

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or  
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**Best practices of teaching and Engaging International Students in  
Online Learning: An Australian Perspective**

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**Abstract**

*Teaching international students can be challenging, either online or face-to-face. However, it can also be fruitful if one knows how to engage with international students in the learning and teaching environments, especially online. In Australia, traditional delivery of teaching was still going on for schools and higher educational institutions until the end of March 2020, but this changed within weeks to remote or online methods, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At La Trobe University in Australia, teaching was paused for a week to cope with the learning and teaching 'shock' – that is to re-orientate teaching from face-to-face to completely offering courses remotely to international and domestic students. The symbiotic relationship between learning and teaching, as well as between students and teachers, must go on via the online medium. Therefore, this presentation illustrates the journey of reflections of an award-winning, early-career, international, academic unpacking of the best online practices of teaching and engaging international students in online learning environments at La Trobe University.*

**Keywords:** online teaching, COVID-19, reflections, early career international academic, Australia

## Introduction

Australia had been steadily attracting international students from around the world up until the pandemic in 2020. There were 177,155 international students in 2019, but only 136,138 in 2020 studying in Australian higher educational institutions (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021). International education was worth \$40.3 billion to the Australian economy in 2019 (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020) and was the largest services export for Australia. Many international students at higher educational institutions come from two major countries: China (38.4%) and India (19.0%) (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021).

International students are attracted to study abroad for a number of reasons. These include: to experience international life; enhance career outcomes; develop personal and professional skills and contribution to home, host, or third countries, based on their qualifications and skills (Singh & Jamil, 2021; Singh & Jack, 2018). Therefore, it is vital, as teaching staff members, to provide a meaningful, supportive, and safe learning and teaching environment for international students to engage in and achieve academic success.

In the main, a wide range of research focuses on international students' academic and social adjustment challenges (Singh, 2021) and not on the strategies adopted by higher educational institutions to teach international students, as Lomer and Mittelmeier (2021) argue. These scholars state that there are limited scholarly studies focusing on classroom pedagogies involving international students. Scholars (e.g., Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Leask & Carroll, 2011) have labelled international students as passive and highly reluctant learners, when it comes to participation in academic and social activities, either in or outside the classroom environment. As a result, international students are normally seen in a deficit mode, as opposed to a resilient group of students (Singh, 2021). As such, teaching strategies for international students are not always assessed appropriately in the scholarly research (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021), in ways to understand the underlying problem of academic failure or disengagement of international students in the higher educational learning and teaching environment (Singh, 2020).

There are numerous scholarly articles that have explored international students' flipped classroom experiences, but limited research has explored the strategies of online teaching and learning in higher education in the current pandemic. According to Singh et al. (2019), the flipped classroom learning environment "has shifted its focus from the traditional, one-way teaching to engage students in meaningful learning activities, which supports the active learning principle" (p. 1311). For instance, a recent study by Singh et al. (2019) has argued that international students are active learners during face-to-face workshops, where they interact with other students and the lecturer, as a result of engaging with the online materials before coming to workshops. McPhee and Pickren (2017) find that international students do review online materials in their own time, pace and place, and they do take ownership of their learning process seriously. From these research findings, we infer that international students are not disengaged in the classroom, mainly due to their low English proficiency levels (Rao, 2017).

However, there are also studies that have explored the negative experiences of international students studying in a flipped classroom environment. Some of the challenges include language issues that are exacerbated for international students, because they have found it difficult to understand lengthy online reading materials and videos, and thus underperform in time-based quizzes (Singh et al., forthcoming). These students still preferred face-to-face sessions with lecturers and other students, due to their home country's culture of learning (Wang,

2016). They also found that locating online materials and navigating the diverse LMS functions were challenging for these students, because the interface of subjects may vary (Singh et al., forthcoming).

Although there are studies conducted to investigate flipped classroom experiences of international students, there are limited studies that explore online teaching approaches dedicated to international students during the time of crisis. Therefore, the purpose of this presentation is to highlight several successful online teaching strategies, adopted by an early-career teaching academic, to engage international students in the online learning and teaching environment due to COVID-19 – an environment very different from that in their home country.

