**Increasing interaction between international students and local students in high school classrooms: Ongoing research in the English Language classroom.**

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*Observation of the non-participation of most international students in mainstream classrooms, and a lack of interaction between international students (IS) and local students (LS) outside of the classroom, prompted me to introduce in-class activities involving IS and LS in authentic collaboration. These activities had the dual aim of engaging students with the task and of enabling students to engage with each other. The success of the project I attribute to the pre-task attention to the skills involved, the constructivist nature of the task (Vygotsky in Hammond, 2001) and the connections built between students (Cadman, 2005, 2008). My conclusion is that if EAL and mainstream subject teachers could collaborate in identifying relevant, authentic, collaborative tasks and inclusive pre-task activities, this would allow for not only improved learning outcomes, but also a more satisfying educational and cultural experience for all students.*

**Introduction**

Returning to tertiary study after 20 years of English Language (EL) teaching, I was forced to review how my students learn. Reading on *Second language learning theories* (Mitchell & Myles, 1998) revealed a range of theories. I began to be influenced by the view of language as social practice and semiotic (Halliday cited in Butt *et al*., 2000), learning through "communities of practice" (Lave, 1991), and "pedagogies of connection" (Cadman, 2005, 2008). I began to understand better the term 'sociocultural' and how it related to learning as I reaffirmed constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978 cited in Hammond, 2001), scaffolding (Hammond, 2001), and inclusivity. Coincidentally, while at university from 2003 to 2006, I became aware of a lack of interaction between the large numbers of predominantly Asian international students (IS) and local students (LS) in Higher Education. This is a recognised problem (Volet & Ang, 1998; Takeda, 2005; Bain, 2007; Collett, 2007). In fact, according to Volet and Ang (1998, p.5), "the lack of interaction between Australian and international students from Asian backgrounds" is "one of the most disturbing aspects of the internationalization of Australian university campuses." In my teaching, I found the same situation at secondary schools with an IS population. I also found that students I approached, whether international or local, at university or high school, overwhelmingly indicated that they would like to have more interaction. Since, in the light of the theories presented above, 'interaction' is viewed as facilitating learning, and particularly language learning, I decided to try to increase interaction between locals and internationals.

I was looking to provide a social framework for learning, on constructivist principles, using inclusive practices, for combined groups of IS and LS who had been enabled to connect

with each other and who could, perhaps, come to regard themselves as a cohesive group of learners, in the belief that learning outcomes would improve for all students.

For this goal I defined IS as those students who had come to Australia to study from other countries (making the assumption that IS equated to students with English as an Additional Language [EAL]) and LS to those students living in Australia as residents with their families (making the assumption that these students spoke English at home). There were issues with both these definitions which I will consider later, but in this context they were the most feasible.

The interaction activities I envisaged had to counteract the perceived barrier to interaction identified by Leask (cited in Takeda, 2005, p.4) that there is "not enough acceptance that interaction across cultures is a two-way process". The interaction also aimed to address further key findings from Takeda's (2005) study, in particular that, although "responsibility for increasing interaction lies predominantly with the students themselves, [both groups of students] believe that the University also has a role to play" (p.11). Among Takeda's participants' suggestions for increasing interaction were "projects that require interaction in class" (p.11). However, my own teaching experience in both universities and high schools had led me to be convinced that just putting LS and IS together without preparation produces minimal, even negative, results. Therefore, in this high school context, strategic preparation would be necessary. I chose to set up a series of lessons to enable successful interaction, specifically, to enable IS to participate equally in a group discussion with LS.

