Staff development needs on an international campus

Wendy Baker and Mary Panko
UNITEC Institute of Technology
New Zealand
wbaker@unitec.ac.nz
mpanko@unitec.ac.nz

Abstract

Over the last decade academic staff at tertiary institutions have been confronted by increasing internationalisation of their classes. In an attempt to support staff development in this area a collaborative research project was undertaken by a combination of interviews and observations to investigate the issues and strategies adopted by staff to improve the learning of Non English Speaking Background (NESB) students.

In the study lecturers identified the overwhelming problem when teaching NESB students as language difficulties which they attempted to address by altering their oral delivery patterns but not supporting this with other ‘good practice’ strategies.

Other issues raised were: cultural factors such as limited participation in group work by NESB students, and that NESB students ‘unpreparedness’ for Student-Centred Learning. Few lecturers were observed to attend to these issues.

The study also revealed problems and attitudes changed according to who was the minority - in some classes first language English-speaking New Z students formed the minority group while in others it was NESB students.

Without exception lecturers valued the presence of NESB students but felt that institutions that encourage large numbers of NESB students should become more accountable for lecturer difficulties and frustrations.

The research paper concludes by the advocacy of ‘best practice’ which will go along way to overcoming difficulties with NESB students for both lecturers and institutions.

Introduction

Over the last decade academic staff at tertiary institutions have been confronted by increasing internationalisation of their classes. Although there has been an increase in students from Europe, particularly from the former Eastern Block countries, the majority of international students at UNITEC Institute of Technology are from the Asian region. Therefore, reference in this study to international students largely refers to students from Asia, both New Zealand residents and non residents.

The data in the research presented here draws also on the information collected by the authors’ colleagues Mark Barrow and Jeff Buchanan in the 1996-1997 period.
Although these students are not a homogenous group of people, for they come from different countries in the same region, they share many common experiences: they are studying in a language other than their first language and they are studying in a context different to their previous experiences in terms of expectations, learning support and academic and social requirements (Chalmers & Volet, 1997).

Much has been written about Non English Speaking Background (NESB) student needs (Burns, 1991, Kennedy, 1995) but less about the needs of those who teach them. Many lecturers are struggling to provide an environment that is conducive to learning without adequate preparation to cope with multicultural classes, some members of which speak English as a foreign language, others who speak it as a second language and yet others who speak it as a first language (Kennedy, 1995).

In 1995 a Working party on the Internationalisation of the UNITEC campus considered ways in which fuller benefits could be provided for the increasing numbers of NESB students and one of the key initiatives they identified was the need for clear strategies to increase staff training and support. In an attempt to support staff development in this area a collaborative research project was undertaken to investigate lecturer attitudes and teaching strategies to improve the learning of NESB students. The specific purpose of this study was:

- to identify issues concerned with the teaching of NESB students from lecturers’ perspectives,
- to examine the strategies currently being employed by academic staff teaching international students and,
- to be able to incorporate ‘best practice’ into future staff development.

The findings of this project suggest that a wider repertoire of teaching skills would greatly assist lecturers who are teaching NESB students and consequently improve student learning. The effort and resources required to support such developments would benefit all students. As revealed in a study by Burns’ (1991) overseas students do have a number of problems in common with local students although the additional factor of being an English second language speaker exacerbates their difficulties. Also, with the current focus in higher education on the quality of learning, the principles of ‘best practice’ apply just as much to NESB students as they do for local students. As used here ‘best practice’ refers to the establishment of the following characteristics deemed to be conducive to learning according to Western educational wisdom.

The following list exemplifies this:

- An ability to make material taught stimulating and interesting
- A facility for engaging students at their level of understanding
- A commitment to making it very clear what has to be understood, at what level and why
- Showing respect and concern for students
- A commitment to encouraging student independence
- Using teaching strategies that require students to learn actively, responsibly and cooperatively
Using valid assessment methods
- A focus on key concepts, and students' understanding rather than covering all the content
- Giving high quality feedback on student work
- A desire to learn from students and others about how teaching can be improved

(Ramsden, 1992, p89)

In this paper firstly, the research procedure and the analysis of the results are presented. These are the issues concerning the teaching of NESB students and the strategies employed by lecturers and are discussed under the headings of Language and Learning Strategies. Next lecturer perceptions of Organisational Issues which have impacted on their ability to teach NESB students are considered. Finally conclusions are presented.

