2002, 574) note that, 'The implication of applying efficient teaching approaches is that the creation of a constructivist, learner-centred environment where curriculum outcomes and tasks are aligned can foster cognitive skills and a deep approach to learning.' Comments feedback can be an efficient way to communicate academic knowledge and personal opinions between students and tutors. It is because that teacher providing formal and informal feedback and feed-forward is necessary to deliver seminar, learning sets, and one-to-one tutorial session (Falchikov, 2001). In the module of Sector Industry Analysis, students should complete four small assessments, five hundred words each. Students are also encouraged to finish each assessment every two weeks and then bring to the following seminar to discuss with their tutor.

The comments feedback was often used in the seminar group and the tutor would give written comments behind each student's assessment. Some questions, critical comments and a mark scale will be given in order to stimulate student engagement. The written feedback will not only give some formal academic comments, but also reflect informal communication between tutor and students. The critical comments, for instance, would be presented as "√" and "?" in the text, and summarised in the paragraphs at the end. In particular, the symbol of "√" and "?" can help a student interpret a tutor's understanding in a simple image. "√" means that students have good arguments and appropriate evidences, while "?" means students' interpretation is unclear, as well as their arguments are not very strong. The number of "√" and "?" can identify the degree of tutor's understanding in students' assessment. As a result, the tutor may agree with a student's argument if there is more "√" in the assessments.

International students may clarify the strength and weakness of their assessments based on these symbols. The symbol of "√" and "?" can also give confidence of writing academic English. If students have more "√", it means that their interpretations can be more understood by the tutor and their writing ability could be accepted. It helps to improve the awareness of writing ability for international students, especially on the Master level. The comments feedback generates positive outcomes that many students can finish each

assessment within two weeks. Indeed, some students take the initiative of tutor's feedback and then discuss it in the seminar.

However, some problems in relation to the perspectives of the tutor and students should be considered carefully. The first problem is that, giving written comments may be a little bit intensive for a tutor's daily work. The tutor cannot give individual handwritten comments if he/she has over 200 students in total. This pilot only applied to a small seminar group with 16 students, and this approach may be not available for a large group of students. The second problem is that students may focus on the number of "√" and "?" but not the exact meanings of the symbols. Indeed, some students were more attentive to the mark range rather than the comments. If students received a lower mark, most of them would hide their assessments and lose interest in engaging with seminar activities.

### **Imitation/role play**

Imitation is a creative approach in which students become actors and participants in a specific environment. This approach attempts to create an interesting context which students, especially international students can deal with their language barriers and build up confidence to talk in public. Language problems may impact communication between international students and tutors, and also among different students. Kember (2000) believes language barriers and cultural differences will impact on students and they may disengage in lectures and seminars. International students may worry about grammar mistakes in talking with people who are native English speakers. Many international students may become anxious of others' opinions when they speak in English, because they do not want to lose 'face' (Chuah, 2005; Jones, 2010). For instance, some international students may not often talk, or stop talking, with tutors and other students in order to avoid grammar mistakes and feeling embarrassed. This problem is very common within group work. The role play activity is trying to deal with this issue as well as enhance student awareness of employability.

Before role play activity, the tutor would ask students a question: 'What do you want to do after graduation?' Most students are willing to do some jobs in relation to hospitality, tourism and events. Some of them prefer to apply for a placement in UK. Thus, the selected questions relate to real interview questions in related business organisations. It attempts to offer an authentic interview environment, giving international students a sense of what to expect in the future.

As job seekers, students need to prepare an interview for a hotel job in an imitating environment. The tutor acts as a manager or a recruiter asks each student one question, encouraging them to think critically about the business environment, specifically areas of hospitality, tourism, leisure and events. Some questions posed are: 'Why do you want to work in the hospitality industry?', 'Why did you join the hotel sector?' Each student should give a personal statement within a minute. After students respond to questions, they will be given suggestions and tips by tutor.