For IS to be able to participate equally there were some crucial considerations. The first was an understanding of the activity itself, the group discussion, and the approval of the IS for the activity. In her book outlining the experiences of IS in Australia, Claudia Doria describes the unfamiliarity of the Australian education system, particularly to Asian students (Doria, 2005, p.21). So, my first consideration was that IS needed to accept the cultural value of group discussion and understand its purpose. I could not assume that the IS were familiar with group discussion. I did, however, assume that once informed of the group member roles – recorder, facilitator and checkers – that LS would be able and willing to take part. Another consideration was the content. In order to be able to reveal their thoughts on the topic, topic vocabulary and concepts needed to be clarified and time allowed for them to think of ideas. I have sat in many mainstream classrooms in which IS or ESL learners are set up to be deficit models, as they are not given time to use their

dictionaries or to ask clarifying questions without loss of face. Equally important for me was consideration of presenting orally. Students needed to find and feel confident to use their voices, so pronunciation and intonation issues needed to be dealt with. Associated with these affective factors was whether students felt comfortable enough with others to communicate at all. I saw the need to provide all the students, both local and international, with opportunities to get to know each other before working on an activity together, to put them all in a position to "risk the emotional challenge of moving outside their zone of comfort" (Volet & Tan-Quigley, 1995 cited in Volet & Ang, 1998, p.12).

Each consideration needed to be dealt with pre-task and separately. This kind of preparation is described by Bruner (cited in Hammond, 2001, p.3) as "the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom taken in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring." In this case, the final "difficult skill" for the IS was the confidence and the language required for the interaction with local students in a group discussion.

**My research aims**

In order to address these issues, I clarified for myself the following aims:

1.  to design scaffolded activities informed by learning theories to prepare the students for interaction;
2.  to document the outcomes of the scaffolded IS-LS interaction in the classroom;
3.  to explore the implications of IS and LS collaborating in classroom activities.

**Context**

The setting was a Year 10 high school class in the metropolitan area of Adelaide, South Australia. Both IS and LS included males and females aged 14-17 years. There were 10 IS from an ESL class and they came from Asia, Europe and Africa. The two Africans were refugee/immigrants and not fee-paying students on study visas. I included them in the IS group because they were in the ESL class. Seven of the IS had been in Australia for 3-12 months and one for 18 months. There were ten LS from a mainstream English class, selected because classes were on the same line on the school timetable and had a teacher willing to participate in the project. None of these LS were classified as ESL learners, although surnames suggested that some may have had cultural backgrounds other than Anglo-Celtic. There were no Aboriginal learners in either group.

**Methodology**

I identified what I saw as specific factors contributing to success of classroom interaction: familiarisation with key concepts and terms, clarification of purpose, connection with other participants and performance in roles. As indicated, these factors are based on my own teaching experience integrated with the learning theories previously referred to as demonstrated in Figure 1. The process is here conceptualised generically so as to be applicable to any activity for any learners, and there is no set order for activities: what is done first is determined by a teacher's perception of the particular students' needs.

*Methods*

I first confirmed through discussion with the IS students in my 'ESL'[1] class that they had limited interaction with LS. I then asked them to design a survey to ask LS in the participating class about their interaction with IS. They conducted the survey 1:1 in class time. The results of the IS survey suggested that the LS had limited interaction with IS, but that it would be welcome. Having thus discovered that interaction was limited but desirable, I obtained permission from the school principal to conduct a research project, as I intended collecting data for analysis.

I prepared a series of five 100-minute lessons based on these key factors to prepare IS for their roles as researchers and experts, including one 50-minute session comprised of IS + LS on connecting activities. A brief description of all these activities can be found in Appendix 1. The IS were given the topic: *Interaction between international students (IS) and local students (LS)* and they devised a question to be discussed, first amongst themselves, and then in the interaction lesson: *How can we increase interaction between IS and LS?* Once the students were prepared, I organised the IS-LS group discussion. Then, in order to provide data for Project Aim 3, four months after the discussion session, I surveyed all students involved about the experience. The survey can be found in Appendix 2.