Procedure

The research subjects were lecturers targeted on the basis of class composition of 10% or more NESB students and were essentially volunteers. This group of 40 lecturers comprised approximately ten per cent of UNITEC's academic staff. Although the participating staff were only a sample of academics, which clearly limits the generalisability of the results, it does give indications of staff development needs supported by other current research. In addition, some of the comments which have been included are taken from other UNITEC investigations (Gunn-Lewis et al 1996).

The research had two parts - interview and observation. Interview questions examined lecturers' perceptions of the learning difficulties of NESB students, the teaching strategies used to address these issues and any other related issues which affected teaching. The interview responses were rated by the number of times a particular issue was highlighted by individual lecturers.
These responses were grouped into three categories:

**Figure 1: Interview Response Categories:**

<table>
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<tr>
<td>• modifications of speech,</td>
<td>• learning styles</td>
<td>• enrolment,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• explanations of new terms</td>
<td>• teaching strategies</td>
<td>• support,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• recommendations for language support</td>
<td>• attitudes to knowledge</td>
<td>• Institutional strategic policies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subsequent observations were designed to check whether the strategies lecturers espoused were present in their practice. These were grouped into two main categories Category A - Language - Issues of Oral Delivery and Category B - Learning Issues and Strategies with eight sub-categories as listed below:

**Figure 2: Observation Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Categories</th>
<th>Sub-Category</th>
<th>Specific issue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A - Language - Issues of Oral Delivery</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Lecturers’ management of specific key words related to their subject area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Lecturers’ avoidance of slang or other NZ cultural phrases</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A3</td>
<td>Lecturers’ enunciation and speed of speech.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A4</td>
<td>Lecturers’ use of learning aids - colour, diagrams, whiteboard usage etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B - Learning Issues &amp; Strategies</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Lecturers’ use of questioning and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Lecturers’ use of group and peer work initiated to develop understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B3</td>
<td>Lecturers’ frequency of relating content to NESB students’ backgrounds</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B4</td>
<td>Lecturers’ frequency of the use of NZ terms made accessible to NESB students to bridge language or cultural ‘gaps’ e.g. the term ‘cross lease’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The decisions to place responses into these categories was a subjective one, reached by the collective agreement of the researchers.
Language issues as perceived by lecturers

Figure 3: Language-issues as perceived by lecturers:

![Language Issues Graph]

A1 Lecturers' management of specific key words related to their subject area.
A2 Lecturers' avoidance of slang or other NZ cultural phrases
A3 Lecturers' enunciation and speed of speech
A4 Lecturers' use of learning aids - colour, diagrams, whiteboard usage etc

In this study the majority of lecturers (84%) [Fig.3] identified inadequate understanding of the English language as the main difficulty they experienced when teaching NESB students. These findings are supported by numerous other studies in Australia (Ballard, 1987; Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Bourke, 1986; Samuelowicz, 1987; Burns, 1991) and in New Zealand (Bellingham, 1993; James & Watts, 1992) all of which identified English proficiency as a major problem affecting academic performance. In Australia Samuelowicz (1987) and New Zealand (James & Watts, 1992) it was found NESB students themselves ranked language problems, especially in oral expression and understanding spoken language, as contributing to academic barriers (Hunt, 1994). This focus on the oral sending and receiving of language was also the main focus of the lecturers in this current study. The language aspects of reading and writing were almost exclusively not attended to in our study, this is possibly due to the fact that face-to-face communication is the initial most obvious evidence of difficulty that lecturers experience.

Lecturers in this study gave numerous examples of the way this occurred:
“They spend all their time looking up dictionaries and getting completely lost.”
“Sometimes I know I confuse the situation by explaining the same thing in a different way”
“I don’t seem to be able to make even my task instructions understood at times”
“Some of the activities I set up to help language are seen as childish, especially by some Asian men.”
“They use a lot of out-of-class time because of either inability or unwillingness to ask questions in class.”

Or as exemplified in the following exchange:
Lecturer, “Was this a chronic situation? What was their response?”
Students – search dictionaries
Lecturer, “Don’t you know the meaning of chronic?”
Student, “I want to know meaning of there/their.”

