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Enhancing the University experience for students who are non-native English speakers on mainstream courses

A report for the University Teaching and Learning Committee

Kevin Orr

Introduction

The University of Huddersfield has benefited from an increase in the number of foreign students who have brought our courses and campus an international dimension. Many of our British students are unable to study abroad, so foreign students have created what has been referred to as "Internationalisation at Home" (Hyland et al 2008) and thus created an international perspective for everyone at the University. This small-scale project funded by the University Teaching and Learning fund has analysed the experience of students who are not native speakers of English and the lecturers who teach them. It set out with two primary aims:

1. To enhance the University's understanding of the use of English language by non-native English speakers (NNES) on mainstream courses.
2. To identify and disseminate good practice on what tutors can do that will benefit NNES students and not adversely affect native English speakers.

In order to achieve these aims there has been consideration of existing research in this area, coupled with original research at the University of Huddersfield to discover local issues. A fuller description of methodology is below.

Due to the limited scale of the project the focus is solely on language. To divide language from broader concepts of culture, identity and thought is at least questionable, and it has certainly meant making arbitrary and arguable distinctions. Similarly, the project touched on the broader internationalisation of the curriculum, but does not analyse this in depth. This significant area should be the subject of subsequent research. Nevertheless, the restricted focus on language has allowed important and useful insights into the experience of both students and staff. This paper reports on the project and its findings before making recommendations to tutors and managers involved with NNES. A brief "good practice guide" will also be produced for lecturers working with NNES students.

Definitions
In April 2006 Tony Blair announced the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI 2 2006) to attract 100,000 international students to the UK by 2011. The government define international students as those from beyond the European Union (EU); those from within the EU are home students and pay the same fees as UK students. This project did not differentiate on the status of students, but was interested only in those who speak English as a second or other language, whether they were from the EU, the UK or further afield. Throughout this group are referred to as NNES.

Like every other group of students, NNES are heterogeneous and any generalisations should be treated with caution. However, students who travel from abroad to study in Britain are, almost by definition, successful, self-motivated learners and so any recommendations about teaching made here should in no way imply these students require some sort of remedial help. Though not apparent in research carried out at the University of Huddersfield, a damaging and unfounded conflation has been made by some between lowering academic standards in universities and the influx of international students (for an analysis of this in the Australian context see Devos 2003). While genuine debate must be encouraged around the impact of NNES on University courses and, for example, implications for resources and tutor workload, this project found no evidence of courses reducing entry or assessment criteria in order to admit international students.

Methodology

The aims of this report concern understanding practice relating to the use of English by NNESs on mainstream courses and the dissemination of good practice based upon the perceptions of all of those involved. Analysis or theorisation of these perceptions or use of English were beyond its scope.

So as to gain a broad picture of student experience the major part of this research involved semi-structured interviews recorded in April and May 2008 with NNES who were already established on courses at the University, and in October and November 2008 with NNES who were newly enrolled. These students were from, amongst other countries, China, Bahrain, Poland, Czech Republic, India and France. Four staff were also interviewed about their experience of working with NNES.

What is offered here is partial, as both groups were largely self-selecting and the sample is obviously not large or diverse enough to be representative of the whole University. Moreover, it was keenly understood that highly localised contingencies and exigencies on specific courses affect what practice is possible for staff, and what works successfully. This report and the accompanying guide make general points and are intended to open a discussion within course teams about NNES since good practice is always situated.

Contents of report

Drawing on data from these interviews as well as a review of published research in this area this paper will first of all set out issues regarding the admission of NNES onto courses, including English language requirements, and the established framework of support available at the University for staff and students. It will then consider the students' experience and their perception of what has helped them to develop on courses. The use of group work is also discussed. The experience of staff is then described before tentative recommendations are made.

I am particularly grateful to Sara-Jane Postil and Dionne Coburn at the University's International Study Centre for their invaluable help in producing this report.

