



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Teaching International Students

Strategies to enhance learning

Sophie Arkoudis



Teaching International Students

Strategies to enhance learning

Teaching International Students: Strategies to Enhance Learning was developed for the University of Melbourne by Dr Sophie Arkoudis of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Permission is granted for copying, distribution and use by other institutions, with appropriate acknowledgement.

Available in electronic form from <http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/>

Further enquiries regarding permission and availability:

Centre for the Study of Higher Education

The University of Melbourne

Telephone: 03 8344 4605

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au>



Introduction

This document contains practical suggestions for teaching strategies that will assist the University's international students. Some of the suggestions may seem self-evident as they represent widely accepted principles of effective teaching in higher education. Nonetheless they are worth reiterating.

The University of Melbourne endeavours to create environments which foster academic excellence and which encourage all students to engage with their learning communities (<http://www.unimelb.edu.au/diversity/downloads/inclusive%20practice.pdf>). The University has a culturally diverse student population, including students from Indigenous, international and recent immigrant backgrounds. This document focuses on the language and cultural issues that may be considered in teaching international students. While acknowledging that the term 'international students' is complex to define, for the present purposes of this document international students will be those who have had the majority of their previous study in countries where English is not the main medium of instruction in education.

Globally, more people than ever before are choosing to undertake an international education. The large-scale movement of students between education systems means that academics need to consider the learning and teaching implications of the increased numbers of international students in university classes. Notably, international students now form a large part of the diverse student community that exists at the University of Melbourne. Many of these students are originally from countries where English may be spoken as a second or third language, or where English is only learnt as a foreign language in school. It is important to not make assumptions about these students' learning strategies because of their cultural background. Much discussion of international students has focused on stereotypes: a presumed reluctance to talk in class, a preference for rote learning and an apparent lack of critical thinking skills. Implied within this stereotyping is an 'us' and 'them' approach to the students and a deficit view of this group of learners, as people who perhaps 'lack' the desirable qualities for succeeding in higher education as we understand it. However, this is simply not true. International students are some of the highest achieving students at the University.

In the *Nine Principles Guiding Teaching and Learning in the University of Melbourne*, the fourth principle is 'an international and culturally diverse community and learning environment'. Research has highlighted that the educational expectations of international students are as diverse as those of domestic students (Biggs, 2003; Ryan, 2005). These students can range, for example, in academic ability, English language proficiency, motivation, educational experiences, as do many of the local students. However, there are some conclusions we can draw about the particular challenges facing international students that distinguish their experiences from those of domestic students. These include the challenges of:

- learning and living in a different culture;
- learning in a foreign university context;
- learning while developing English language proficiency; and
- learning the academic disciplinary discourse.

A survey of international students' experiences at the University of Melbourne (University Planning Office, 2005) noted that the students were generally very positive about their experiences in their courses. They highly valued the opportunities for personal growth and academic achievement. However, the students said that they encountered problems to do with initiation into their course, participating successfully in a Western academic environment, English language skills and engaging comfortably with the rest of the University community. While for some of the students, these concerns diminished over time, for others they remained ongoing concerns throughout their course.

Research has found that academics are aware of the learning needs of their students, but may be unclear about how best to address those needs (Ryan, 2005). The purpose of this document is to encourage the use of different strategies and approaches that have been informed by research in the area of international students' learning in western higher education contexts. The key areas that are discussed in some detail include:

- Internationalising the curriculum
- Making lectures accessible
- Encouraging participation in small group work
- Adopting an educative approach to plagiarism
- Supporting students in developing critical thinking skills
- Explaining assessment expectations

In developing this document, interviews were conducted with academic staff from a variety of faculties and teaching contexts within the University. The strategies presented are informed by the experiences of those interviewed. Comments from international students have also been included. Helpful suggestions were received from numerous academic staff during the development of this document. Feedback was received from members of the Academic Programs Committee (APC), Teaching and Learning Quality Assurance Committee (TaLQAC) and the International Students Consultative Committee, and their contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

The practical advice in this document has been written for academic staff wishing to explore different ideas in their teaching to address the needs of international students. This advice is offered with international students in mind but can be useful for all students.

