

Empowering students by developing their intercultural communication competence: a two-way process

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Abstract

It is a common belief that tertiary students acquire intercultural communication competence through interacting with each other in multicultural classrooms. Much research undertaken in Australia, however, indicates that having culturally diverse classrooms will not, by itself, necessarily promote student development in this area. This is particularly true of students working in multinational/multicultural teams, where often the experience can reinforce negative stereotypes instead of promoting understanding. What is required, instead, is deliberate and structured intervention promoting two-way learning not only between international and local Australian students, but also between all students of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

This paper describes a workshop that was implemented with a group of undergraduate students at Curtin University of Technology to assist them in working successfully in multinational student teams. It will describe the activities used, not only to raise student awareness, but also to lead them to a deeper level of understanding and to develop intercultural communication competence. The paper emphasises the importance of guided discussion and how the workshop facilitator needs to lead students carefully and sensitively to explore cultural and linguistic issues in intercultural communication. The paper also discusses directions for a classroom pedagogy which utilises teaching and learning approaches that build on cultural diversity and develop intercultural communication competence in students. That is, possibilities for two-way learning in classroom contexts are explored and discussed.

Keywords: intercultural education; intercultural communication; internationalisation of curriculum.

Introduction

This paper examines current business education at tertiary level, particularly in an Australian context and, based on the findings of case studies undertaken for doctoral research (Briguglio, 2005), offers suggestions for future directions. An analysis of the linguistic practices in two multinational companies, one in Malaysia and the other in Hong Kong, served to explore the 'global' role of English (Crystal, 1997; Graddol 2000 & 2006). Such observation helped to identify the English and intercultural communication skills that business graduates will require to operate successfully in multinational teams and, more broadly, in international contexts. A case study was then undertaken with a 'typical' business class in an Australian tertiary institution, in order to gauge whether students were developing the necessary intercultural communication skills in the course of their studies. The case study showed that while students are equipped with quite sound knowledge of cultural and linguistic matters, they may not have the necessary intercultural communication skills to enable them to work effectively in multinational teams. This paper describes a deliberate intervention, in this case through a specially designed workshop, carried out to raise students' awareness of cultural and linguistic issues, and to develop their intercultural communication skills. The results and implications of this intervention are discussed, particularly in relation to internationalisation of the tertiary curriculum.

Internationalisation of the university curriculum

'Internationalisation' at tertiary level is conceived and defined in various ways. Trevaskes, Eisenchelas and Liddicoat (2003, p.11) differentiate between 'weak' and 'strong' perceptions of internationalisation, with the first showing a superficial engagement with the concept (and perhaps more concern for the marketing of

education to international students) and the latter a much deeper understanding and exploration of the concept, with the emphasis on internationalisation of curriculum. Stier (2004) also informs us that internationalisation is perceived by some as ‘a *state* of things’, by others as a ‘*process*’ and by others still as a ‘*doctrine*’ [author’s italics], these approaches reflecting very different motivations. Although many Australian universities have incorporated internationalisation policies which would reflect ‘strong’ perceptions of internationalisation as a transforming policy for all those engaged in teaching and learning, the truth, say Trevaskes et al. (2003), is that in many cases the rhetoric far outweighs reality. They feel that Australian universities have merely acknowledged the presence of large numbers of international students on local campuses but have not utilised this phenomenon to develop “a culturally literate, interculturally capable society in Australia. [Moreover] as the imperative to produce graduates who can operate successfully in the global market environment strengthens, such holding back becomes increasingly unsustainable and self-defeating” (Trevaskes et al., 2003, p.10).