*Data collection*

I collected the responses brainstormed by the IS to the question of how to increase interaction. These were categorised and became the content of the worksheet for the IS-LS

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[1] English as a Second Language (ESL) is the term used by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services to refer to this group of students and classes.

interaction session. I then collected the documents produced by each group of IS+LS providing their
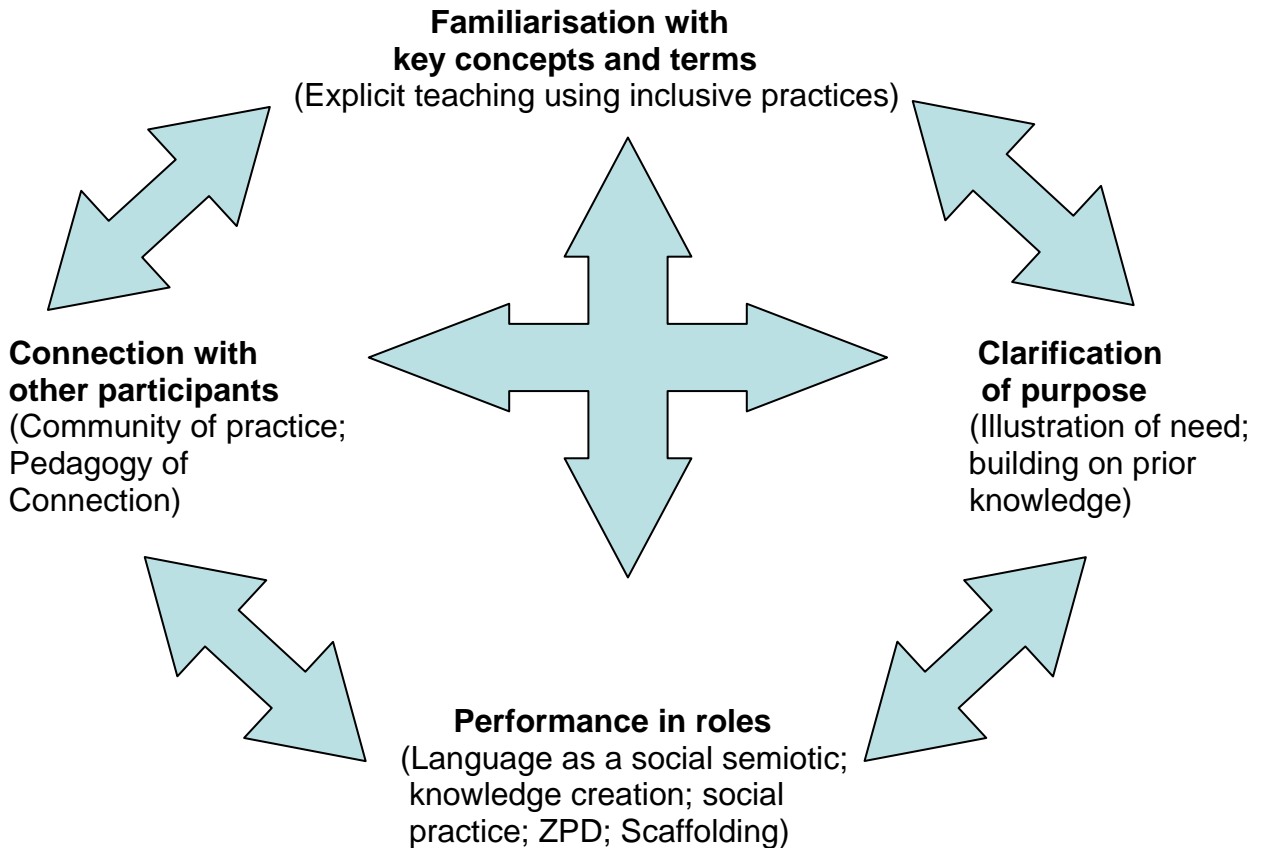
**Familiarisation with
key concepts and terms**
(Explicit teaching using inclusive practices)

**Connection with
other participants**
(Community of practice;
Pedagogy of
Connection)

**Clarification
of purpose**
(Illustration of need;
building on prior
knowledge)

**Performance in roles**
(Language as a social semiotic;
knowledge creation; social
practice; ZPD; Scaffolding)

*Figure 1: Generic version of method/practice showing incorporation of theory.*

responses to the question and their ideas for implementation. Throughout I made notes of my observations of the understanding on the part of the IS and of the participation of all students during the IS+LS interaction (occasionally checking that group roles were being performed appropriately). I did not audio or video record as I did not wish to impede students' participation. I made notes of my own feelings during the whole procedure. The survey was conducted four months after the interaction lesson when I collated and graphed the responses.

