Two sides of the same story? Staff and student perceptions of the non-native speakers experience of the British academic system.

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Abstract

This paper draws on a research and materials development project undertaken at the University of Leicester. The project's aims were to identify problems encountered by non-native speaking students (NNS) and to offer academic departments a toolkit for overcoming these problems.

The paper will discuss the student and staff experience of dealing with linguistic and cultural difficulties and suggest pedagogic and institutional strategies for improving in-sessional support. The paper will suggest that academics frequently have difficulty in diagnosing the nature of the problems that their NNS students have and that a greater focus on language is necessary. The paper will go on to argue that the high number of NNS studying at British universities creates an imperative for academic departments to mainstream the support that they offer for international students. As many of the recommendations for support for NNS are essentially 'best practice' teaching and learning they also are likely to have positive knock-on effects for other students.

Background

As the presence of large numbers of non-native speakers (NNS) becomes part of the learning and teaching landscape at British universities there is a requirement to capture these students' experience and to use it to inform both EAP teaching and subject-based University teaching. This paper describes the findings of a research project at the University of Leicester which captured the experience of staff and students through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

The authors of this paper come from differing backgrounds, one being heavily involved in pre-sessional language and study skills support programmes, whilst the other is principally involved in supporting and developing both native and non-native speakers' academic and transferable skills during their degrees. We had both been approached by academic staff to provide "a solution" to the "problem" of the academic under-performance of NNS. Academic staff usually imagined that there was something that could be done to the students to "fix" them.

As we tried to offer support to students and consultancy to staff we became increasingly aware that improving the NNS experience of British universities required both staff and students to adapt. Therefore, a small research project was designed to help ground our intervention.

This paper rejects the argument that NNS should not be treated differently from other students and argues that a student centred approach to HE teaching cannot rely solely on "teacher intuition" (Davies 2006:3). It proposes that the dynamics of a changing student body of NNS requires ongoing research into the needs of those students and flexibility on the part of the institution in dealing with those needs.

Very few academic staff have any formal training in teaching non-native speakers and some will have received little or no formal teacher training at all. Jeremy Leavsley, an academic from the Department of Mathematics argued that academics need a stronger steer on what best practice is, going as far as to say, "just tell us what to do and we will do it".

Methodology

The research undertaken was designed to allow us to formulate a picture of the impact that NNS had on the teaching and learning environment. To achieve this we involved staff, both academic and support, and NNS students. Involvement from academic staff was solicited by an advertisement on the University of Leicester's intranet. Staff came forward from a range of departments with participants tending to come from departments that experienced a substantial international student presence on their courses. A questionnaire was distributed inviting academic staff and/or departments to comment on the origins of their international students, the benefits they brought to the department, the problems and how they were addressed, and finally what

support they would like to see made available. The follow-up interview was semi-structured and the participants were asked to comment on: a typical student day in their department, induction programmes, referral system and any specific support for international students such as cultural awareness sessions or specific tutorials.

To get a broader perspective on the issues faced by international students and how the university helped them, a number of non-academic staff were interviewed. These were from the following areas: the Student Learning Centre, the Welfare Office, the Students Union and the International Office. The participants were asked to comment on the problems faced by international students, how the current provision helped them and what the University could do to improve the international student experience.

Eight students were invited to take part in the research project. All eight students completed a pre-interview questionnaire about their experience of study in the UK. Some of these had previously completed a pre-sessional course whereas others had not.

The project investigated the perceptions of staff and students engaged in the teaching and learning process. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the principle research methodology to ensure that both staff and students felt free to discuss the wider issues that particularly concerned them, rather than having the scope of their responses guided by a more structured interview or questionnaire format. As the analysis of these interviews and questionnaires demonstrates, the majority of the participants recognised that wider social and cultural factors had a significant impact on the teaching and learning environment.

Findings: Staff

Academics who completed the questionnaires or who took part in follow up interviews were remarkably candid. There was a clear sense that the growing presence of international students amongst their cohort was a live issue which many had strong opinions about. The chief benefits of having international students amongst their cohorts were identified as: giving the course an international perspective; revenue; and the broadening of the minds of home students. For example, Jennifer Smith a lecturer in the Centre for Mass Communications research commented,

> I find having students from different cultures in modules is particularly helpful when considering cross-cultural or international comparisons, and the often unquestioned Western bias in much theory and practice.

The importance of cultural diversity was not confined to discursive social science and arts subjects but was also emphasised by John Fothergill (Engineering) who noted that 'mixing' NNS and home students had positive benefits for both parties. Ian Bruce the Students' Union Education Officer discussed the wider contribution that international students make to the University and noted that an increasing number were acting as departmental reps, observing that many of them did it 'to improve their English'. The majority of participants identified international students as bringing some positive contributions to their teaching although in a minority of cases this was described entirely in terms of the financial benefit to the department.