Internationalising the curriculum

One of the more apparent influences of globalisation in universities has been the focus on internationalising the curriculum. How we interpret this idea depends on our discipline area, the extent to which the content can be internationalised and the process of teaching and learning. We also need to consider the attributes of all graduate students. Currently, the Graduate Attributes for the University of Melbourne emphasises leadership in professions and communities, fluency between cultures and active global citizens. It is desirable that graduates develop ways of effectively communicating with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, be aware of international perspectives and interpret issues within a global context.

This section will discuss two ways in which the curriculum may be internationalised. From a content perspective, topics and resources with a more international flavour may be selected. From a teaching and learning perspective, consideration needs to be given to how the content will be taught to enhance learning for students. Both of these aspects need to be considered in internationalising the curriculum. Strategies for each of these are presented below.

Internationalising the Content

For some disciplines it seems that academics already consider the content as international, usually because the discipline is practised in the same way across different countries. An example of this is cell biology:

Science has this arrogant belief that it's an international entity. It certainly is a western international entity. And science as it is practised in other places, whether it is an Islamic country or China is still recognisably that western entity. To be science it has to be. I don't know how you can internationalise the pursuit of truth.

Other academics internationalise the content by including material that offers different international perspectives:

What I do with my undergraduate Management subject is I specifically looked for videotapes, examples and cases that were not just North American, European or Australian. I cover a number of Asian countries, because most of our international students are from Asia. In my postgraduate subjects I get examples of companies that are multinational. My guest speakers are all from organisations that are global. Also every year I look for books that have an international or Asia-Pacific focus. That's how I internationalise my curriculum.

Content can also be internationalised by connecting students to international research as suggested in The Teaching-Research Nexus (http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/downloads/TR_Nexus.pdf) and contextualising local issues within global concerns.

Internationalising Teaching and Learning

It is slightly more challenging to explore internationalising the curriculum in terms of teaching and learning. This perspective is more concerned with how the content is taught and the consequences for learning. From the interviews conducted with academics, three main issues emerged. Firstly, academics were concerned with developing intercultural perspectives and encouraging effective communication with students from diverse cultural backgrounds:

At the start of the semester I show the Australian Bureau of statistics snapshot of the population. I do this just in case any of the local students think that it is not relevant for them to hear about the experiences of the international students. Even if they don't work overseas, they have to communicate with people from different backgrounds here in Australia.

Secondly, academics believe that they need be aware of students' different experiences and expectations and cater for these in their teaching:

I think internationalising the curriculum is about the different educational experiences our students have and the way we actually go about teaching them and responding to their expectations of learning. The activities that we use, the expectations that we have and how we communicate those to them may impact on how well they are able to participate in class.

Finally, academics were concerned with developing students' skills to be able to work anywhere in the world and the implications for this on learning:

We talk about issues of portability. The degree and the qualification have to be portable, so that any of our graduates can work anywhere in the world. We get the students to think about how the theories actually work and also the limitations of those theories in different contexts.

Some of the suggestions offered in this document can be used to develop approaches that internationalise teaching and learning. From University surveys we know that international students choose to study at the University because of its reputation and quality of teaching. They enjoy being in a learning environment where they are challenged and exposed to new ways of learning. There are also benefits for domestic students, as they engage with culturally and linguistically diverse students who offer multi-cultural perspectives on local and global issues. The challenges and benefits for academics are in optimising opportunities in planning and delivering curriculum to enhance international students learning and create inclusive supportive learning environments for all students.