**Results**

With respect to Aim 1 to design scaffolded activities informed by learning theories to prepare the students for interaction, the IS demonstrated that they were well prepared by the scaffolded activities by successfully completing all tasks, by producing the documents to be

used in the discussion with LS, and by demonstrating increasing confidence in the ESL classroom.

Results for Aim 2 – to document the outcomes of the scaffolded IS-LS interaction in the classroom – were threefold.

*Content*

In respect to content, the IS demonstrated an impressive level of thinking. For example, they identified four categories for potential interactive activities: language, history, customs, and food. Further, it was noticeable that the groups of combined international and local students' suggestions for implementation displayed equal levels of initiative and maturity. For example, on language, one group suggested that, at a whole school assembly, an IS could use data projection to show a map of where he/she was from and teach students how to say 'Hi'.

*Participation*

In regard to how the students participated, I observed the following:

- there was a sustained 'buzz' of talk, students on task, and no obvious unequal participation;
- all groups of combined IS+LS returned worksheets with more ideas for interaction and implementation;
- each group had a facilitator, a recorder and a spelling and grammar checker;
- groups sustained concentration on task for varying amounts of time, one group spending approximately 40 minutes on task.

*The effect on me*

My allowing students to operate independently of me, the teacher, was at first difficult. I was relinquishing my role as the authority. It felt as though I was handing over responsibility for the learning to the group, and I felt anxious: what if nobody spoke? My fears proved groundless. It appeared that students may have greater flexibility than teachers, and are possibly less locked into patterns that we educators can get stuck in. I would say that the dynamic nature of a socially organised classroom practice has greater chance to flourish without teacher control being overt and ever present. The groups produced very useful results without me! (On a sobering note, this may not be the case when the group is not connected. This point will be taken up in the Discussion section.)

Later, for Aim 3, four months and a Christmas break after the interactive sessions, the survey of all students involved that were still at the school was enlightening. Everyone remembered the interactive sessions. Everyone said they had communicated with students from the other class involved in the interaction. All the IS said they had since communicated with LS who were not involved in the interaction, but only 60% of the LS had. All of the LS thought that communication with ESL international students is definitely made easier if they experience organised classroom interaction such as the activities in 2007. However, to this question about organised classroom interaction, only 20% of the IS answered definitely 'yes', with 40% 'possibly yes' and 40% 'maybe'. With respect to having a more positive attitude in general towards students from a different cultural background, 100% of the LS believed that they 'definitely' had, because of this kind of classroom interaction. However, only 40% of the IS answered 'definitely yes' to this question, with 40% 'possibly yes' and 20% 'maybe'.

All students said that they enjoyed the interaction sessions.

**Discussion**

I suggest, despite the relatively small number of student participants, that the results indicate that scaffolded activities are enabling, that the outcomes of the interaction are very positive, and that there are clear implications for classroom teaching.

In my experience, the perceived level of engagement in the 'shared socio-cultural endeavour', which the 'buzz' in the room attested to, is not often evident in Year 10 mainstream classrooms when a teacher is present. Students were thinking about the problem and communicating their ideas. A sense of purpose was felt as a result, I believe, of the authenticity of the task. It appeared that, as Douglas (2000, p.53) argues, the IS and LS found "working as a group proved to be a stimulating experience" and, perhaps, discovered a "potential for sustained work and discussion far beyond what [we] might have predicted from the start". The classroom interaction helped facilitate these outcomes by providing a platform from which the students could perform, as they knew the role to be played and had their own experience to draw on. The group who continued working on task for 40 minutes exemplified this.