Imitation approach attempts to enhance international student awareness of employability and future career plans. Graduates must demonstrate three main skills: communication, team-working and integrity through CVs and job interviews (Archer and Division, 2008). This approach attempts to practice students' interview skills and match the module's learning outcome, which is to increase students' understanding of business environment and the sectors of hospitality, tourism, leisure and event management. The students in pilot group can enjoy this approach even though it may give them pressure in answering the questions. One of them indicated:

I like this kind of approach even though I was very nervous at the beginning. Tutor didn't judge our performance, but only gave some suggestions related to the business environment and sector. It seems like playing games but it teaches us a lot.

Imitation approach attempts to build-up international student confidence to speak English in public. By taking into account that some international students may be shy or anxious, the tutor will have given students enough time to ponder questions, and provide some formative feedback in the form of nodding or smiling to confirm and encourage students in the exercise.

## Drawing competition

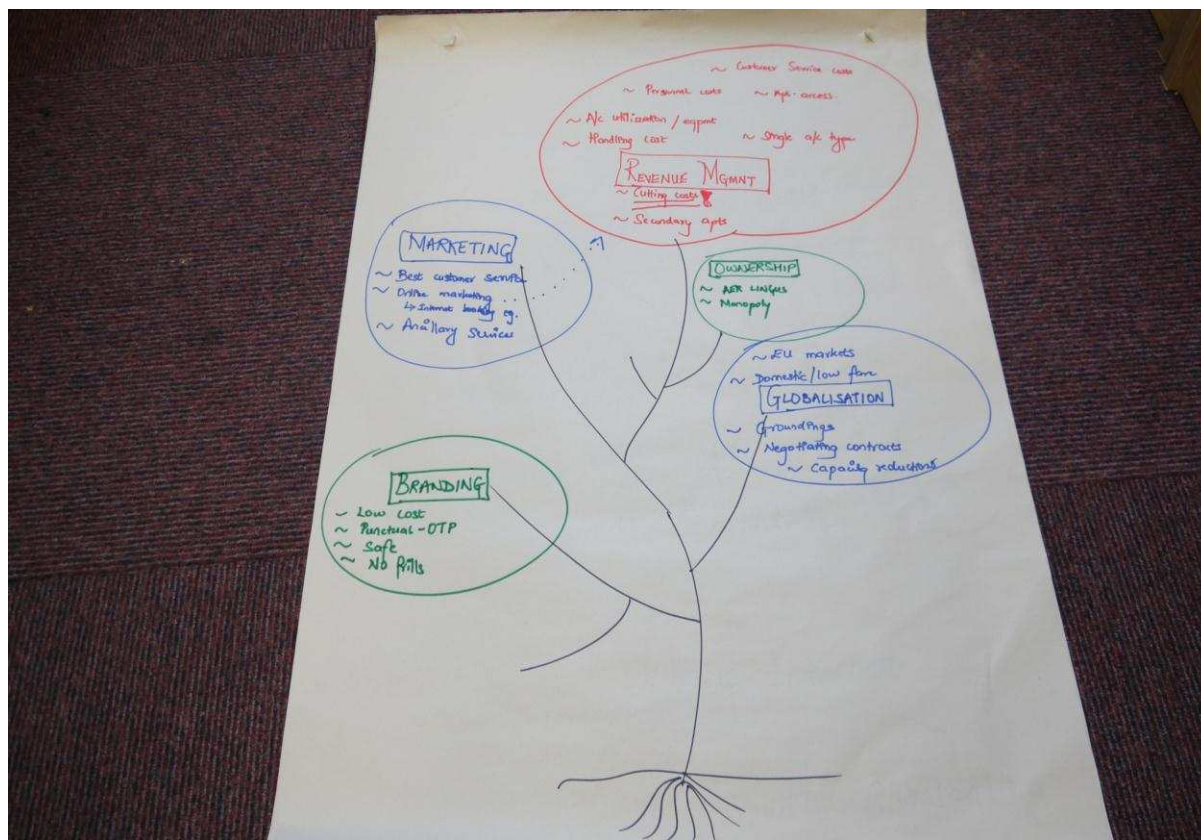


Figure 1: Students' group work for analyzing business strategies

Drawing competition attempts to train international students to summarise, exercising their analytical ability through picking up keywords and drawing them into an imaginative picture together. The module Sector Industry Analysis invites students to analyse operational strategies and performances of two leading organizations in the same sub-sectors. This drawing competition approach may help students understand an organisation's operational strategies in a logical but interesting imaginative way.

First of all, students groups have to complete some reading and analyse selected operational strategies. Afterwards, they are asked to draw a brainstorming map within a limited amount of time. Then student groups should complete drawing, associating it with key works as soon as possible. It keeps the fair principle that each group will read the same material at the same time. Each students group has twenty minutes to read two pages and then twenty minutes to summarise key strategies by cooperating with other group members. Finally, each group needs to present the map and give a five-minute explanation. As a reward, the work of the group who completes drawing activity first will be uploaded in the virtual learning environment.

The drawing competition exercises international students' ability to take-in information and summarise what they have read in a competitive environment. International students may not read and understand the meaning of text as native English speakers.

Therefore, the tutor would suggest international students to use different colours pens and highlight keywords when reading texts. It may also be efficient for students summarising the content in the group discussion (Belbin, 2010). Furthermore, the drawing competition enhances international students' analytical ability in a logical way. The tutor would suggest students to imagine the case company as a tree and the operational strategies as the branches. The students can then insert summarised keywords into the tree, which enhances their logical thinking in a colourful tree.

