

Working with international students: Applied linguistics and the art of inclusive teaching

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The influx into their classrooms of large numbers of non-native-speaker students from significantly different cultural backgrounds puts great pressures on tertiary teaching staff who have no special training and little institutional support to equip them to meet these additional demands. It can induce a sense of personal and professional frustration, a concern about declining standards in teaching and assessment, and considerable resentment towards the institutional and national policies that lead to these outcomes.

This paper illustrates the contribution that training and experience in Applied Linguistics can make in such a situation. It describes the development by the academic language and learning unit at a major Australian university of a website for academic staff teaching students from mainland China, now the major source of international students in Australia. Based on a series of interviews with Chinese students, conducted in English and Chinese, exploring their experience in adapting to study in a foreign language and an unfamiliar educational culture, and supplemented by interviews with faculty staff, the website provides a range of resources to help staff to better understand the problems they encounter in teaching such students, and to devise inclusive solutions to them. The paper examines how an informed understanding of the nexus between language, culture and communication can be applied to the task of clarifying the expectations of teachers as well as students, to the benefit of both.

Introduction

In 2005 the Language and Learning Services (LLS) Unit at Monash University undertook to interview a number of Chinese students about their experience at the University, and on the basis of those data to put together a set of online materials to assist University teaching staff in working with this cohort of students. In doing so, LLS members were fully aware that there can often be resistance from academic teaching staff towards anyone from outside their discipline who tries to advise them on how to do their job.

It is in part the extent and nature of that resistance that concerns this paper, but more particularly the ways in which training and experience as an applied linguist qualifies teachers of language skills and of learning skills to get beyond - or perhaps around - this resistance, and make a positive contribution to the development of inclusive teaching practices in our institutions.

This paper, therefore, is not directly concerned with TESOL as such, but rather with teaching academic content in and through English. It is, however, very much concerned

with pedagogies of connection, and with the role of language and culture within pedagogy.

Applied Linguists

People with training and experience in Applied Linguistics are people with a specialist understanding of the nature of language and language structures; of what the different languages of the world have in common, and the ways in which they can differ from each other; of the nature of lexis; of the way grammar binds words into sentences, the way sentences combine in discourse structures, and the functions they perform; of how meaning is made; and of the relationship between speech and writing (Pinker, 1994; Crystal, 2006).

As language teachers we seek to know as much as we can about the psychology of language use: about the relationship between perception, comprehension, production and expression, and about the role of language in learning (acquiring knowledge); and we are constantly finding out more about how languages are acquired/learnt: how long language learning takes, what factors facilitate it, what factors inhibit it, the role of motivation, the role of the teacher, and how to go about diagnosing problems and assessing levels of skill (Ellis, 1986, 1994).

Applied linguists have always been concerned with the way language functions in society: with the nature of language standards and language variation – diachronic and synchronic, regional and sociolectal; with the relationship between language and culture, as expressed in the styles and registers that we use, the discourses we construct, and the genres in which our writing and speaking are shaped (Trudgill, 2002; Chambers, Trudgill, & Schilling-Estes, 2002; Coupland, 2007).

We naturally take particular interest in language and social access: language and identity, language as gatekeeper to the society and to knowledge, and questions of language and power (Fairclough, 1989, 2006; Pennycook, 1994, 2007; Alim, Ibrahim, & Pennycook, 2009).

Above all, we are fundamentally concerned with how language works in communication: with the relationships between utterance and context, language and culture, language and personality, and with language as action (Gumperz, 1982; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Nelson, Freedman, & Anderson, 2001; Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2002).

It follows, then, that Applied Linguists have much to contribute to the development of inclusive pedagogy.

Inclusive teaching, and impediments thereto

It would be hard to find a better definition of “inclusivity in teaching” than that given on the website of the Centre for Instructional Development and Research at the University of Washington (Inclusive Teaching, 2008):

Inclusive Teaching means teaching in ways that do not exclude students, accidentally or intentionally, from opportunities to learn.

In response to the question: “What excludes students?”, the following behaviours are listed:

- Conveying disrespect, unfairness, or lack of confidence in students
- Disregarding student backgrounds, preparation, or life events that affect learning
- Interacting with only a subset of the students
- Teaching in ways that favour particular backgrounds or approaches to learning

One would be loath to believe that teachers in our universities would be intentionally guilty of acting in any of these ways. Given the pressures under which they work, though, they may at times find it hard to avoid doing so unintentionally.