Making lectures accessible

Understanding lecture content can be difficult for international students. Listening is an active rather than a passive skill, especially for the second language learner. They are processing the words, attempting to understand the main ideas presented and drawing on what they already know to make sense of the material presented in the lecture, in their second language. This is especially true for first year undergraduate and postgraduate international students, who are developing their English language skills and learning in a western university environment. There are strategies that can be used in the design and delivery of the lecture that can assist in making the conventional lecture more accessible for international students:

- Outline the main points of the lecture and make links to other topics covered in the subject or material to be covered in tutorials. Highlight key questions or issues that will be addressed during the lecture. Concept maps are useful as they offer a visual representation of the content and how it relates to other areas in the course.
- Provide a lecture outline with the main points to be covered to assist students to follow the lecture and guide their note taking. This can be put on the web for students to download and supplement the PowerPoint slides that are usually available to students.
- Explain any relevant background information that may assist students in understanding key concepts.
- Define any new or unfamiliar words or concepts, and provide opportunities for clarification.

Focusing on core concepts

Over the years I have really learned to think through what is the essential and optional in courses. Now in class I focus on the essentials and direct people to the optional. I think that a lot of the time in teaching at university it is very easy not to foreground to the students what you think is very important, because we tend to mix it up with a whole lot of other stuff. (Academic)

Recording lectures

I have had feedback from the international students that they value i-lecture because they can go back and review points of the lecture they did not understand. (Academic)

***Being on the lookout for
jargon***

I try to reduce jargon in what I do, but in certain areas have to teach the jargon, as the students will be working in the industry. I also try to reduce the use of idioms and colloquialisms. I had students who came to see me and I had given them a document saying, "This is the silver bullet to the whole situation". And the students from China said to me "what is this silver bullet?"

(Academic)

***Explaining unfamiliar
words***

The local as well as international students find it useful when I ask them whether they understand specific terms. It is interesting to see them gain confidence in asking for definitions. They do this because I let them know that it is okay to ask when they are not sure. (Academic)

- If slang, jargon and culturally specific humour are used in the lecture, explain the meaning for students who may not understand it. This is important with first year students, although by third year this should be less of an issue.
- Summarise the important information at certain stages in the lecture.
- Use international examples or case studies where possible.
- Record the lectures using i-lecture, so that international students can listen to them again. This will assist students to clarify points that they may have not understood due to English being their second or third language.
- Conclude the lecture by summarising the main points and highlighting 'take home' messages.

*In my lectures I think critically about the level of detail I teach. I think about what is more important. **Is there a theoretical concept or an overview that the students would much rather have than being bogged down with the seventy-seven new words that we are introducing in today's lecture?***
(Academic)

At the start it was very difficult for me to understand the lecturers. It was good when they took time to explain ideas and they encouraged us to ask questions if we are not sure. (International student)

Creating opportunities for small group participation

It has been widely observed that international students may appear hesitant in contributing to group discussions. This is not necessarily because this is their preferred learning style. International students often report that they would like to participate but lack the confidence to do so. This could be in part due to their lack of familiarity with how to contribute to an academic discussion or their perceived lack of English language skills. Contributing to discussions can be seen as a risky undertaking if the students are not comfortable with their English language ability or are unfamiliar with the cultural conventions for 'breaking into' the conversation. Academics may need to create 'safe' learning environments where students feel that they can make a contribution. Creating opportunities for participation in class where students feel supported can be achieved by incorporating some of the following strategies:

Preparation for small group discussion

- As second language learners of English, students need to be given adequate time to prepare responses. One strategy that can be used is to ask students to prepare some responses for the next tutorial or seminar. Set key questions with the reading material so that students can prepare their answer before the class. This will give them greater confidence in contributing to any discussion.
- It is important to make expectations about student participation clear to international students. As we know, this is an effective strategy for all students, but it is particularly useful for international students because research indicates that they are often not aware of what participation in class actually means in an Australian tertiary context. Making academic expectations clear can help to clarify this to students.
- Create a teaching atmosphere early in the semester in which students interact with each other. This allows the opportunity for international and domestic students to talk and get to know each other.

