

How can we improve standards in international education?

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Research on the language difficulties of international students

- learning difficulties of international students as perceived by both students and academic staff (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000)
- language needs of international students (Pantelides, 1999)
- relationship between English language proficiency and performance at university (Feast, 2002; Carroll, 2005)
- international students' experience of transition into higher education (Prescott & Hellstén, 2005)
- language difficulties and the effect of prior learning experience (Sawir, 2005)
- health and well-being of international students (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2006) other research work including Hellstén and Prescott (2004), Daroesman, Looi and Butler (2005), Singh (2005).

Written language problems

Oh, yes, sometimes it is not very convenient to use English. Not like your mother language you know. When you write papers you need to think – is this real English or not. With your mother language you can write that and think if this is good or not. But with English sometimes... (male, 41, science, China)

So far the writing system is very different, you know... because most Indonesian students, with assignments they don't get used to references, how to write references (female 19, communication, Indonesia)

Difficulties in speaking in English

You know in China there are lot of vocabulary and I think really good grammar but we can't speak for ourselves, we never tried it and just uh our education system put every thing in my brain, not participate, there is only one way my teacher say I listen so I never say so I can't speak very well before coming here (cited in Hellsten, 2002, p. 9)

My main concern at the moment is that sometimes I find it's not that easy to communicate my ideas during the class... we understand, sort of, like, the concept of the subject but to communicate the ideas and to share them with our friends in the class is not that easy, especially where I'm sort of intimidated by local students as well. (female, 20, commerce, Indonesia)

[5]

Difficulties in listening (in understanding the local English)

I think, the first time I came here, I was not used to Australian accent. In South Korean we are exposed to American English, so my god, this is not English, what are they talking about? (male, 25, computer science, Korea).

Sometimes I find it hard to understand Australian dialect. When I learned English in Indonesian it was taught by an Indonesian teacher so I was so shocked when I first heard the Australian accent. (female, 28, early childhood, Indonesia)

[6]

‘Like... urg’

Problems all round

Still, I find it pretty hard to understand. Sometimes the lecturers speak pretty quickly and don't give you notes or anything. It is a bit difficult. And also writing the assignments. I just started 2000 words last night, and I was like ... urg ... shaken. (female, 19, resource management, China)

Difficulties in making friends across cultures

Not really... but because of the language difference, because of culture difference, you can't make very close friends. When you use English to communicate, somehow it's hard to have very deep communication. (male, 41, information & technology, China)

People tend to stay with their own country people ...I think the language is a very big barrier. Chinese people can't speak very well English. When we speak, we cannot communicate very well and I think that is a very big barrier. (female, 22, environment, China)

Language and cultural understanding

No I would not say that it is a problem, but yah, when it comes to actually owning the language, you know, I find it difficult. Because there are certain nuances that cultures bring in and yeah it's difficult to read those things, though I am quite good. I have to pause to understand what they mean. Sometimes they are too fast (female, 29, education, India)

[9]

Language at work

I think probably, maybe, some of the customers during my work at the fast food restaurant didn't really respect me. They kind of look at you as if you don't understand English quite good (female, 19, commerce, Indonesia)

‘Some don’t make an effort’

Most of the time it was not explicitly stated that we don’t like you because you speak English different. But yeah, it’s been a major problem. Some people for example don’t make an effort to understand what you are saying when you speak with a different accent, it can be in a shop or it can even be in the university. Especially when your English is basic, they don’t make an effort to understand. It is like a prejudice, they are probably not aware but this is a racist prejudice that this person is not able to communicate with me that is the assumption behind it. It sounds trivial but it’s actually very important when it happens systematically it kind of puts you off. (male, 28, sociology, Cyprus)

[11]

‘They think I’m stupid’

I remember one time I go to the international office because I’m so I don’t manage my language very well so the reception give me not very patient looks because they think I’m stupid or maybe just sort of sitting there... They should stand up and come to me not just leave me sitting there. (male, 25, information & technology, China).

Present (inadequate) approaches to improving standards

1. Use English language testing (mostly IELTS testing) to ‘guarantee’ the English language ‘competence’ of students when they start, and
2. Provide some ongoing academic support after the course commences.

IELTS and academic performance

- Positive relationship between IELTS score and the Grade Point Average (GPA): Elder, 1993; Hill, et al., 1999; Poyrazli, et al., 2001; Feast, 2002.
- No statistically significant relationship between IELTS and academic performance: Dooley (1999)
- The English language proficiency of international students who meet university language requirements is often unsatisfactory (Coley 1999)
- Preparation for IELTS is inadequate to meet the needs of academic discourse in English. (Pantelides 1999)

Is IELTS an adequate standard?

I don't think IELTS is sufficient. For your daily life it's enough that you can communicate and understand someone. But for academic purposes it's far from enough [for example in relation to] how to organize your sentences, how to express your point of view very accurately'. (male, 26, IT, China)

I did IELTS and then I came to do a Master of Education. I was shocked, totally lost. I had a bad experience in the beginning... You just struggle I struggled a lot I didn't sleep for many nights thinking about assignments, so hard for me. (female, 33, education, China)

[15]

So, what should we do?

Two questions about ‘global information flow’

1. How much information about home country educational backgrounds has been flowing to Australian universities, to help them educate international students?
2. How much of the international student experience here in Australia, including students’ language problems, has been communicated back to the home country institutions and language schools?