The intense scaffolding of IS pre-task appeared to be essential to enable the successful interaction. It is obvious that students need to be familiar with the key concepts and terms and to understand a task's purpose; clearly, the need for a learner to feel secure and comfortable enough to take risks cannot be underestimated. Related to this is consideration of student identity. In this case, explicit teaching and time allowed for thinking, as well as enabling both IS and LS to connect with each other prior to the main activity, allowed IS to perform an identity closer to who they know they are. I agree with Doria's (2005, p.86) claim that "integration into the broader community without loss of identity is paramount", and with Teramoto's (forthcoming) insistence that IS, when not given a voice, are often grossly underestimated. Identity analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

In the preparation for the main interaction, the predominant role the IS played was that of researcher. The fact that it was the product of their research that was used as resource material for the class learning reinforced the importance of this role. In the main interaction, the predominant role the IS played was, along with the LS, that of expert. The preparation enabled IS to work with LS as equal participants in the provision of content formation, thus illustrating the interdependent nature of the work and the awareness on the part of all that this was not a one-sided affair.

Giving students the chance to connect enabled them to see each other as equals, despite their cultural differences. This bonding began in the quiz activity when LS and IS were finding what they had in common; the fact that they had to answer as themselves meant they were relating personally. Finding out from the results of the quiz that all of them were ignorant of school statistics proved to be a huge equaliser. In a group discussion/problem solving where both IS and LS are stakeholders, the realisation for students is on the expertise that each individual has with respect to their own experience. It is each individual's experience which is being valued in the activity, implying recognition of everyone's prior knowledge and not privileging any single culture or view. An inclusive, constructivist approach appears to be a highly successful way to produce this kind of student talk, that is, having an activity that had no 'right' or 'wrong' answers where students might otherwise be reticent to engage for fear of appearing foolish. How well such tasks dealt with Collett's "institutionalised ranking" (Collett, 2007), however, warrants further study. The awareness by these IS and LS that they share many commonalities in their learning worked as a unifying factor.

Another indication that connection between learners is important was revealed by the outcome of the 'Find points in common' activity. The IS group (familiar with each other for at least ten weeks) when performing this activity generated not only innovative ideas but also some hilarity, despite being from a range of cultures. The same activity when LS were included in the groups did produce interesting results but not as much laughter and conviviality. I would suggest this was due to the fact that the students did not know each other as well, and did not know how far they could push their probing, did not know how 'cheeky' they could be. Interestingly, my new class of IS this year were unable to participate in this activity at all, finding it quite threatening until they had got to know each other better.

A second significant point on this particular connection activity is that level of language was not an issue, as it allowed for the more able to assist the less able with no obvious loss of face. This proved to be a form of natural scaffolding between peers, as they all needed each other for the task. This seemed to have assisted in the creation of the learning community. In a similar way, in the collaborative activity LS unconsciously scaffolded the IS in the presentation of their ideas, that is, in *how* to contribute, *not what* to contribute. By making suggestions, agreeing and disagreeing in their spontaneous interaction, LS provided a model for the IS to follow. They were, in a sense, tapping into the IS's Vygotskian "Zone of Proximal Development" (1978 cited in Hammond, 2001).

The roles played by group members (facilitator, recorder and checker[s]), both initiated the activity and enabled it to proceed. I was interested to read of the Commonwealth Government's 2020 Summit that "some participants complained their points of view were not heard" (*The Advertiser,* 2008), suggesting to me that the facilitators in the group discussions had not understood the importance of playing this role properly!

The follow up survey indicated a number of implications. The fact that IS said they had communicated with LS who had not been involved in the structured activities suggests an increase in confidence on the part of IS. However, despite the IS indication that they were communicating with a wider range of students, their response to the question of whether interaction was easier as a result of the activities the previous term was inconclusive. Only 20% responded as 'definitely yes', 80% considered it as only a 'possibility' or a 'maybe'. This may be because the IS interpreted the question in a different way from my intention, suggesting the survey question may need to be reworked. The question was intended to

probe whether the IS had become more comfortable in their communication with the LS, while they may have interpreted it as probing into their English language competency. IS are realistic about how much control they have over their use of English, and they did not see the interaction as dealing directly with that problem. The fact that LS stated emphatically (100%) that communication with IS was easier and that their attitude had become more positive towards IS since the activity, but that the majority had not interacted with IS who had not been involved except when on excursion, suggests that some LS may not know how to approach an IS. It may be, as Takeda (2005, p.13) argues, that "[l]ocal students are interested but don't know how to bridge the gap." This suggests that activities or strategies for 'bridging the gap' are still needed.