As Ryan and Hellmundt (2003) have pointed out, there are a number of factors that militate against inclusive teaching in our classrooms. These include student numbers and class sizes; the range of diversity, and the proportions of native and non-native speakers in the mix; budget and infrastructure constraints on our universities; the heavy workloads that these give rise to; the time constraints that these put on planning and researching our teaching; and also what we might call a degree of cultural inertia. In their recent book *Translating lives*, Besemerer & Wierzbicka (2007) have noted that :

[Until quite recently] mainstream [Australian] society was effectively monolingual.... In the last half-century or so this has changed as a result of the radical change in Australia’s immigration policies.... But this change in Australia’s linguistics situation has not yet led to a concomitant change in public consciousness of what it means to live with different languages.... (pp. xvi, xvii)

and they remind us that:

[m]onolingual speakers of English are not usually aware of living in a world shaped by their native language and of being shaped by it themselves – in their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with each other.

This then is the social and institutional context of the Monash University project mentioned above. The following briefly outlines the goals of the project, before looking at what was produced, and discussing the reactions of some of the teaching staff to it.

The China project

In the last few years the proportion of students coming to Australia from mainland China has been growing very rapidly. China has been the largest single source of international students in Australia – and, a fortiori, at Monash. For the most part these students have undertaken courses in Business and Economics or in Information Technology; in 2006, some 31% of the international students in the Business Faculty at Monash came from the PRC, and already by 2004 there was a sense – only partially accurate, as later statistics showed¹ – that Chinese students were not doing as well as local students, or indeed as other international students. This was the context in which the ‘China project’ was initiated by the Language and Learning Services Unit, as part of a larger project promoting inclusivity at Monash.

In planning the project it had been decided that interviews should be conducted with both students and staff as its output would be a website designed for the use not of the students themselves, but of the academic staff teaching them (as also of administrative staff who advised and supported them). It was obviously important, therefore, to get some sense of the views of those teachers on the issues involved.

Student interviews

Twenty three students, from a wide range of backgrounds in China, were interviewed, the majority of them graduate students doing a Masters by coursework in Business and Economics. Most of the interviews were conducted both in English and in Chinese, with the assistance of a Chinese student who had just completed her own Masters in Economics. The interviews were scheduled to take 45-50 minutes, but nearly all of them lasted close to double that time. If nothing else, these students had plenty to say.

A striking feature that emerged from these interviews was the similarities between the problems and challenges reported by the students interviewed, and those faced by local Australian students in the transition from high-school to University. This is evidenced in the work of Krause et al. (2005) on the First-Year Experience who identify, in particular, the need to find your way around and achieve an identity within a large and

¹ Internal statistics for 2005 indicated that while aggregate results for undergraduates from the PRC were clearly lower than those for other student cohorts, the results for graduate course-work PRC students were on a par with those of other cohorts, and in one area – Accounting – actually higher than those for other cohorts, including local students.

somewhat intimidating institution, and to come to terms with an unfamiliar culture, academic and administrative, in which you are expected to find your own resources and make your own decisions – in short, to manage yourself, largely or totally in the absence of the personal support groups – family, friends and teachers – on which you had been used to relying. Of course, for a Chinese student these issues are exacerbated, and often seriously so, by language and socio-cultural differences, but the process of the experience is in many ways similar.

It should be noted that the interview sample was very much self-selected, and as such included no-one who had failed their course, or seemed likely to do so. But even so, all interviewees reported a high degree of stress and anxiety in the time it took – usually the first semester, sometimes longer – to attune their ears to the language, to get a sense of what was expected of them in class and in the assignments they had to write, to learn about and acquire the library and research skills they needed, and above all, to learn to manage their time to cope with the enormous amount of reading they found they had to do.

Staff interviews

Eight teachers from the Business faculty agreed to be interviewed. Some teachers exhibited a degree of caution at first, sensitive to any implication of deficit in their own teaching practice. Once assured of a sympathetic ear, however, they took full advantage of it, and as with the students, several of the interviews lasted much longer than originally scheduled. All the interviewees gave ample evidence of having made strenuous efforts to assist international students, even at the risk, which worried them considerably, of compromising their own academic standards.