These difficulties also caused embarrassment for staff who frequently failed to understand students’ replies even after several attempts and who generally could not pronounce the names of the Asian members of the class.

To their credit the observation part of this study showed the majority of lecturers attempting to employ a variety of strategies to overcome perceived language difficulties which supported their espoused awareness of this area. The data here shows that 80% [Fig.3] of lecturers were highly aware of clarifying key words which were specific to their content area. The staff recognised that problems with technical vocabulary, experienced by all students, were increased when an NESB student lacked basic English skills. Words were written on the board, spelt out or repeated, the class was asked for an explanation or the lecturer supplied an explanation. Fifty percent of lecturers [Fig.5] were observed to support this strategy by using teaching aids such as colour, whiteboard, diagrams accompanied by careful explanations and content handouts with key words and definitions.

It was observed that at times there was agitation displayed by lecturers and NZ students that explanations were slowing the pace of the lesson - “Lecturers are too busy being ESL instructors.”

Sixty five percent of lecturers [Fig.3] demonstrated avoidance of slang or NZ cultural phrases such as:

- “a bird in the hand” or “as different as chalk and cheese”
- “That’ll be the day”
- The work “tick” your answers created confusion
- Double negatives

However, there were also times when totally inaccessible language was used ranging from:

- “Shivering in a turret does not contribute to social avant garde antagonism and twentieth century art”


to the use of the term “Gotcha” in a class comprising 80% NESB students.

Sixty percent of lecturers [Fig.3] demonstrated slowing their speech and enunciating more carefully. However, despite this level of consciousness it must be noted that attention to this aspect tended to fluctuate during the course of the lesson and also at times resulted in a slow monotone.

Lecturers advocated a variety of other strategies in an attempt to overcome language difficulties of NESB students such as:

- maintain the use of a simplified vocabulary,
- increase clarity, e.g. by the use of Learning Outcomes at the commencement of each session,
- give more handouts,
- group native and non-native speakers of English together,
- hold additional sessions prior to examinations,
- increase lecturer availability for 1:1 consultations,
- review drafts of assignments,
vary delivery techniques to include the use of videos,
• recommend English language support for students, and,
• develop introductory classes specifically for NESB students.

However, lecturers explained that using some or all of these techniques involved an enormous extra expenditure of their time, both working with the students and on preparation of additional materials. They also recognised that the basic strategies of reduced speech speed, simplified language and extensive after-class hours support of NESB students could diminish the quality of tertiary education being received by native English speakers. The issue of the additional time required to teach international students is endorsed by Ballard and Clanchy (1997, p3) who state:

"Possibly the major reason why staff hesitate to welcome more international students in their classes or hesitate to supervise international research students is the recognition that teaching these students will invariably take up ... significantly more of their time. And few staff have any time to spare, no matter how much goodwill they may have toward students from other countries.”

The theoretical framework on which this study is based is the Ballard and Clanchy model (1991) of the relationships between teaching and learning strategies and the cultural attitudes to knowledge which inform them.

Figure 4 Ballard and Clanchy Model:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes to Knowledge</th>
<th>Conserving</th>
<th>Extending</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning approaches</td>
<td>Reproductive</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
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</table>

This model helps us to understand that there are dominant approaches within cultures towards knowledge, from an emphasis on the conservation of knowledge to attitudes which emphasise its extension. These approaches are also reflected in the way knowledge is delivered. In reality there are not two extremes of position but rather a continuum of attitudes along which NESB and local students are located. For despite being educated in a particular culture individual students in all cultures vary in their attitudes to knowledge and the way it is delivered and received. For example there are many New Zealand students (young and mature) who regard group work and exploration of values and attitudes around the content of a subject as “touchy feelie” and prefer a teacher centred lecture approach.