## **Methods**

The author has used the autoethnography method to encapsulate her online teaching experiences during COVID-19 in 2020. Autoethnography falls under the interpretivist research paradigm and illustrates an individual's personal experience, in a systematic manner, to develop sociological understanding (Farrell et al., 2015). According to Stahlke Wall (2016), "personal experience methods can offer a new and unique vantage point from which to make a contribution to social science" (p. 1). However, she also states that "autoethnography has been criticized for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective, and individualized" (p. 1).

In order to capture this author's reflection on her online teaching strategies during COVID-19, autoethnography was one of the best ways to depict her experiences. The author reflected on her teaching experiences relevant to the writing prompt: What were the online strategies utilized to teach international students during COVID-19?

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Best Online Teaching Strategies**

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, face-to-face teaching was moved to online teaching within a week at the author's university in March 2020. In order to engage international students in the author's subject, the author adopted four major teaching strategies to engage international students in online classes. These strategies were: synchronous Zoom online delivery, Zoom's screen-sharing function, Zoom's breakout-room tool, and online games.

### **Synchronous Zoom Online Delivery**

According to Cooney and Darcy (2020), it is important for staff members to effectively use Zoom functions such as annotate, chat, poll, and breakout-room tools to engage students online. Therefore, during the synchronous online delivery via Zoom, the author used the chat function regularly. The author provided further information, messages, and uploads/downloads of relevant files on the online learning activity. International students also used it to send instant messages on issues, or to seek clarification on assignment questions or content. This assisted students who did not wish to share their questions with other classmates, especially for those feeling peer pressure, such as international students, but who were motivated to engage in the online workshop.

### **Zoom's Screen-Sharing Function**

Secondly, the author used the screen sharing option on Zoom to display the PowerPoint slides so that international students were able to follow the topic in discussion, as the author was aware that students preferred reading notes or slides. She used the screen annotation intensively, so that international students were able to engage innovatively with the content shared on screen. For instance, the author provided a question for students to answer, and international students commonly used annotate tools such as text or draw (lines, arrows, and shapes) in composing answers. The author then normally saved the screen with all annotations as a screenshot and included the screenshot in the slides, which she later shared on the Learning Management System (LMS), upon completion of the Zoom workshop, so that international students could review material for assignment purposes.

### **Zoom's Breakout-Room Tool**

Thirdly, the author frequently used the breakout-room tool in her weekly online workshops. Randomly allocating students to different breakout rooms every week gave domestic and international students the opportunity to learn how to discuss and engage with other students whom they may have ignored in a face-to-face classroom. Breakout rooms were used also for students to discuss and finalize their group assignments (Quezada et al., 2020), which was evident in the online workshop, as well. The author provided a drop-in session via the breakout room function for all group members to participate in separate rooms, in order to discuss their group assignment extensively. This session was conducted a week before their group assignment was due, and this has reduced the number of emails from students seeking extra guidance on their group assignment.

### **Online Games**

Lastly, the author personally developed online games for her students to engage with the weekly learning materials. The author mostly used a game-based online activity, called Kahoot, because this is a fun-based activity designed to further support students' learning in an online setting (Plump & LaRosa, 2017). The multiple-choice questions quiz takes about 15 minutes of online class time and was conducted a few times during the semester. Because the quiz is ungraded, the author observed that international students welcomed the use of this fun game, because they were able to answer most of the questions correctly and contribute to the learning environment. Immediate or real-time feedback, after every question, was provided to further clarify and explain the answers, which at times, stirred excellent discussions between the students and the author, as the online workshop facilitator.

## **Conclusion**

For teaching staff members, inclusivity is important to engage international students in their learning and teaching process. Students do feel they belong, not only to the subject or

course that they are studying, but also to the university, if they are able to engage meaningfully in the classroom, as well as outside of the classroom environment.

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