The problems identified by the teaching staff were very much those reported by Ryan and Hellmundt (2003), and might be summarised under 3 headings – all of them being systemic issues, well beyond the control of the individual teachers themselves:

- Numbers

Their classes were too big, and the proportion of international students was too large, for them to be able to give the students the educational experience they wanted to give. The university's rhetoric of "internationalisation" and "inclusive teaching practices" to address the cultural and linguistic diversity of students in the classroom, they felt, was no more than rhetoric unless the university was willing and able to ensure that the student/staff ratio was low enough for such practices to be practicable.

- Language

International students were being admitted into undergraduate and graduate degree courses with levels of spoken and written English low enough to seriously impede their own ability to learn and their teachers' ability to teach effectively.

- Culture of learning (for this term, see Cortazzi & Jin, 1996)

International students from Chinese and allied cultures were seen to be coming from an educational system in which teaching consists of lecturing from a podium, with little if any student interaction; learning consists of memorising the contents of lectures and set texts – hence the student's role was passive, dependent and non-critical; and assessment is exam-based, norm-referenced and summative rather than criterion-based and formative, requiring the students, in this view, to do no more than regurgitate what they have memorised. Yet the Australian system into which these students had come, at substantial cost to themselves and their families, was one in which learning is regarded as constructive rather than reproductive; teaching aims to be interactive and facilitative rather than directive; and assessment is an ongoing process requiring students to demonstrate that they can undertake their own research and think independently and critically.

Overall, with respect to the 'China project', the senior teaching staff in particular were not encouraging with regard to what it might produce that could be of interest or use to them. They were prepared to endorse materials directed at current or potential students from China that might induce them to modify their expectations of Australian education in the direction of reality but they were skeptical of the utility of materials directed towards the teachers themselves. Nonetheless, on completion of the website, when a number of lecturers – some previously interviewed, some not – were approached and asked to review it, their reactions were uniformly able. A small sample of these is given below.

The website

Entitled *Working with students from China* (Millar, 2007), the website comprises three main sections²: 'The Chinese student experience', 'Learning in a foreign language', and 'Teaching international students'.

² All the following student quotations are from Millar, 2007.

The Chinese student experience

This section is a distillation of the students' voices, and what they had to say in their interviews about the experience of studying, first in their homeland, and subsequently at Monash. Academics reviewing the site found the following comment an effective antidote to a stereotype that seemed to have some currency, of Chinese students as spoilt kids from *nouveau riche* families:

In fact the tuition fees is very expensive to many of us from northern part of China. You know, there exists a big gap about salary level. Maybe in Guangdong [in South China] a family can afford their child spend \$30,000 - that's OK. But in north part, if your family is not doing business or earn more money, it's almost the whole money the parents they earn in their life.

“Nana”

It was illuminating for academics to learn of the extreme pressures imposed on senior secondary school students in China as they face the intensely competitive matriculation examinations:

In China, before you go to university it's really very very hard for each student.... We can't do badly in our study because we must protect our parents' face. We live up to many people, all our relatives ... if there is one student who is going to attend the exam to University, all the family they focus on this thing. So much stress.

“Nana”

In high school [to be] a good student means you are listening carefully to the teacher, and also the exam is the most important, because we must get a high score to enter the University. If you can't compete with others your future will be very, very worried.

“Nana”

A traditional good student in China, they don't do anything, just concentrate on study so their parents will be happy. And they don't need to do housework, anything can be done by their parents, as long as they study well.... Work all daytime and work all night time, very late; especially for good high school – high standard high school.

“Susy”

– and they were intrigued by the following comparison of going to University in China and in Australia:

The difference is the demands on you at the universities here – Chinese universities are 'hard to enter, easy to pass through'; universities here are 'easy to enter, hard to pass through'. If you want to do well here you really need to put in a lot of effort; whereas in Chinese universities it's all a matter of exams, so it's relatively easy to deal with that.

“Jade”

Attitude to library work was another surprising issue. A number of students spoke very highly of the University library – not just the facilities, but the willingness of library staff to help students. One lecturer reviewing the website was astonished to learn that most Chinese students have minimal if any access to a library at high school or at university, and to realise that their lack of research skills when they come to Australia is as much a matter of the infrastructure of their education in China as of educational culture.