Giving students time to prepare

I do expect international students to participate. I give them case studies that they prepare for discussion in the following class. Now because I am aware that some students are struggling to participate, I ask them to hand in their preparation. I do compromise, so that they are not disadvantaged, but I do expect that they will gain the confidence to contribute in future classes. (Academic)

Using ice-breakers

I spend a lot of time in the first class 'breaking the ice' and getting the students to establish a bond and start making friendships. By the end of the class I can hardly stop them from talking. And I do this in my lectures as well as small group teaching. (Academic)

Explicitly seeking

international perspectives

At the start of the semester I collect student profile information, where I specifically ask them their country of origin. I memorise their names and their country of origin, so I can specifically invite the students to make comments. I think that memorising their names, knowing where they come from and calling on them in class, makes them feel that they are not just a number. I always encourage the students and I try to see something of value in what the student says that I can reiterate to the class.

(Academic)

Thoughtfully managing

student group work

There is a lot of coaching I do in terms of warming up the teaching atmosphere. I think about the composition of the groups and make sure that there are students from different cultural backgrounds present in each of the groups. I organise the groups so that they are small. I give them a task which is quite explicit, and where each person in the group at some point must speak.

(Academic)

Encouraging contributions in class

- We know that one way of increasing participation is to memorise students' names and invite them to speak. This can be a successful strategy if the lecturer has already established a 'safe environment' and if the international students feel that the group values their contributions.
- Ask international students how the issue would be considered from their experiences, keeping in mind that they do not represent the views of their culture or country.
- Briefly summarise the discussion from time to time, highlighting the key points, so that the students can follow the discussion.
- Pose questions or issues that students can discuss in pairs and then report back to the class.
- Remember to wait before moving on to another student, as it can take time for international students to understand the question, consider their response and communicate that in English.
- Structure group tasks so that international and domestic students are grouped together. Assign roles for each member of the small group, including discussion leader, timekeeper, note-taker, and person to report back. This allows everyone to have a role in the group.
- As is acknowledged in strategies for effective small group teaching, quizzes and pair work encourage interaction among students.
- Organising group activities so that diversity of experience and knowledge are necessary for successfully completing the task.
- Where possible, develop tasks that increase opportunities for domestic and international students to interact.

Adopting an educative approach to plagiarism

Misunderstandings about plagiarism can occur for international students because of cultural and language issues. Students need to know what constitutes plagiarism (see *Assessing Learning In Australian Universities*, www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning). For international students, plagiarism can be an intercultural issue. They may come from cultures where writing involved repeating the collective wisdom and there is little need to acknowledge the source of information. Plagiarism can also be an English language ability issue. While international students may be aware of what plagiarism is, they may lack the English language skills required to read information, extract the relevant points and then put it into their own words, so that they can avoid plagiarising.

- Highlight the reasons why referencing is used in your discipline and give students examples of correct referencing styles.
- Discuss issues concerning plagiarism with the students. Contact the Language and Learning Skills Unit or teaching and learning units within your faculty for expert support in this area.
- Model the use of referencing within your lectures and tutes.
- In the discussion of readings, highlight certain sections where the author has synthesised the main ideas and referenced them.
- Use examples of previous assignments to demonstrate how ideas can be presented and sources referenced.
- Develop tasks that ask students to evaluate and analyse ideas they have read, so that the focus is more on critiquing the readings rather than comprehension

Courses related to plagiarism are very crucial, especially in Australia where this problem is dealt more seriously than other countries. (International student)

Explaining referencing

When the students begin their first assignment I spend some time in class explaining how to use referencing. I highlight how they should include references in their notes and where they got that information. I give the students a style guide to help them and ask them to refer to it all the time when they are writing. (Academic)