The disappointment with the failure of universities to truly internationalise curriculum is fairly common not only in Australia (Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000; Nesdale & Todd, 1997; Trevaskes et al., 2003; Liddicoat, 2003; Eisenchelas et al., 2003), but also in the USA (Hayward, 2000) and elsewhere (Stier, 2004). And yet if we compare present university curricula to those of ten years ago we might find that, at least on the surface, some things have changed. For example, more units carry ‘international’ in their title and this usually reflects some change in content to include international perspectives (Briguglio, 1999). However, deep level changes that would equip graduates with intercultural communication competencies would require awareness of language issues across the curriculum. Such changes would be tackled more effectively at the broader university level through the development of language policies integrated with internationalisation policies, thus providing a more coherent framework for developments across the curriculum.

A number of universities both in Australia and elsewhere already have language policies. For example the policies of Stellenbosch University (2004) and Cardiff University (2005) relate to the rights of minorities; others, such as those at Lingnan University Hong Kong (2000) and the university policies of the European Language Council (2001) are tied more closely to political and strategic, as well as identity, issues; others, such as Curtin’s (2004c) ‘Language of Instruction Policy’ aim to clarify language of instruction issues, particularly for offshore campuses; and still others, such as those of Monash University (2002) and Wollongong University (2005), are more broadly related to curriculum. The Monash University ‘Language Policy’, in particular, seems very far-sighted, promoting the sort of student development that is advocated in this paper, and offering a good example for other universities:

In adopting a University Language Policy, Monash University recognises the centrality of language in academic, professional and social life, the rich linguistic resources available within the institution, and the language needs generated by globalisation.

Of course the development of clear and far-sighted policies is only a first step, with implementation often proving more challenging.

Those working at the forefront in the area of internationalisation of curriculum, such as Altbach (2004 & 2005) and Knight (1999 & 2004) advise us of the importance of developing intercultural communication skills in order to equip graduates to operate effectively in the 21st century. Knight (1999), for example, states that:

The preparation of graduates who have a strong knowledge and skill base in intercultural relations and communications is considered by many academics as one of the strongest rationales for internationalising the teaching/learning experience of students in undergraduate and graduate programs (Knight, 1999, p.17).

Does our current preparation of graduates in Australian universities develop in them the skills and competencies they require for the global workplace? There are certainly instances of excellent internationalisation of curriculum initiatives in Australian universities, but research in the area (Volet & Ang, 1998; Committee of Associate Deans Teaching, 1999; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000; Liddicoat, Trevaskes and Eisenchelas, 2003) would seem to indicate a lack of ‘whole of university’, ‘embedded’ or ‘deep learning’ approaches. However, it should be pointed out that in this area, Australian universities are probably not behind other world institutions. A 2003 internationalisation survey by the International Association of Universities (a UNESCO backed body) found, among other things, that “while two thirds of the institutions

appear to have an internationalisation policy/strategy in place, only about half of these institutions have budgets and a monitoring framework to support the implementation” (Knight 2004, p.4). The survey also found that internationalisation is largely driven by faculty, that is, those academic staff members who are committed to making a difference, rather than initiatives coming centrally from university leaders. We have seen that Eisenchlas et al. (2003) have said similar things about Australian universities. However, while internationalisation of curriculum may not be ‘systematic’ or ‘integrated’ in Australian universities, there are instances of good practice in individual units, courses and Schools, with the impetus coming from academics. The following section describes the case study undertaken in the Curtin Business School, which aimed to develop students’ intercultural communication competence.

The multinational student teams case study

The analysis of multinational companies in Hong Kong and Malaysia (Briguglio, 2005) highlighted some considerations for future business education, particularly in regard to the use of English as a global language and to intercultural communication. More specifically the multinational companies case study showed that *all* business graduates (be they Australian or international students) need to:

- expect and be able to deal with different varieties of English;
- have a tolerance for and acceptance of different accents in English as a lingua franca;
- develop accommodation strategies to deal with different accents and different ways of speaking in English (where differences are perhaps more marked than in writing);
- have reasonably high levels of fluency in both spoken and written English;
- be able to read and respond appropriately in English to different types of emails/faxes;
- be fluent in telephone conversation in English; and
- be able to write internal (largely informal) reports in English.