Learning in a foreign language

This section of the website provides information and discussion relating to the IELTS test and allied learning issues. The teaching staff interviewed all felt that they were not well served by IELTS, but few of them in fact claimed to know very much about the IELTS test; and they were interested in finding out more about the use and abuse of this test, as described by David Ingram, one of the founding fathers of the test (Ingram, 2005).

More importantly, perhaps, four pages of this section invite teaching staff to recognise the complexity of the behaviour that we call ‘using English’, and the obstacles to ready communication that most of our international students have to overcome. Reviewing the website, one Education lecturer remarked, *There’s an entire TESOL syllabus just in those four pages.*

Nearly all the teaching staff originally interviewed had expressed irritation and frustration with the way Chinese students constantly talk to each other in Chinese in class, and are apparently unwilling to take the opportunity the classroom offers to practise and improve their English. The following question at a staff seminar was not atypical: *What do I do about students who don’t want to learn? Whenever I invite questions from them about my lecture, they ignore me and start talking to each other in Chinese!*

So universal was this complaint that it seemed it worthwhile to offer in the website an argument for tolerance in this area, in a section entitled “Use of Chinese in the classroom” (<http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/China/learning/chinese-in-class.xml> and following pages). This section refers in particular to the work of Swain & Lapkin (2000), Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) and others³, from which one can infer that

³ See a special edition of *TESOL in Context* [2007, 16(2)] which focuses on this issue in the following articles: Chau, E., Learners’ use of their first language in classroom interactions (pp. 11-18); Ellis, E., Discourses of L1 and bilingual teaching in adult ESL (pp. 5-10); Forman, R., Bilingual teaching in the Thai EFL context: One teacher’s practice (pp. 19-24).

what the students are most likely doing in that situation is checking with each other their understanding of the lecture, and working out questions that one of them might perhaps put to the lecturer on behalf of the group – something to be actively encouraged rather than inhibited, as one reviewer of this paper has noted.

Teaching international students

This website section draws information from a large range of sources to propose strategies that staff can and do use to assist students from China and other countries to achieve success in their studies in Australia.

Many of the ideas in this section may seem commonsense enough to a language teacher. To the Economics teachers, however, some ideas were novel – for example, the suggestion that a teacher might lead a class in compiling an online glossary of specialist terms. One teacher started to say, *Oh, but you couldn't do this in a graduate class* – and then immediately started thinking of how she could, in fact, use these ideas in her own graduate classes. More commonly the reaction was *Yes, I had vaguely thought of doing something along these lines, especially with specialist vocabulary, and now that you've mentioned it, I might just put that into practice*. Similarly, another teacher liked the suggestions on modelling reading in class

(<http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/China/teaching/reading3.xml>) because they affirmed and validated her own practice:

I think that is very useful. I always get them to read the abstract and also to go right to the reference list at the back, and see what's current, and what builds on, or what's been done before, so they can actually follow the themes of the work. That's good. I like this. This is really useful. And using Endnote ...

If there was one thing that did elicit some resistance it was the suggestion that class reading lists might specify not only what students should read, but when they should read it. This tended to be seen as pandering dangerously to the 'passivity' of Chinese students, and inhibiting rather than stimulating their capacity to make their own decisions about their learning. Teaching students to teach themselves was a strongly held principle. Further exploration of the website as a whole, however, reassured these academics that its concern was, precisely, how to do this most effectively and efficiently.

Conclusion

The website section heading 'Teaching international students' was chosen deliberately, for two reasons. Firstly, as several lecturers remarked, they don't necessarily know for certain which or how many of their students are Chinese, still less PRC Chinese;

secondly, the classes they teach consist in general of a mixture of local students with international students from various origins, and their teaching needs to respond as far as possible to the needs of all those students. Indeed, in this context the term 'international' can be read in a sense that sees *all* students as international, and the strategies proposed in this website assume that good teaching is effective communication, and builds on universal principles. As a response to the challenges of the diversity in our classrooms, the website is very much in the spirit of learning equity advocated in the work of Buckridge & Guest (2007).

Drawing principally on the concepts, experience and practice of Applied Linguists, *Working with students from China* demonstrates the contributions students' disciplines have to make to the definition and the practice of inclusive teaching for all students. As for the systemic impediments to inclusive teaching noted above, as Chanock (2007) has argued for the allied field of Academic Language and Learning, Applied Linguists have a role to play in making their professional voice heard to monitor, protect and maintain the linguistic and the pedagogical health of our institutions.

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