In circumstances like these there are multiple variables operating. A longer study that identifies personality type, speed of language acquisition, home circumstances and other variables would need to be undertaken. However, the results here indicate that carefully prepared interaction lessons do promote successful interaction and that successful interaction may promote wider contact. The results also suggest that both IS and LS are positively affected.

**Evaluation**

In this study there were two noticeable difficulties. The first lies in the distinction between IS and LS and highlights the importance of clear definitions of terms. My ESL class of ten had one student, a refugee, who had been in Australia for four years. He claimed to be a local. The Year 10 mainstream English class participating in the interaction included two foreign exchange students from England whose first language was English, who announced that they were international. Modifications had to be made in the questions from which statistics were taken and in the follow up interview questions, making it specific that I was asking about further interaction between local students and international students for whom English was not the first language. This crossover of students also meant that the data collated from the survey questions had to be reviewed. In addition, some of the LS came from families from non-English speaking backgrounds, adding another variable which was not accounted for. On reflection, for this context one could consider defining LS as "native speakers" and IS as "Asian fee-payers", as these are the groups that prompted my study. However, as stated, I believe this method benefits all students, whatever the background.

Secondly, for the project to be more real and perhaps more lastingly influential for the students, it is necessary to appropriately publish a follow up report on findings. Beginning the sequence of preparatory lessons towards the end of the year in Term 4 meant there was no time for the follow up and the class changed the following year.

Despite these limitations in my procedure, I evaluate the whole process as a positive experience. At the very least the LS and IS interacted with each other during these lessons and all expressed enjoyment. Also, during the carefully structured preparation activities, IS were being exposed to and engaged in a range of skills necessary for research. The effect on the LS who participated was positive overall and could have wider benefits due to the expressed improvement in attitude. Exactly what, and how much, was learned will show in later student work. If, as Rogoff (1994) suggests, students should be able to operate under more than one model of learning, it is time for all educators to incorporate into their pedagogies a sociocultural view in which students are active participants.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Whether or not a class has IS members, a focus on student–student interaction should be included in all teachers' repertoires. The more authentic the activity is, the better the outcome, that is, the more contextualised the better. Cooperation in data collection, especially where individual expertise is recognised and valued through students being given the opportunity to connect as learners together, is something to be aimed for. This kind of cooperation, once established, could be extended, for example, to discussion of issues and critical analysis. Teacher collaboration in identification of relevant and engaging interactions in all subject areas is desirable. EAL teachers need to find ways to connect with mainstream classroom teachers to encourage the incorporation of activities that allow all students to connect with each other and to collaborate with each other on tasks.

Enabling students to interact in the classroom in an authentic collaborative activity through carefully staged preparation can produce quality outcomes which potentially translate to improved learning and, in this case of IS and LS, to increased interaction outside the classroom. If, as Volet and Ang (1998, p.6) found at tertiary level, "students' preferences/attitude for cross cultural mix decreased/became more negative from first year to second and third year of undergraduate study", I suggest the kinds of steps I advocate here be implemented immediately by educational institutions, especially high schools.

However, to achieve a successful interaction, pre-task preparation, as described in Figure 1, is essential.

My own observation of mainstream classrooms reveals IS to be non- or minor participants, as are, I also believe, the hidden other EAL learners, be they Indigenous, migrant or from a socio-economic background which does not enable easy access to the prevailing academic genres. I suggest that working collaboratively on a real issue has the potential to bond the students and break down the predominant 'us and them' attitude that exists. It is time to give all a voice, to enable all students to show the level of thinking they are capable of.