Many of these skills can be developed in multinational student teams, which are a common enough feature in Australian university classes. However, research undertaken in Australia (Hawthorne, 1997; Nesdale and Todd, 1997; Briguglio, 1998; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000) tends to show that there is a lack of mixing between Australian and international students and that in group work, if students are left to their own devices, they will tend to gravitate towards their own. Volet and Ang (1998) examined student interactions in culturally mixed groups and found a variety of reasons why students initially preferred to work in culturally/nationally homogenous groups, not least the sense of belonging, bonding and familiarity provided by a peer group comprising the same or a similar culture. Importantly, they found that where students had been forced by circumstances to form culturally diverse groups, both Australian and international students had found the experience to be reasonably positive. Unfortunately such an experience was not enough to encourage students to seek further involvement in culturally diverse teams, leading the authors to conclude that “unless cultural contact is engineered as part of formal study, social cohesion will not happen and all students will miss out on critical learning opportunities” (Volet & Ang, 1998, p.9). In the US, Schullery and Gibson (2001) found a reluctance on the part of students towards working in assignment groups. Various studies have therefore concluded that student group work, particularly in multicultural/multinational teams, needs to be well-structured (Smart, Volet & Ang, 2002; Cheney 2001) and well-managed (Schullery & Gibson, 2001; Casperz et al., 2004 & 2005) and that students need to be given the necessary skills (Crosling and Martin, 2005) in order to achieve good learning outcomes.

For this case study data was gathered from students involved in a group project for an undergraduate unit in International Management. The case study aimed to ascertain whether a workshop providing students with insights and techniques for better intercultural communication and interaction in multinational teams has a positive effect on the nature of the group experience and the attitudes of students towards such teams; and whether it helps students acquire intercultural communication skills. The selected unit already contained a requirement for a group assessment task involving both oral and written components, so that students in the project would not have their workload increased in any way. Assessment for the unit included two group/team tasks: a 20 minute group presentation (worth 10% of total mark) and a 3,000 word formal research paper (worth 20% of total mark).

The cohort consisted of 35 students (17 males and 18 females). The unit lecturer informed students that since this was a unit in International Management, they would be deliberately placed in multinational teams to optimise learning. Every student was allocated a letter from A to H and all students with the same letter were asked to form a team. Only one team did not result in being fully ‘multinational’ and this was achieved simply by inviting a couple of students to change. The final result was that with 12 different nationalities in the class, each sub-group of four or five students had a mixture of three or four nationalities/cultural backgrounds (see Table 1, below). The class was divided into two halves, with one half (the sample group) receiving a workshop to prepare them for “working in multinational teams” while the other half (the control group) received a workshop on “working in teams” but with no emphasis on linguistic and cultural issues. Students were not informed of this difference and both halves of the class were told they were being given the skills for working in student teams. Both workshops lasted for two and a half hours and were held in the second week of semester before students had actually had the opportunity to begin working in teams. Importantly, both workshops were evaluated very positively, using the same evaluation instrument.

Table 1: Composition of Sub-groups (national/cultural background & gender)

Sub Group	Nationality/cultural background *	Gender	Sub Group	Nationality/cultural background *	Gender
	Sample group			Control group	
A	Australian (Arabic)	Male	E	Thai	Female
A	Chinese	Female	E	Malaysian-Chinese	Male
A	Australian (Anglo)	Male	E	Norwegian	Male
A	Australian (Italian)	Female	E	Australian (Anglo)	Female
			E	Australian (Croatian)	Female
B	Turkish	Male	F	Indonesian	Male
B	Chinese	Male	F	Australian (Anglo)	Female
B	Australian (Anglo)	Male	F	Taiwanese	Female
B	Chinese (HK)	Female	F	American (USA)	Male
			F	English	Female
C	Croatian	Female	G	Indonesian	Female
C	Indonesian	Male	G	German	Male
C	Australian (Anglo)	Female	G	Chinese	Male
C	Kenyan	Male	G	Australian (Dutch/Italian)	Female
			G	Australian (Anglo)	Female
D	Thai	Female	H	Australian (Anglo)	Female
D	Norwegian	Male	H	Malaysian	Female
D	Malaysian	Female	H	Indonesian	Male
D	American (USA)	Male	H	Australian (Anglo)	Male

* As indicated by students in questionnaire responses.