Despite the benefits identified, staff took part in this project out of a desire to deal with problems they had experienced with NNS. The main problems identified by staff were largely associated with a perceived cultural gap between the students and the British HE system. This cultural gap was discussed in a variety of ways including poor understanding of academic conventions (especially plagiarism); a lack of willingness to participate in discussion based learning and poor learning techniques. There was a concern that these factors combined with linguistic difficulty and personal problems to make international students needy and time-consuming.

The Department of Museum Studies completed a departmental response to our survey in which they commented that, "international students are time-consuming" and require a "high level of support". Agneta Svalberg, a TESOL lecturer, argued that it is a mix of "language problems" and "difficulty adapting to new culture (academic culture and other)" that results in NNS placing an additional burden of support on academics. Interestingly, this TESOL lecturer was one of only two academics who explicitly mentioned language as a factor, the other being a Pro-Vice Chancellor with explicit responsibilities for the needs of international students. Other academics tended to emphasise the cultural aspects and rarely discussed language issues.

The issue of plagiarism proved to be a fertile ground through which academics could discuss the cultural differences that they had experienced. Robin White from the Department of Law stated that "current issues relate to an understanding of plagiarism" and consequently argued that any outcomes from our project should assign, "top priority" to "addressing the issue of plagiarism especially at postgraduate level". The theme of plagiarism is repeated across the academic spectrum from the Medical School to Museum Studies to Mass Communications with Jennifer Smith noting its drain on staff time. Ian Bruce who is responsible for representing students in appeals and disciplinaries noted that most plagiarism cases at the University involve international students. He added that, "clearer examples of plagiarism would be really helpful for international students".

Departments vary in the ways in which they deal with these problems and articulated a range of resources and support that they would like in order to better aid NNS. Departments with many years experience of NNS appear to accept the need to adapt language and content, often because they have had time to reflect on the needs of NNS. Pro-Vice Chancellor John Fothergill noted that "all overseas students tend to have problems if English is not a language that they have been used to working in". TESOL lecturer Agneta Svalberg commented that, "we adapt, to some extent, our language when talking to NNS" however, she adds, "some students might benefit with more help with their language, we don't see that as our job".

Lecturers like Fothergill and Svalberg were unusual in their recognition of language issues. However, all departments with experience of teaching NNS emphasised the importance of finding out about the cultural background of students. Several academics also emphasised the importance of a personal tutor system of support. Fothergill, in his role as Pro-Vice Chancellor, has promoted this as best practice and argued that "a personal tutoring system is very helpful to overseas students" as "they need someone they can turn to if they do have problems". He observes that international students often have a reluctance to discuss problems, and others, including the Students' Union Education Officer concur.

Several of the participants stressed the importance of the wider institutional context for international students and argued that there was a need for more administrative staff trained in dealing with them. Support, such as Mandarin speakers in key administrative areas, will result in students feeling "more welcome" (Svalberg) and that the university needs to prioritise, "the way they are dealt with on a human interaction level" (Fothergill). This has been taken on board by some support departments with Claire Taylor (Head of Welfare) pointing out that she employed a Mandarin speaker at key times of the year and that the main halls of residence for international students all had a Mandarin speaking sub-warden. This is also the case in other key departments that deal with international students such as accommodation and the English Language Teaching Unit although to our knowledge no academic departments have chosen to follow suite.

Findings: Students

There is no shortage of research highlighting the myriad of difficulties that NNS experience in adjusting to English speaking, Western-style universities (e.g. Nichols: 2003, Myles and Cheng: 2003, Leki: 2001, Littlemore:2001). However, it is important not to fall into the trap of perceiving international students as a consistently oppressed and unhappy group. Our questionnaires and interviews reveal NNS to be generally happy with their experience of the University. Academic problems suffered by the students interviewed were commonly explained by them as being a result of language difficulties. For example, Ping, a Taiwanese student in MA Museum Studies, talked about her difficulty in taking part in discussion based learning. "The lecturers tend to adapt their language for international students but the students don't". This seems to back up the UKCOSA (2004) quantitative research findings which reported that 50% of respondents to a national survey of international students were concerned about their language before arrival and at the point in the academic year when the survey was conducted concern was still 20%. These figures were significantly higher for students from China, Taiwan and Japan.

Student participants in the research talked extensively about the wider social context in which their study was taking place and argued that this was central to their experience of University. So for Savaas, a Greek PhD student in the Department of Management, the weekly staff/student football game was both an important part of his social life and something which provided a valuable context for his study.