Admission and Induction

By common agreement, the single most important decision made by the admissions tutor about NNESs is the basis on which they are offered a place. Moreover, like any other student, NNESs need to be aware of the expectations of the course before enrolling, including the required linguistic level. There is a tendency for native speakers to underestimate their own linguistic knowledge, and therefore there may be an underestimate of the language level needed on courses. Enrolling students with inadequate English onto a course places a huge burden on staff and is, moreover, unfair to the student who may end up dropping out.

Admissions tutors are recommended to consider the English requirement for their course in collaboration with tutors from the International Study Centre (ISC), who will be able to advise on appropriate qualifications or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores (discussed below). ISC staff can also administer their own robust ninety-minute diagnostic test for applicants or students who are on the campus.

Some tutors also felt it useful to show samples of good course work to NNES to demonstrate the expected academic and linguistic level.

Where applicants are not considered to have the required level of English, a conditional offer can be made and the applicants can be advised to join the ISC for one of their English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. These can last up to 48 weeks, with up to twenty-five contact hours per week. Incidentally, the intensiveness of this kind of course is an indication of how much work is required to improve some students' language, and should make admissions tutors cautious about admitting students with inappropriate English language ability.

From the students interviewed, the relationship with a course tutor willing to support them was crucial to their success, so ensuring tutors have the time for that is itself crucial.

While the focus so far has been on the role of the individual tutor or course team, admissions and induction of overseas students is the responsibility of the whole University.

> ...if the person at the front, i.e. the lecturer, and the support staff - because there's a whole arena of admin and support staff here, who comes into play, say 'oh, I don't understand', puts the phone down, 'I don't know what that degree means, you're not entitled to come'. Unless all of those players are aware of their management role, it falls into complete disarray.
>
> (Tutor quoted in Hyland et al 2008: 10)

The whole University needs to continue to develop in order to welcome NNESs, and each of the students interviewed spoke positively in particular about the help they received from librarians.

Language Tests
IELTS is the most commonly used guide to English ability used by universities in this country, which usually require 'band' scores around the range of 6.5 to 8.0, depending upon the course. For more details see http://www.ielts.org . A student is placed within an IELTS band based upon an average of their marks in listening, speaking, reading and writing, and so while the score is a useful guide, it may not give the necessary detail to judge a student's suitability for a course. Moore and Norton (2005), for example, have found that the writing tested by IELTS does not match the tasks commonly used on university courses.

The authenticity of a student's test scores can be checked on-line, but one of the respondents to Hyland et al (2008: 12) considered that there were so many practice papers available that the tests were easily "crackable". Moreover, a glance at any EAP discussion board will reveal the concerns of many as to the accuracy and utility of these tests. Hyland et al (p25) state, and this report concurs, that:

> institutions should not rely too heavily on this form of assessment. The drive to recruit students should not overshadow the need for rigour in the use of entrance tests of language ability, and this should be informed by a better understanding of what they do, and do not, measure.

One of the decisions that course teams need to make is what credence they give to such tests and what if any indicators of level may be required.

The Student Experience
For all of the students the primary reason for studying in the UK was the positional advantage a British qualification would give them in their own country, or indeed internationally. What attracted them to Huddersfield were, in roughly equal measure, the availability of a particular course, the reputation of the University and the size and location of the town. A striking element was the existing connection with Huddersfield through family or friends amongst many of the students, reinforcing the importance of maintaining a good reputation. Some had been recommended Huddersfield by paid intermediaries in their own countries.

Some respondents expressed surprise that there were so many NNESs in their groups, though this was not considered a negative. One remarked that she had met someone in Huddersfield who turned out to be a neighbour from Poland. Apart from the ubiquitous complaints about the weather, the only negative comment, made by one African student, was about the amount of alcohol consumed by British students.

"My course is so interesting. It is absolutely amazing," one Polish student enthused when asked to describe her studies and every one of the students interviewed was very positive about their course and, generally, their experience of Huddersfield. This was, above all, due to their relationship with tutors who were frequently described as

"helpful" and "patient" once again highlighting that the attitude of academics is crucial to the positive experience of the international student.