Data gathered from student interviews, written progress reports and a post-questionnaire indicates that students in the sample group interacted more positively and went some way towards developing intercultural understanding and communication, whereas those in the control group did not. The workshop implemented with the sample group is described below.

A workshop on working in multinational teams

At the beginning of the workshop with the sample group entitled ‘*Working in multinational teams*’, students were informed that the aims were to prepare them for working in multinational teams and to develop intercultural skills. They introduced themselves and their cultural background and then completed a pre-questionnaire, which sought to establish what students already knew about linguistic and cultural issues. From the start, the emphasis of the workshop was on cultural issues and intercultural communication (indeed a warm up activity had students match a list of statements in 12 languages with the right language). Since students were going to be engaged largely in group activities, they were asked to sit with their pre-assigned

team members in sub groups of four or five. However, there was also open discussion during which all class members participated.

The first activity assigned to students in their sub-groups was to come up with a one or two sentence definition of 'culture' (What is culture? What culture is not). Each group's definition of culture was then discussed by the whole class. This discussion was very useful and allowed students to think beyond stereotypical and surface elements of culture. Because the class itself was so culturally mixed, students were encouraged to provide examples from their own culture and this allowed for the emergence of different perspectives.

The next stage involved presenting to students some information and statistics about English as a global language and emphasising the fact that the future world in which they would be working and interacting with others would, more likely than not, involve many interactions between first (L1) and second language (L2) speakers of English and between L2 and L2 speakers. Well-established varieties of English (such as Singapore and Malaysian English) were discussed, with some of the students present giving examples of the use of such varieties, as well as the need for all students to have intercultural communication skills in this sort of future scenario. It was stressed that because people from different cultures were communicating in the same language (English), this did not mean that misunderstandings would not occur. The responsibility of all interactants to develop *interpretability* as well as *intelligibility* skills (Candlin 1982) was also stressed. That is, in the complex world of increasing globalisation, all speakers (whether L1 or L2) have the responsibility to become more sensitive to, and knowledgeable of, the way English is spoken around the globe and to become better at understanding speakers of varieties different from their own (*interpretability*) as well as developing fluency in their use of English (*intelligibility*).

The complex nature of intercultural communication was discussed, with students offering some of their own examples of intercultural 'dilemmas'. To assist students in unravelling some of these difficulties, they were asked to write for themselves the three things that are considered most important in their culture. The responses were then written on a whiteboard and students discussed similarities and differences. A related activity asked students to first write for themselves, and then to share with their team members and the class, three things that are considered very polite and three that are considered very rude in their culture. This again led to rich discussion around linguistic and cultural issues and perspectives.

The next step involved students thinking about the 'multinational' team task they were about to undertake. Firstly, to make students aware that everyone brings different knowledge and skills to the team task, students were asked to discuss important developments in their own region/country of origin. This makes everyone an 'expert' about their own region. Then students were asked to consider the unwritten 'rules' about working in teams/groups in their culture. This again illustrated some very interesting differences. It was emphasised that all team members needed to be absolutely clear about expectations and that they all needed to ensure their own understanding of requirements; for example in regard to meeting times (real time or flexible time?), in regard to their own contribution to the group task, and so on. The facilitator then presented what we know about working in teams and concluded with what research has told us about successful multinational teams.

Examples that students gave throughout the workshop to illustrate their opinions did much to shed light on differences and different cultural perspectives. The point was made to students that these different cultural perspectives needed to be kept in mind and respected, and that their group interaction would be influenced by such perspectives. Student evaluations completed at the end of the workshop indicate that they found this workshop to be very useful and enjoyable. Comments in response to the first open-ended question on the evaluation sheet indicate that students appreciated and found most useful the discussion of cultural aspects. The comments below reflect the general tenor of responses:

What was the best/most useful aspect of this workshop for you?