Song, a Chinese student on the Msc Financial Economics, reiterates the importance of non-academic considerations, "one of my friends was studying at the University of Leicester and he told me about the environment, social life and lots of things about Leicester and so I decided to choose this University".

To summarise, academic staff stressed the difficulties that they had encountered in dealing with NNS. They felt that, despite some acknowledged benefits of a more diverse cohort, NNS can be time consuming and frequently struggle with academic and cultural acclimatisation. Very few staff discussed the wider context within which learning was taking place or the issue of language. Conversely, the students rarely mentioned the difficulty of coping with different academic and cultural conventions, instead focusing on their language skills, which they frequently recognised were too weak. They also stressed the wider social aspects of their lives, which they saw as essential to a positive experience of university.

Evaluation

To some extent the differences in emphasis between students and staff can be explained in terms of differing perspectives on a set of common issues. However, the mismatch in expectations about the wider social and cultural context points towards some interesting issues for staff and students alike. There may be a tendency for staff to downplay the language problems that students are experiencing and to perceive all difficulty as being cultural. Conversely there may also be a tendency for students to feel that the solution to all of their problems lies in the improvement of their English when they are actually experiencing more cultural or conceptual problems.

The way in which staff describe their concerns about NNS and plagiarism provides a useful issue through which to explore staff discourses about NNS engagement in the British academic system. As already noted, academics consider plagiarism as one of the most serious problems with NNS. These problems were usually understood as being principally cultural, essentially a failure to understand the standards of academic discourse expected. There is academic literature that backs up this perspective and emphasises the differences between academic cultures.

For example, Carroll argues that "international students, before enrolling in UK universities, may have been very successful in systems that required them to locate and reproduce answers; many have never attempted a piece of independent writing in any language, let alone an unfamiliar one such as English" (2005: 3). While few academics outside of the worlds of EAP, education and learning and teaching have engaged with this literature directly, the perspective Carroll outlines seems to have been broadly adopted as by many.

There is a counter-literature which places the emphasis on language rather than culture. We find this perspective persuasive in that it supports what we found in the student interviews. Nichols argues against 'slipping into cultural essentialism' (Nichols 2003: 144) and Kirkpatrick (2004) picks up this theme arguing that, while there are important differences in structure, the academic and argumentative practices of Chinese and Western scholars are remarkably similar. So if, "it is hard to conclude that Chinese Learners will come to the task of writing in English disadvantaged by their previous learning experience" (Kirkpatrick: 2004, 13), it is likely that Chinese and other NNS students who fail to meet the standards set out in university plagiarism policies are actually struggling with language rather than culture. NNS plagiarism may be as easily attributable to use of linguistic scaffolding, what Howard (1995) calls "patchwriting", as to a cultural difference in citation practice.

Conclusions

It is the contention of this paper that the research out-lined above, coupled with other evidence such as the UKCOSA survey, has clear implications for British universities who wish to continue to attract large numbers of NNS students.

To address the challenges outlined in this paper we feel that HE institutions should consider an increase in resources for both pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP teaching and other forms of in-course academic support. However, it is important that the responsibility for the NNS experience of British university education is not left solely to EAP and study support staff. If the NNS experience, and the experience of the staff teaching them, is to be improved there is a requirement that pedagogic and support practices are re-examined at every level.

The students who we interviewed identified strongly with their departments and desired greater integration between themselves, staff and other students. Because of this, perhaps the most important area for development is the teaching and learning practice of academic staff. A process of staff development needs to take place, informed by the experience of EAP teaching and others with experience of supporting NNS.

As EAP and academic support professionals we need to play a key role in changing processes within our institutions. While academics may recognise that students are struggling, they need to be offered practical solutions that they can implement within their teaching. We have begun this process at the University of Leicester by developing a range of guides designed to support academic staff who deal with NNS (see www.le.ac.uk/eltu/abouteltuweb/TeachingISGuides to download these guides). These guides offer concrete advice to departments who attract international students. The issues addressed are: plagiarism, welfare, seminars, lectures and university support for international students. These guides reflect issues mentioned by both staff and students. It is hoped that they will be a useful starting point for departments at the University of Leicester and will also stimulate other universities to produce concrete support. If this support is based on research that focuses on the needs of departments and international students, we feel confident that the benefits will be felt by all. As one UKCOSA respondent says,

> "Foreign students should be given more support. The institution should realise that foreign students not only contribute a great deal to the local economy and university finances but also sacrifice a great deal to come to a foreign country for the sake of education and hope of a pleasant experience" (Malaysian male undergraduate 2004:40).

Surely they deserve both and it is our role to help to ensure they do.

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