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Working with Non-native English Speaker Students on Mainstream Courses: a guide to good practice

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 and so provided a global perspective for British students unable or unwilling to study abroad. However, the increase in non-native English speakers (NNESs) has brought challenges for tutors who want to make their courses accessible and engaging for all of their students.

This guide derives from a University Teaching and Learning Project which considered issues related to the use of English by NNES students. Having researched the experience and opinions of NNES students and staff who work with them, it seeks to identify and disseminate good practice for tutors that will benefit NNES students, without adversely affecting native English speakers. The full project report is available for anyone who is interested.

The emphasis here is on the use of English, although to divide language from broader concepts of culture, identity and thought is highly questionable, and entails arbitrary distinctions. Similarly, the important area of internationalisation of the curriculum is beyond the scope of this guide. Nevertheless, this restricted focus on language allows tutors to at least begin to analyse their courses so as to open them up to NNESs, without detriment to native English speakers.

The points for consideration below relate to two areas:

- The period prior to the start of a University course, including the setting of linguistic entry requirements

- Teaching strategies

The suggestions and questions that follow are only tentative because staff know their own courses. Local contingencies and exigencies affect what practice is possible, and what works successfully, so this guide is primarily intended to open a discussion within course teams about working with NNES students.

Points to consider prior to the course
Teams should analyse the language requirements of their courses in order to assess what they will require from an NNES so that both staff and students are clear. Admissions tutors are strongly recommended to consult with staff at the International Study Centre (ISC) at the University who are experienced in working with NNESs and will be able to advise on entry level. The ISC can also suggest what potential students can do to improve their English, including taking courses run by the ISC. Moreover, they can set applicants who are on campus a thorough diagnostic test to assess their English.

NNESs, like any other group of students, are diverse and so generalisations should be treated with some scepticism. However, enrolling students with inadequate English onto a course places a huge burden on staff as well as those other students required to work with them on collaborative projects, and is, moreover, unfair to the individual students who may end up dropping out.

One-to-one contact with tutors is seen by many NNES students as being very beneficial and NNESs may need considerable help, especially at the beginning of a course. So, course teams should plan for tutors to have that time available.

The following list of questions may help tutors to analyse their courses to prepare them for NNESs. Remember though, that native speakers often underestimate their own linguistic ability, and consequently may underestimate the language level needed on courses.

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

- 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? How will that be organised?

- What linguistic support is in place within the school?

- Can you show potential students examples of work?

- 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 English classes for NNESs and who will fund these?

- Have you consulted with staff at the International Study Centre at the University to help with deciding upon entry requirements and available English support?

- If you use the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), should you ask for a specific score in speaking or writing, for instance? For more details see http://www.ielts.org.

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

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

- *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)

When NNES students were asked what tutors had done to help them engage on the course, the responses 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. All of our students benefit from these, not just those with weaker English.

Group work caused many NNESs anxiety at first, but where tutors created groups based upon the membership of the whole class, rather than letting students decide for themselves, the NNESs settled in more quickly.

The suggestions and questions below may aid a strategy for teaching NNES students.

- 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. Tutors may need to focus on the distinction between simple description and evaluation or critical analysis of information, for example.

- 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.

- Think about how you annotate or highlight linguistic errors in written texts.

Simply correcting errors may not help NNESs to develop their own proofreading skills

o Use active reading tasks whereby reading can be discussed in groups of mixed ability and written questions can be used to guide debate.

o Avoid inappropriate culture-specific idioms, proverbs and analogies.

o Consider how you encourage participation in 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 and pronunciation of key phrases.

o Suggest that students can record lectures if necessary.

o Place lecture notes or handouts on Blackboard so students can access them before lectures to allow them to follow the thread of the lecturer's presentation.

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 allows students to concentrate on content. Take care, too, over the form of discourse. Some students with limited English fail 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:

> *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.*

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

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

o Think about how you can check understanding where appropriate or possible, by using context-specific questions rather than "is that clear?" or "are we all right

with that?" Quick, specific concept-check tasks may also be possible.

- o 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 an 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/] created by the University of Manchester is helpful for students struggling with producing the vocabulary and expressions of written academic English.

"My course is so interesting. It is absolutely amazing," one Polish student enthused when asked to describe her studies at the University of Huddersfield. This was, above all, due to her positive relationship with course tutors who she described as "helpful" and "patient". This instance, and many others like it, strongly indicates that both the attitude of academics towards NNESs, and the time they are able to spend with NNESs are crucial to the success of the international student.

The benefits to the University, and all our learners, of having international students on our courses are significant. So the consideration of our practice and procedures that this guide promotes, and which may lead to welcoming more international students, is certainly worthwhile.

Reference
Hyland, F.; Trahar, S.; Anderson, J. & Dickens, A. (2008) *A Changing World: the internationalisation experiences of staff and students (home and international) in UK Higher Education.* Bristol: Higher Education Academy