Supporting language learning

I tend to use the services of the Language and Learning Skills Unit and get them to come out and give a talk to all my students. The LLSU show students how to reference their work and also discuss why they need to acknowledge sources in their academic writing. (Academic)

I think we can do more. Rather than focus on what the students should not do in terms of plagiarism, I try to focus on what the students should be doing. I want the students to synthesise and evaluate what they read. We need to teach students how to do this and this needs to be more of a focus in teaching. (Academic)

Supporting students in developing critical thinking skills

Critical discussion in class

I encourage my students from day one to critically analyse anything that I give them. We go through many examples in class. I deliver part of the lecture and then I stop and say, "Okay think about this particular theory? Now what do you think is wrong with it and when would it not apply?" I try to get them to think about what the theory means, how we can analyse it and whether it applies to every situation. I model the types of questions they should be asking. (Academic)

Multi-level reading guides

I have found that for second language learners it is important to give them questions to accompany the set readings. It gives students the processing time that they need. I mix the questions up in terms of difficulty. Some of them are very literal questions and some of them are inferential so that they cater for different ability groups. (Academic)

It is often suggested that students from Confucian heritage cultures find it difficult to think critically. However, like most stereotypes, this is unlikely to be true. Research has found that students from CHC are capable of high-level critical thinking (Biggs, 2003). It is not the international students' cognitive skills that are in question but their English language ability that influences their reading, understanding, interpretation and evaluation of the material that is demonstrated in either written or oral expression. As we know, developing critical thinking skills is equally challenging for domestic students.

Teaching critical thinking skills can be useful in assisting students to develop learning strategies to avoid plagiarism. Classroom activities that model critical thinking skills in our discussions, create learning opportunities for students to develop their skills and offer feedback can guide students' development of critical thinking skills. These may include:

- Explain and demonstrate what critical thinking skills are required in your disciplinary area. Different disciplines define it in slightly different ways.
- Clearly the reading process can be difficult for students who have English as a second language. It may be useful to highlight the importance of the reading material to the content of the course. This will assist students to access the main ideas presented in the text.

- When setting required reading, offer questions for students to guide their reading of the text. Stage the questions to include literal meaning (describe, define, explain), interpretive meaning (analyse, test, calculate, apply, demonstrate) and applied meaning (evaluate, compare assess). This will help the students to think beyond the literal understanding and develop their skills as strategic and critical readers.
- Develop students' critical thinking skills through classroom discussions. Questions such as "In what situations would this work?" "Can you think of any situation in which this would not apply?" "How does this relate to other theories/concepts we have discussed?" can be used as prompts for students to present different points of view.

Defining critical thinking skills within disciplines

Learning how to be critical doesn't happen by osmosis. I try to deal with it this way. I often tell the students that they are the judges. Getting them to fill the shoes of the judge is a way of encouraging them to be critical and to explicate what underlying values are informing the choices.

(Academic)

Encouraging critical analysis

I know that the international students from certain Asian countries may not be used to critical analysis. I acknowledge that they might find this difficult. I encourage them to come and see me if they have any problems or to email me. I have an open-door policy to support the international students. And they do come and see me.

(Academic)

Discussing different points of views

Provided that you have a teaching style that involves a lot of participation in small groups, mixing between international students and local students, or international students from different backgrounds, then I think that they can have the experience of hearing different points of view. Negotiating between those different points of view is the heart of critical thinking. (Academic)

Explaining assessment expectations

Developing group assignments

*Some assignment questions that we set advantage one group over the other, like getting students to critique something that is inherently Australian, that has cultural values that are Australian. What would students who have come from Malaysia be able to contribute to this assignment? Unless if somewhere in the assignment it says to take a different world perspective and ask whether from other countries look at it the some way. You then start to give other cultures that sort of chance at being valued members of the team. **Unless you create that situation, why would you want to have someone who is a liability in your group for assignment work when they don't have that background knowledge that you have?** (Academic)*

Assessment may be one of the most important areas in which international students need to be given guidance. As international students bring different educational experiences, we may need to highlight what we will be valuing in the assessment process. This requires explaining the assessment criteria and our expectations, as well as offering constructive feedback to students (see *Guide for Reviewing Assessment*, www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/publications). Feedback is especially important to international students as it can offer them some direction on how they can improve their performance.