Most students in the pilot group can participate in drawing competition and learn business concepts and related theories. For example, one of them thought the tree map is very useful to understand operational strategies and company performance in a holistic and logical way:

The tree map can practice our analysing ability of other companies which we are not very familiar. Even though I may forget the content of key branches, I can still remember this analysing approach.

### **Video quiz**

Video quiz is a lively but a little difficult approach than other three approaches in teaching international students. As previously discussed, international students may not find it easy to take-in English and then interpret into their own messages. The module Sector Industry Analysis delivers a message that students can have a critical analysing ability and understand strategic management in the macro-micro environment. Therefore, the tutor should place careful attention when selecting video materials for new international students.

There is an example using video quiz in the pilot group. The tutor chose one video about the latest professional speech in the UK hospitality sector and asked students to make notes. There is one question posed to students in relation to the hospitality sector before the video is played. The students should write down their opinions in ten minutes when the video is completed. They will then divide themselves into different groups and exchange ideas.

The video quiz attempts to enhance international students' listening ability through creating a professional English atmosphere. Playing a video is a direct way to show students the latest developments in hospitality sector. It may also improve their understanding of English when watching the video.

However, the video has to be played twice because many international students, especially Asian students, struggled to make notes at the first time. For example, one Chinese student worried about it:

I was very struggling to understand the messages in the video at the first time. It's very difficult to complete the quiz if I cannot watch the video for the second time. Although I still can't understand the whole messages in the video, I can pick up some key points sometimes.



## Conclusion

Language can cause many problems for international students studying in the UK. Students might interpret some messages in different ways which are far from the tutor's perspectives. Moreover, a tutor may deliver the curriculum content which students cannot fully take-in. Four visual approaches have been offered here to provide a holistic understanding that may be able to interpret English language in a simple and pictorial way. The visual approaches can improve students' English ability in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The comments feedback focuses on writing. Imitation may assist with public speaking. The drawing competition coerces students to read, while the video quiz can strengthen a student's listening ability. As a result, the visual approaches to a certain degree can improve student confidence about engaging in various learning experiences. There will be further opportunity to employ these four visual approaches in the future. In doing so, questions revolving around the strength of the relationship between lecture and the seminar and diversifying the content of seminar will require addressing.

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