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**Appendix 1.** **Pre-task preparation. Examples of activities**.

| | Examples of activities |
|---|---|
| familiarisation of key concepts and terms | <ul><li>brainstorm definition of 'research' in small group</li><li>small group work rules of engagement modeled</li><li>access prior knowledge of research vocabulary from list of 25 research skills</li><li>research terms used in context</li><li>authentic texts from real research – vocabulary exercises, paragraphing exercises</li><li>concept map of when and with whom interaction in English</li><li>quiz on school population (total numbers, IS numbers, NESB numbers, countries of origin)</li></ul> |
| connecting IS with IS | <ul><li>name learning games</li><li>world map for individual introductions</li><li>pair work, re-pair</li><li>shouting across the room activity</li><li>find things in common (pairs, groups, half class competition)</li></ul> |
| connecting IS with LS | <ul><li>IS give LS the quiz</li><li>IS survey the LS</li><li>find things in common (IS + LS pairs, mixed groups)</li><li>students choose category of interest from those identified by IS</li></ul> |
| clarifying purpose | <ul><li>anything it takes to ensure topic vs. issue difference is understood</li><li>teacher steers IS to a Research Question after/during students' Internet search for background information on the topic, i.e., students devise own "purpose"</li><li>raise student awareness of ultimate purpose, i.e., answer Research Question in small groups of LS and IS through step-by-step elicitation of what is known and what is not known and who best to ask</li></ul> |
| roles in performance | <u>As researchers</u>:<ul><li>IS search Internet for secondary source data on the topic and the issue once identified</li><li>IS devise survey to find out about LS experience of interaction with IS</li><li>IS conduct survey, collate responses, graph collated responses, make inferences from the graphs</li><li>IS address the Research Question and identify categories</li><li>IS clarify purpose to LS</li><li>IS explain small group discussion roles of facilitator, recorder and spell and grammar checkers</li></ul><u>As experts</u>:<ul><li>IS + LS group work on one of the four categories identified by IS</li><li>IS + LS brainstorm and discuss ideas</li><li>IS + LS brainstorm and discuss implementation of ideas</li><li>IS + LS prepare document to hand up</li></ul> |

**Note: The only 'order' here is within the separate boxes**.

**Appendix 2. Follow up survey questions on Interaction Activity.**
**Increasing interaction between local and international students at HHS**

**Questions to international students**
Student name: _____
Year level:  _____
Interactive activity: _____

1. Do you remember the interaction with local students in Term 4 2007? (Show feedback sheet or other relevant document to the student).
        YES / NO
If NO go to Q6.
2. Have you seen any of those students this year (2008)?                 YES / NO
If NO go to Q6.
If YES
3. Has there been any form of communication between you and them?    YES / NO
If NO
4. What do you think may be the reason for this? Tick (a) your answer.
   - you are not sure if they remember you        _____
   - they do not look at you                    _____
   - you have avoided it                        _____
   - other _____

If YES
5. What form did the communication take?

                        How many times? How many different students?
VERBAL                              _____         _____
NON-VERBAL (eg smile, nod)          _____        _____

6. Have you communicated this year with any other local students?
                                                   YES / NO
If NO go to Q8.
If YES
7. Where was the communication? What form did it take? Tick your answers.

   - in a classroom         _____        verbal _____ nonverbal _____
   - in the school yard      _____        verbal _____  nonverbal _____
   - other _____ verbal _____ nonverbal _____

8. Do you think communication with local students is made easier if you experience organised classroom interaction such as the classroom activity in 2007? Tick (a) your answer.
_____
_
**definitely yes     possibly yes     maybe    I don't know   definitely not**

9. Do you think you have a more positive attitude towards local students in general because of this kind of classroom interaction? Tick (a) your answer.

_____

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**definitely yes      possibly yes      maybe     I don't know    definitely not**

**Note: Same Survey Questions to LS but with necessary in-text changes from 'local' to 'international'.**

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