- *Learning about other cultures.*
- *Get to know members of my group more closely. It was an opportunity for me to see the diverseness (sic) within the class and hear interesting facts of the other students' backgrounds and customs.*
- *Discussing cultural characteristics of other students and other cultures/nationalities.*
- *More knowledge of multinational teams, multicultures etc.*
- *Learning about other customs and cultures and getting to share your opinions and ideas.*

- *Different values and opinions between students.*
- *Discussing the differences between cultures and people's perceptions of them.*

One student's comment reflects the fact that cultural and diversity issues are not often discussed in tertiary classrooms and that students might appreciate the opportunity to do so:

I would personally recommend this workshop to be compulsory for all CBS students and something similar to this should be conducted in the first year of study.

Discussion

The data gathered through the pre-questionnaire showed that students are well disposed to learning about other cultures and other countries. However, by half way through the semester when a progress report was completed by over a third of the participants in the case study, it was becoming evident that the deliberate workshop intervention to assist students to operate in multinational teams was having some positive effect on the sample group, whereas the control group was showing signs of tension. The sub-groups in the sample group, on the other hand, displayed more positive team interaction and greater intercultural sensitivity. For example, one student in the sample group reported now understanding "*the way people do the work in their styles*". Another student in the sample group reported having gained "*appreciation of cultural and gender differences*." These more positive attitudes are likely to be attributable to the effects of the sample group workshop on multinational teams, which sought to make students aware of cultural and linguistic differences and how these might affect the group task, for as Distefano and Maznevski (2000, p.46) state:

Team members from different cultures come to the group settings with very different predefined notions about how a group should proceed. Furthermore cultural values and norms are deeply held, and almost always implicit and taken for granted [...]. Cultural differences [can] hinder smooth interaction.

Research evidence also indicates that if culturally diverse teams are well managed, positive achievements are likely to be the result in both work and study contexts (Adler, 1997; Cox & Blake, 1999; Caspersz et al., 2004 & 2005; Crosling & Martin, 2005). In the instance of this case study, it could be argued that one half of the cohort, the sample group, was reasonably well prepared for the group task in multinational teams, whereas the other (the control group) was not.

The earlier results obtained from the progress report were confirmed through end of semester interviews with a number of students and the results of the post-questionnaire. Analysis of these data shows that students in the sample group improved in a number of areas, particularly in acquiring cultural sensitivity and operating successfully with others in multinational teams, whereas tensions in the control group intensified. The sample group demonstrated small gains in areas such as confidence with written English, understanding people with accents, and learning more about other cultures through mixing with students from all over the world. This is important, for we have seen that these are among the skills needed to operate successfully in multinational business settings. The control group, on the other hand, reflected a drop in confidence with written English and formal and informal writing styles, and a reduced belief that English language skills were being developed during university studies.

The interviews with students held after completion of the unit left no doubt that interaction in the sample group had been much more successful than in the control group. As one student in a control sub-group said: "*The experience in this group was awful. It was a negative experience*". Another said: "*It's one of the worst experiences I have had, because nobody really cared*". While students from the sample group did not say that working in multinational teams was easy ("*you have to have listening skills and patience and understanding*") their comments revealed an attitude that was more understanding and open to other cultures. Quotes from sample group students revealed that some learning had occurred and they had acquired new sensibilities. When asked about what they thought were the skills needed to work in multinational teams, some students in the sample group had this to say:

For success in multinational teams you have to be more tolerant of cultural differences and not alienate them, for example by talking about football. You also have to understand that others might

have language difficulties [...]. You have to accept that their understanding of English may not be as good (Australian student).

You need to have listening skills (that's most important) and patience and understanding. The skills we learned here are really useful. This [experience] is like a small portion of the real world. This is like a small introduction (Croatian student).