Assessment criteria

- Explain in detail the purpose of the assessment and the subject content that will be assessed. Give students a copy of the assessment criteria and explain how marks will be allocated. This gives students a clearer understanding of what is required and clarifies expectations.
- If English language is being assessed, indicate in the criteria that aspects of English language will be assessed and the marks allocated for this.
- Outline the requirements of the exam and model the type of responses required.

Two weeks before the exam, I run cases and sample questions similar to the exam and I clearly explain to them what they will get points for in answering the questions and how they should answer it. I focus on the structure as well as the content. For instance, if I'm going to give any marks for definition, I will always say to the students that they need to give a definition. I emphasise that they need to have an introduction, body and conclusion and that I will give so many points for each part. (Academic)

Assessment and learning

- Where possible try to vary the type of assessment tasks used, to cater for different learning styles.

I try to provide a range of assessment tasks. So I will have a combination of group assessment, of individual assessment and multiple choices. I'll also have participation in class as part of the formal assessment and the exam.

- Assessment tasks early in the semester can help to identify students who may need extra support with their English writing.
- Involve the Language and Learning Skills Unit (LLSU) in your classes. Staff from the LLSU can assist in addressing the language learning issues for students in your classes.
- Plan learning activities that prepare the students for the assessment tasks. This is useful for all students and for increasing understanding of the requirements of the assessment for the subject. It also allows opportunities for group feedback.

Feedback

- Try to avoid feedback such as “this is not logical” or “this is confusing”, as these comments do not offer students advice on how they can improve. If the paper does not “flow logically” then offer a few brief suggestions to the students as to how they achieve this and direct them to the support services available at the university, such as the Language and Learning Skills Unit.
- Offer oral feedback to students in class after assignments have been returned, focusing on the main issues that arose from the assessment and identifying what students can do to improve their performance in the subsequent assessment for the subject.

Explicit criteria

Assessment is an interesting process because the information you want to get is both for you and the students. So you need some sort of assessment tool that's explicit about criteria in order to work out where the strengths and weaknesses are in different dimensions, like content organization, language, following the conventions and so on. This is very good for them because they gain feedback on their strengths and weaknesses. That's true not just for international students but all students. (Academic)

Giving written feedback

I tend to be very explicit in my written feedback while reading the assignment. I also write a paragraph at the end summarising the things that I want to praise and acknowledge, and try to express what I think may be limitations in the paper. (Academic)

Assessment and learning

I believe in teaching the assignment as well as setting the assignment. I teach students about the meaning of the assignment and what I am looking for through activities in class. (Academic)

TLU was very helpful in my first semester when I was seeking assistance for my assignment. It's the first time I needed to write such academic style writing and the TLU gave me clear direction and explanation on how I should write. (International student)

Linking content and language teaching

The international students are so overwhelmed, especially when they have just arrived. I make a point of getting the Teaching Learning Unit (TLU) to come to my class rather than just waiting for the students to go there for help. That way, the students see the TLU is a part of the subject that I teach and this encourages them to seek support. (Academic)

The LLSU staff helped us not only on grammar correction, but also the technique in answering the questions and the structure of our essays. They give helpful advice and resources that release much of our pressure. (International student)

References:

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Berkshire: Open University Press.

Ryan, J. (2005). Improving teaching and learning practices for international students: implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. In J. Carroll & J. Ryan (Eds.), *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. New York: Routledge.

University Planning Office. (2005). Survey of final year international students on their experience of the University of Melbourne. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
(http://www.upo.unimelb.edu.au/upo_EC_Home.html)