All of the students were aware of and had been in contact with the International Office, which they had found easy to deal with. They were all aware, too, of the English language support available through the International Study Centre, though some had chosen not to take this up. Some received in-sessional English support organised and funded by their School, most had received formal help with their English from study skills tutors, but all had received substantial informal help from certain course tutors. Both from what these students perceived, as well as the experience described by staff below, it is clear that NNES may need a great deal of support, linguistic and otherwise, at least when they first arrive. Tutors may be asked about accommodation, jobs, transport and much more.

When asked what tutors had done in classes or lectures to help them engage on the course, the responses of NNESs mirror those of any group of students: the general approachability of the tutor so NNESs were not scared to make mistakes when speaking; eye contact; clarity of voice including proper use of amplification equipment in large lectures; well-structured presentations which signposted the important points; appropriate use of visual aids. It is, perhaps, worth noting that all of our students benefit from these, not just those with weaker English.

None of the NNESs particularly wanted tutors to slow their verbal delivery down; general clarity was considered more important. Moreover, since English is a stress-timed language, were tutors to slow their delivery too much, their spoken language would lose the phonetic characteristics of English stress, so paradoxically making it more difficult to understand. It could also be seen to be patronising to all students.

Speaking in seminars was described by one established student as a "huge psychological barrier", and the topic of group work was raised by NNESs in several interviews. Group work was the cause of anxiety, especially for those recently enrolled on courses. There was general consensus from the established students that tutor structured groups were most successful in removing barriers between students and allowing NNESs to integrate, and to allow English speaking students to perceive an international perspective, too.

Notetaking in lectures can be difficult for all students, and evidence suggests that many students are poor note-takers (Titsworth 2004) but this is especially so for those working in a second or third language. It was strongly recommended that NNESs make notes in English and some of the NNESs who were well established on their courses had initially recorded lectures, until their confidence grew. Though not identified by respondents during this research, Kingston & Forland (2008: 214) found that pre-prepared notes assisted learning for international students. These could be produced on Blackboard, for example. More generally, Titsworth (2004: 305) found that "strong organizational cues" in lectures aid effective notetaking for all students.

Understanding tutors' accents was occasionally an issue for the NNESs interviewed, especially for those early in their courses, and tutors may need to think about their pronunciation of certain words or phrases if it is unorthodox.

The students had all found written work to be a challenge. They had benefited from thorough feedback on their English, rather than just underlining or circling errors, though once again that has a time implication for staff. Most of the students interviewed had worked with study skills tutors, and all were aware of this facility. Those who had taken pre-sessional language courses with the ISC were very positive about them, and recommended these courses thoroughly.

As with any student, what allowed these NNESs to prosper was a combination of what they were offered here in Huddersfield, and what they brought with them in experience, ability and expectation. However, of the aspects that are under the control of the University, the relationship with individual tutors is the most important.

The Staff Experience
Each of the staff interviewed talked of how rewarding it had been to work with NNESs who they had seen develop academically, linguistically, and personally. They all, however, agreed that this work could be challenging, though not necessarily more so than with other groups of students. However, all could point to colleagues who would prefer not to work with NNESs. Training in this area would be useful, though Hyland et al (2008: 19) found that some staff might resent such training for being "remedial".

The idea that all NNESs would simply absorb English was challenged. According to one study skills tutor:

> [i]f self-study [of English] were that effective, there would not be a problem. It is a problem.

Some Schools were paying for in-sessional English support, which others may wish to consider budgeting for.

One tutor had taken the opportunity of working with NNES to examine his own communication with all students and from his experience it is clear that clarity of expression does not have to mean dilution of content. Another described how occasionally it was difficult to decide whether a student was having academic or linguistic difficulties, but that "[it is] far, far easier to sort out an academic problem."

The staff interviewed were convinced that British students benefited from their exposure to students from around the world, far more than they might be disadvantaged by having to communicate with NNESs.