When examined from a language perspective, many NESB students will be forced to adopt a position on the Reproductive end of the spectrum, particularly at the beginning of their studies.
Learning issues and strategies as perceived by lecturers

Figure 5: Learning Issues and Strategies as perceived by lecturers

Learning Issues & Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of Lecturers</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>15%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

B1 Lecturers’ use of questioning and discussion
B2 Lecturers’ use of group and peer work initiated to develop understanding
B3 Lecturers’ frequency of relating content to NESB students’ backgrounds
B4 Lecturers’ frequency of the use of NZ terms made accessible to NESB students to bridge language or cultural ‘gaps’ e.g. the term ‘cross lease’

When interviewed about the issues and strategies lecturers used when teaching NESB students 12% of the responses [Fig 5] indicated that differences in learning strategies were a major problem. These issues of differences have been grouped under the following headings: Knowledge and Learning Strategies. This implies that 88% of lecturers did not consider any cultural implications possibly because they felt overwhelmed by language problems. However, when observed, 25% of lecturers [Fig 5] were seen to be attempting to use learning strategies which the authors categorise as student centred techniques beneficial to NESB and local students alike.

When this area is considered in conjunction with the Ballard and Clanchy model the starting point of the average NESB student might not be so far removed from that of his/her New Zealand counterpart as might have been expected. Although the apparent previous experience of Asian students in particular might seem to relegate them to the left hand end of the continuum, many of the learning strategies they adopt, such as working in informal collaborative peer groups, in fact place them towards the centre of the continuum, (Biggs, 1996).
Knowledge

In addition, lecturers experienced their own frustrations at not being able to convince students that many problems had more than one solution. “I explain that there is more than one correct answer and they say, ‘But which one is right?’ (Gunn-Lewis et al, 1996).

Looking first at knowledge implications, many lecturers stated that NESB students came from educational backgrounds which were: teacher dominated, used expository teaching methods and low-level cognitive strategies such as memorising and rote learning were required. This is revealed in one lecturer’s comment, “Students have not been previously required to offer a creative viewpoint as distinct from repeating one which has been stated in the recommended textbook.”

It was perceived this is why NESB students have difficulty with assignment requirements such as not being familiar with directions such as, “compare,” “critique” and “relate”. These perceptions led lecturers to believe that NESB students adopt a surface approach to learning which deals with unprocessed information. Much early literature and hearsay evidence supports these contentions (Ballard, 1987, 1989; Bourke, 1986; Gassin, 1982; Kim & Crowley, 1990; Samuelowicz, 1987). However, recent empirical studies conducted by (Tang, 1993; Hess & Azuma, 1991; Kember & Gow, 1989) challenge these perceptions. They support the assertion that NESB students make extensive use of memorisation and rote strategies but it is incorrect to assume this is related to just surface learning. According to Tang (1993) and Marton, Watkins & Tang (1995) memorisation is being used to precede understanding of information. Biggs (1991;1992;1993) found that Asian students consistently scored higher on deep learning approaches than their Australian counterparts.

It has also been put forward by Kember & Gow (1989) that memorisation and rote learning are effective strategies when studying in another language for it reduces the memory load and enables students to deal directly with content and ideas rather than with having to decode the language (Chalmers & Volet, 1997).

Staff also commented on the extent to which students incorporated large sections of unattributed texts into their assignments. This issue became exacerbated when students overtly copied from one another. Many staff said that even after explaining to the class that this was regarded as cheating, students still failed to see what lecturers were complaining about. The associated task of compiling references and bibliographies was also alien to many students. This lack of attribution led to accusations of plagiarism although Pennycook (1996) has indicated that plagiarism can be seen as a necessary developmental phase of international students’ academic progress, driven both by their limited English and by prior learning experiences. Pennycook states that students not only use plagiarism as a coping mechanism but also learn from this copying, by understanding the contents and improving their linguistic competence.

Learning Strategies

Lecturers identified a number of cultural factors which they perceived to have an effect on the students’ learning experiences at UNITEC. There seemed to be an ‘unpreparedness’ to become involved in student centred learning approaches such as group work, responding
actively in classroom question sessions or contributing to discussions during tutorials. Staff said, “Just tell me how to get them to participate in class. They never ask questions,” and, “They become so frustrated with all the group work and lack of model answers,” (Gunn-Lewis et al, 1996).

To counter these issues, staff frequently formed mixed groups of native English speakers and NESB students. They also attempted to increase the cultural awareness of the local students in aspects such as the social mores of different ethnic groups and a wider understanding of non-verbal communication between different peoples. In spite of these endeavours, students reorganised themselves to work within their own ethnic populations whenever this was possible, or when asked to work in pairs or groups NESB students continued to work individually. Group and pair work also broke down if no written instructions were given or the directions for the task were given casually. In addition, students appeared to resist staff attempts to introduce elements of student centredness into lecturers’ delivery, eg the use of language learning activities was often regarded as childish and staff were requested to return to lecture-style teaching. Perhaps it is due to these difficulties that only 25\% of lecturers [Fig.5] were observed to use group and peer work to develop understanding.

