

Australian Englishes and the Experiences of International Students

Peter Kell & Gillian Vogl
Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong

Introduction

There is one salient feature that differentiates English from other Asian and European global languages. It is the way in which English has been subject to commodification and characterised as a marketable product (Habermas, 1990). In the context of a post-industrial society, English has assumed an important status as providing access to economic, educational and immigration opportunities (Singh, Kell and Pandian, 2002).

In his work on the uses of languages, Bourdieu (Jenkins, 1992: 152) claimed that language could not be understood without close attention to the cultural context in which it was situated. Language and culture are interwoven. Language is firmly embedded in social relationships and language is a part of the struggle over the production of culture with cultural reproduction confirming and legitimising the existing social order. Belying the unity of standard languages is a symbolic domination in which non-standard languages are given less dominance (Hanks 2005: 75).

The internationalisation of the university had included the increased use and reliance on English as the lingua franca of higher education. However, in the current climate while there has been an increased policy focus on English proficiency, this focus has tended to see English as disconnected from culture and has also failed to recognise the hybridity of Englishes that exist in Australia and the connection between international students successful negotiation of these Englishes and their well-being. This paper focuses on the issues confronting international students in academic and social life in Australia.

A crucial element in the achievement of success for international students is not only their academic adjustment but also their adjustment to the social and cultural environment. While academic success may heighten a student's confidence, social and cultural adjustment can be important factors that lead to this academic success (Novera, 2004: 475). According to Cameron and Meade (2002), there is a tendency to view international students, particularly Asian students as a homogenous group. Thus, while it is important to be aware of the heterogeneity of the international student population, recent research suggests that there are a number of common difficulties which many international students face in terms of their adjustment and well being. These include, homesickness, financial difficulties, language difficulties, problems dealing with university staff and other authorities, loneliness, isolation from other classmates and anxiousness about

speaking in the classroom in front of classmates and lecturers (Leder and Forgasz, 2004: 195; Novera, 2004: 476; Roberstson et al., 2000: 94; Scheyvens et al., 2003).

Global English in the Global University

The research that will be described below was part of a much larger trans-national project funded by the Global Development Network of the World Bank. The research project explored the question of how to enhance the usage and proficiency of English in universities in the Asia Pacific and Australia. There were two nodes of research, one in Malaysia conducted by Ambigapathy Pandian of the University of Sains Malaysia and one in Australia. The research from which this data emerged was part of this study and was conducted by Peter Kell and Gillian Vogl as part of the Australian node. This node was conducted in a highly regarded public university in a regional centre in Eastern Australia and for the purposes of this study is called Beachways University.

The data in this study was obtained through a combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups, with support staff, university management, and international students. This paper concentrates essentially on the students' accounts of their own experiences in settling into the Australian university setting and the broader community.

Global English in the Global University-Issues about Living as a Student in Australia

Written Academic English

The majority of the students who participated in this research had been studying English since junior high school. This, however, largely involved reading and writing of an academic nature. Students from a number of different countries made comments, such as: *They teach in Japan to focus on grammar, especially writing and reading and they seldom teach us communication, English is mostly concentrated on grammar and vocabulary (Iran) and In my country most people learn to read and write in English but spoken English is not important (China).*

Largely, students in this study stated that they felt the most anxious about listening and speaking in English. One of the major factors that led to many of the students' difficulties in understanding English was the Australian accent. Students mentioned that it was particularly difficult to understand the Australian accent out in the community.

One of the students from Indonesia stated that the American and the Australian accent were different and in Indonesia they were used to hearing English spoken with an American accent. To this group Australians tended to mumble and slur words. Others were embarrassed when they spoke to 'Australians' and the Australians did not understand what they were saying because of their accents. They felt that this was not only embarrassing for them when they were asked to repeat themselves but also embarrassing for the person who did not understand them. Other students stated that it did not really matter about a person's accent as long as they spoke slowly and clearly.

They also found 'Australians' hard to understand because they shortened words. Australians even shortened University to 'uni' which tended to confuse students who were used to a more formal type of English (Angelo et al., 1994).

An issue that arose from the focus group discussion was what the participants viewed as 'English' in the first place. They differentiated between American and British English and then again between 'proper English' and the English they heard in Australia. As one student explained, *When I came to Australia, I'm thinking what is going on and they put every word together and it's very different, it's not like English but it's English.*

Some of the support staff who were interviewed said that they explained to students that *English is an evolving language and that there are many different versions of it around the world and that Australia is a multicultural country and so there is no correct or incorrect way to speak English as long as you make yourself understood. That is all that matters.*

Students lacked confidence in speaking to local students and found it difficult to understand what locals were saying but really wanted the experience of speaking conversational English and getting to know what they saw as Anglo-Australians.

In the focus groups, students who had been more successful in starting and sustaining conversations with 'Australians' spoke about the importance of establishing common ground. One of the students talked about the importance of watching popular television shows like 'Home and Away' so that she could join in on discussions about these shows that took place at her workplace and in her seminars. Another participant talked about learning some Australian colloquialisms. He said that going up to people and saying "how is it going mate?" was a good conversation starter.