Recommendations

These recommendations derive from the data provided by students and staff during this project, as well as from literature as cited. They are only tentative suggestions because staff will know their own course and so which if any of these may be beneficial. The intention here, above all, is to promote purposeful discussion of how NNESs can be helped on courses without adversely affecting native speakers.

Prior to the course

Teams should analyse the language requirements of their courses in order to assess what they will require from an NNES before they can enrol on a course. This is the most important decision to make with regard to NNESs. The following list of points may help.

- Do all staff know what to tell international students when they first contact the department?

- What type of English is required? E.g. conceptual language for arts based courses or specialised technical language for engineering courses. Are students expected to have this language from the start or to absorb it during the course?

- Can you show potential students examples of work?

- How much writing is required, especially early on?

- How much of the course is based on spoken lectures?

- How much of the course is based around discussion or student presentations?

- Are there joint student assignments to be completed in groups?

- What linguistic support is in place?

- What is the expected balance of language groups on the course? In other words, how easy will it be for NNESs to mix with English-speaking students and so be immersed in English? Will there be a "need" to converse in English?

- Will there be in-sessional support for NNESs and who will fund this?

- Have you consulted with staff at the ELC to help with deciding upon entry requirements and available English support?

- If students do not yet meet the course's requirements, what conditional offer can you make them, and what will you recommend they do to

improve their English?

- o *Have course and study-skills tutors been case-loaded to reflect the extra support that NNES may require?*

Teaching strategies
(partly adapted from Hyland et al 2008: 16 and Jones 2006: 38)

- Consider activities to encourage or require students to mix early on.

- Have two parallel dialogues whilst you are teaching: talk about the content, and talk about your academic approach

- Explain how British education is delivered and what the expectations are.

- How will you form groups when students work together? Will you create multi-lingual groups or allow students to find their own partners? What will the consequences be?

- How will you deal with native English speakers who may resent having to work with NNESs?

- Consider using international examples and case studies if appropriate

- Allow students to practise writing using small and regular writing tasks in class time.

- The two websites below are particularly useful for academic English:

  1. Using English for Academic Purposes [http://www.uefap.com/index.htm] which is managed by and academic from the University of Hertfordshire contains a very broad range of information and activities useful for staff and students.
  2. The Academic Phrasebank [http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/] set up by the University of Manchester is helpful for students struggling with producing the vocabulary and expressions of written academic English.

- Think about how you annotate or highlight linguistic errors in written texts. Simply correcting them may not help NNESs to develop their own proofreading skills

- Use active reading tasks whereby reading can be done in groups of mixed ability and questions can be used to guide the debate

- Avoid culture-specific idioms, proverbs and analogies,

- Consider how you encourage contributions to discussions. One technique is to snowball contributions by getting students to think about something individually, then discussing it in small groups before finally opening up to the whole group. Thus students can think about and even rehearse what they want to say.

o Consider the clarity of oral presentations, including the use of microphones, and ensure that everyone can hear and understand contributions from students.

o Consider the pace of delivery.

o Suggest that students can record lectures if necessary.

o Place lecture notes or handouts on Blackboard so students can access them before lectures.

o Consider the use of visual aids to allow better understanding in lectures and seminars.

o Balance language and subject matter to cater for non-native speakers and students with high-level language ability.

o Consider how you signpost important points in lectures, seminars and discussions. Predictability of structure so students can concentrate on content may be effective, as well as care over the form of discourse. Some students with limited English have not yet learned to tolerate uncertainty in listening to speech, or cannot distinguish between foreground and background language and so attempt to understand or translate very word. Compare these utterances:

o *There is something else which I want to say at this stage before moving on which is, ehhh. Well, how can I put this? And you may not necessarily agree with this, but many economists, or at least some economists, consider the present financial crisis to be not dissimilar to that of the 1930s.*

o *Some economists consider the present financial crisis to be similar to that of the 1930s.*

o A student struggling to understand every word may be lost before the significant information in the first example. The second example is an illustration of how clarity of expression does not entail dilution of content.

o Think about how you can check understanding where appropriate or possible.

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