Results of this study’s observations revealed that only 25\% of lecturers [Fig.5] used questioning techniques, either directive or eliciting type questions, to support NESB students. It was observed when some lecturers attempted to use questioning in this way and NESB students were not forthcoming lecturers rapidly answered their own questions. Most common questions were: Does it make sense? Do you understand? Is that clear? Any questions? Furthermore, any discussion which was elicited from NESB students seemed only to contain answers and comments that it was thought staff wanted to hear. Seventy-five percent of lecturers did not use questioning strategies to enhance learning. This strategy, considered by the authors as basic ‘best practice’, was possibly not apparent for one of two reasons: either it was not part of the lecturers’ usual repertoire or else it had been tried and then abandoned.

‘Best practice’ principles also dictate that content should be related to students’ background, or better still allow for students to do this for themselves. Yet, in this study a paltry 15\% of lecturers [Fig.5] adhered to this learning principle by attempting to include international themes applicable to students’ backgrounds eg referring to building canoes in their native country or customer service from the Islamic point of view. Although double this number of lecturers, 30\%, [Fig.5] attempted to explain concepts which were specific to the New Zealand context such as cross lease or Treaty Tribunal. However, the majority of lecturers used terms and phrases such as Rogernomics, attitudes of the NZ Government or issues relating to drugs or resource consent without consideration for the background of the NESB students.

Organisational Issues

The overwhelming attitude from lecturers towards a multicultural mix of students was highly positive, perceived as enriching the learning environment and providing an enjoyable challenge. This was frequently expressed as, “It’s great; added diversity enhances experience on the course for everyone, but we also need added resources in order to cope.”
Organisational issues accounted for only 4% [Fig.1] of the problems lecturers associated with teaching NESB students in this study. Yet this was the area lecturers targeted when solutions were being considered. Many staff said that financial constraints meant that additional material, such as extra handouts, was not allowed for in budgets. Neither was the institution providing allowances for the additional demands on staff time made by NESB students, “I am reluctant to provide long explanations to NESB students at the end of every class, or to allow these students an open door policy for out-of-class instruction.” Many lecturers questioned the attainment of minimum language entry requirements by NESB students. They proposed that these levels should be raised, and that minimum ratings should be achieved separately in reading, writing and spoken English.

These concerns about a lack of institutional support for lecturers of international students mirrors issues examined in Australian universities by Kennedy (1995) who calls for the establishment of a ‘curriculum guarantee’, requiring the planned input of both human and financial resources from the organisation.

The study also revealed problems and attitudes changed according to who was the minority - in some classes local students formed the minority group while in others it was NESB students. Generally lecturers considered that they were more capable of incorporating ‘best practice’ strategies for learning when NESB students were in the minority. Our observations of classes where NESB numbers were low did not support this assertion. Also low numbers of NESB students were also reputed to reduce the possibility of local student resentment over content being sacrificed for classroom language instruction, thus reducing the teaching load.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this study reveals that lecturers are aware they need to do something to cater for NESB students and attempt to do so in the area which is the most obvious and natural - their own language. In their oral delivery the majority of lecturers are making an effort; therefore they slow their speech, enunciate more clearly and attempt to clarify specific words by writing them on the board and discussing them. Whilst these efforts are admirable, other strategies of ‘best practice’ (learning aids, questioning, discussion and group or peer work, relating content to student backgrounds) are not being widely employed. ‘Best practice’ strategies would create a platform of support which would be more meaningful for NESB students as they cater for cultural concerns not just language.

Lecturers having to focus on managing the learning of NESB students means they have to examine the suitability of their teaching practice and “good teaching practice in the multicultural classroom makes good teaching for all students” (Amir Salem, 1991, p3).

This research paper advocates ‘best practice’ as a way forward for working with both NESB and local students. To support this advocacy institutions that encourage large numbers of NESB students to enrol must become accountable for principled ways of dealing with students and lecturers.
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