One of the students was very relieved when she discovered the importance of discussing the weather in Australia. She stated that: *That is another thing that I have picked up here, the conversation about how the day is and whether is it*

going to rain, that nice things to talk about. In India there is so much like electricity is off so you are trying to catch hold of the electrician or water has stopped coming so you are running around for the plumber. There is so many things going on, and the traffic jams, nobody really has time to stop and talk about the weather. Someone will start talking about, how is your son, how is your daughter and I have this problem, the fridge isn't working and my daughter is seeing a guy that I don't approve of. So that is another reason that sometimes I used to be very quiet. I am on the fifth floor and I am going down and on the fourth floor somebody else comes and it is just a nod and a smile as then I did not know that I could talk about the weather.

Some of the international students believed that it was not that local students were unfriendly but rather that they also did not know how to initiate conversations with International students. A student mentioned that once the "ice was broken" then it had more to do with a student's personality than their culture as to whether or not a relationship developed. Other students found it hard as they felt that Australian students knew very little about their culture and countries of origin. As one of the students from our focus group stated:

I recognised one lady, myself-I come from Indonesia and I asked her if she knew about Indonesia and she said: I don't know Indonesia. And I asked her again about Bali and she said: I have been there six times. But she did not know about Indonesia.

Another student commented that 'Australians' who had been out of the country were much easier to approach and were 'a lot more friendly' than those who had never left the country.

Learning the Culture

Some of the students took a while to get used to what they referred to as the 'informalness' or informality of Australians in terms of both the way they dressed and behaved. One student stated that;

And nobody even dreams of wearing thongs to university (laughs) that is unimaginable, I mean if my mum got to know that I wear slippers and come to the college, she would freak out.

Some students stated that it was hard to meet Australians because of the pub and club culture of many Australians. One of the students explained that there are two groups of international students, those who cannot go to pubs and drink because they cannot afford to and those who cannot drink alcohol for cultural and religious reasons.

Many of the students found it difficult to follow what both their lecturers and classmates were saying due to both the speed with which they spoke and because of their use of Australian colloquialisms. One of the students said that she was once the only "Asian" in a group and that she did not understand a word of what was being said because everyone in her group talked in slang. Some of the students perceived only their

'Anglo' lecturers to be real Australians. However others recognised that Australia was a multi-cultural country and that the notion of being an Australian was more complex than a simple connection with being a white Anglo Celtic. A few students felt that their lecturers from non-English speaking backgrounds were less helpful, while others perceived them to be more helpful as they felt like these lecturers were more empathetic with their language issues. According to one of the support staff, most of the students were very happy with non-Anglo lecturers if they were good teachers. If they were not, however, this was then attributed to their ethnicity.

Getting on with 'Aussies'; Parallel Worlds?

When students from the focus group were asked if 'Australians' wanted to get to know them most of the students felt that 'Australians' did not want to know them. Yet these participants were interested in getting to know 'Australians' and curious about their lives. Some of the reasons which students provided for their difficulties in forming relationships with 'Australians' were; they did not feel confident talking to 'Australians' or they felt that 'Australians' may not want to form relationships with them because of their own temporariness. Some felt that Australian students couldn't be bothered and that Australians were too busy due to work, family and study commitments.

On the surface it appeared that international students associated and socialised with students from their own backgrounds or exclusively with international students. However, when questioned in greater depth to review associations and connections in their day-to-day experiences, the picture was slightly different. It was not as though the students did not spend a lot of time with others from their own background but further interviews suggested that they seemed to interact more with domestic students than they themselves initially recognised and recalled.

Some of the examples that students provided were attending barbecues with Australians and going out to the pub with work friends. One of the students who had hurt his back spoke about the very friendly interactions he had with his physiotherapist and also other hospital staff. His wife had also made friends with some Australians at the 'mothers group' that she attended. Indeed some recognised their associations through participation in work, sports and house sharing, all of which were not mentioned initially. This

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was partly due to the perception among international student that only Anglo students were real Australians.

Conclusion

A theme emerging from this research suggests that there is an interconnection between English language proficiency and social interaction. The current policy settings interpret language as a disconnected 'requirement to be met' but in reality the attainment of competence and proficiency is, from the perspective of those interviewed, dependent and related to the capacities of students to display social and cultural adaptation and interaction. This interaction is very often outside the academy and is often in language contexts that are very different from that which features in the academy. The possession of an understanding and ability to use colloquial and non-formal English is a key to initiating and maintaining social interactions within and outside the academy. It needs to be recognised in policy terms that the needs of students are often as much to do with developing social, cultural and lifestyle connections and networks that enable access to this colloquial Australian English as they are to do with academic preparation. While within the academy, a more formal type of English may have symbolic dominance, clearly the possession of a basic working knowledge of informal Australian English is important in reducing alienation, loneliness and homesickness and from the experience of informants is linked to the connection they make with the broader Australian community.

The research suggested that there are some complexities about the presence of international students and more particularly Asian students that need to be unpacked for policies to respond to some of the issues described in this research. The neo-liberal market-based approach welcomes an influx of international students to be involved in an Australian experience. This exposure to the Australian experience is something that international students find difficult to negotiate with limited Australian English and knowledge of social norms.

From the data that we gathered in this project, there is a complex pattern of intercultural negotiation through the medium of English inside and outside the academy that influences the life of international students. Simply addressing issues of standard and English proficiency in the academy disconnected from social and cultural aspects of student life will not adequately address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.