The skills you need for multinational teams are listening and understanding. And you need to question to see if they [international students] understand what you are talking about (Australian student)

For the best outcome you need to communicate well [...] it's an efficiency advantage as well. You need to find out something about the other person's culture in order to communicate well, cooperate and get the best outcome (Turkish student).

Students in the sample group could be said to have received better preparation in interpersonal skills for this exercise. They were given the opportunity to explore cultural and linguistic differences and different expectations and interpretations of group work, to examine how these might influence their team interactions, and to explore misunderstandings that could arise. As Crosling and Martin (2005, p.6) state:

The role of culture and how it influences learning styles and interaction needs to be emphasised to the students, so that they more fully appreciate the advantages of collaborative activities [...]. At the same time, students also need to be made aware of some of the problems inherent to interactions with people of different backgrounds.

Students from the sample group, then, were in a better position to have a successful group experience, and this, in fact, proved to be the case. Those interviewed from the sample group gave a very different picture from control group students and all seemed very happy with the group experience. As one student said:

I am now far more responsive to working in multinational teams. I relaxed and enjoyed the group work (first time for a unit). I noticed that by relaxing other people in the group shared their abilities and interests far more. (Australian student)

Conclusion

In summary, then, it appears that a deliberate intervention in the form of a workshop to raise student awareness of linguistic and cultural issues assisted a group of students to interact more successfully in multinational teams than another group of students who did not receive the same support. It would seem that when we combine students in multinational teams in order for them to learn from each other, we need to structure the learning experience so that they derive the greatest benefit possible from it. We know from previous research (Hawthorne, 1997; Nesdale & Todd, 1997; Volet & Ang, 1998; Smart Volet & Ang, 2000; Briguglio, 2000; Caspersz et al., 2005) that just being 'thrown together' is not enough and can, indeed, be counter-productive.

It would also seem that students require greater understanding of and more training in intercultural communication. Several students in the successful sample group stressed honing listening skills "and patience and understanding". These are skills that are not often taught deliberately in class. Students are often taught about oral presentation and sometimes about academic writing. They are not, however, taught about inductive skills for informal social and work-related communication which, according to Crosling and Ward (2001), are essential for the workplace. These authors argue that where students are *taught the skills* to work in culturally mixed team projects, these offer an ideal forum to develop a critical approach to informal communication. They also advise that assisting students to acquire such skills should be undertaken developmentally, over the duration of a course.

Since the major intervention in this case study was a single two and a half hour workshop focussing on linguistic and cultural issues in multinational teams, it is felt that much more could be achieved if the intervention were more sustained and over a longer period of time. A more sustained effort could be in the

form of a semester unit with a similar focus and/or activities involving intercultural interaction in the course of a degree. In particular, it should be emphasised that the process of sensitising students involves more than just imparting cultural knowledge, which of itself may have very little effect, since all students displayed a reasonable level of cultural awareness at the beginning of the unit. However, as Edwards et al. (2003) point out, 'international awareness' is the first step in a three-tiered typology that would gradually lead to 'international competence' and eventually to 'international expertise'. For this to occur, it is the *process* of leading students to question, probe, discuss and analyse linguistic and cultural issues (which is what the workshop aimed to do) that is likely to be more beneficial and effective. If this is so, then such an approach could be incorporated much more into the teaching and learning curriculum to develop students who will have greater cultural and linguistic sensitivity. There is much support in the literature (Volet & Ang, 1998; Smart, Volet & Ang, 2000; De Vita, 2001; Caspersz et al., 2005; Crosling & Martin, 2005) for the use of culturally diverse student teams to achieve student development in these areas, although it is recognised that there are challenges in managing such teams. However, as Smart et al. (2000, p.9) state:

If our central mission is to prepare international students for a global workforce, then it is crucial that they better understand each other's culture, learn to communicate, socialise and work together and to network.

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