



Essay

Cooperative Work Placement: Educating Monolingual Gatekeepers

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This essay considers questions of inequality, language and power, in the context of non-English speaking background students (NESB) at an English-medium university. It has some guidelines as to how best get international or recent migrant students (those that have permanent residency) into a cooperative work placement, based on the experience of teaching at a New Zealand university where the School of Languages has specialized in migrant education and work placements for over 25 years. It also takes an overview of the situation as it currently exists in many, if not all, state-funded tertiary organizations in New Zealand, and the politics behind the situation. Strategies for coping with and improving the process of job placement in these circumstances are outlined to assist academic administrators in the position of dealing with work placement in their programs. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2002, 3(1), 18-21).

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Egalitarianism in New Zealand education hardly exists now. Entrance is by academic achievement or achieving an open-entry age-limit for citizens. The New Zealand Government has reduced its funding for tertiary education since 1994, thus fees are subsidized now to only 75% of the total fee cost. People who have immigrated to New Zealand receive this subsidy after two years residency. As a result the fees paid by international students (non-migrants) have a very beneficial effect on university budgets and are a consequence such students are highly sought after. For example, in Auckland in 2002, one person in eight in Asian, many of whom are tertiary students and at the Auckland University of Technology there is currently a strategy to increase the overseas student body to 20%. There is also an aim and aims to have no single nationality exceed 50% within that group. There are international students from 52 countries.

Tertiary education has to be fitted in to a society now dominated by the power of global money. Money of course can pay for English classes, and pay the fees for an English-medium university education, which is sought after by many people from Asian countries. With an English-medium education such students will get better paid jobs than their peers without one. New Zealand, with its low dollar is a relatively inexpensive place to gain tertiary (an indeed secondary) education. Thus many New Zealand universities have seen increased enrollment growth from Asian countries, particularly from mainland China. This latter growth is fueled in part by the Chinese government lifting restrictions on young people wishing to study overseas.

Additionally, many Chinese students are unable to enter a Chinese university, as their scholastic results are not good enough. With a simple IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 5.5, they can get a university place in New Zealand on an undergraduate diploma course. A score of either 6 or 6.5 is the commonly accepted norm for a degree program in New Zealand and Australia.

At the same time as the finance departments at the universities are encouraging more international enrolments, program or academic group leaders are facing problems with monitoring and evaluating these NESB students. When there is a work placement involved, problems increase dramatically.

Language and Culture as Power

Language has a complex relationship to social and cultural factors. New Zealand is a basically English-medium country, despite Maori being an official second language. The latest census (2001) shows that one New Zealander in seven has some Maori ancestry, however, of those, less than a quarter speak Maori, with fluency in the language relatively uncommon. Any positions that have Maori language as a requirement are filled by Maori. There are tertiary level institutions using Maori language in a restricted range of subjects and levels (for further information check www.twoa.ac.nz). In everyday life, all New Zealanders are encouraged to appreciate Maori cultural customs in formal ceremonies of welcome, and are most

New Zealanders are accustomed to seeing Maori names alongside English ones for Government departments. International sports matches routinely begin with the *haka* (Maori war dance/challenge). But beyond that, English dominates.

The majority of New Zealand academics and employers speak only English, and accept that this is the way it should be, believing that those wishing to take part in the education or business environment need to learn English in order to do so. How aware are these ‘gatekeepers’ of the academy that social connections within most fields, academic or business, and access to certain people in a position of authority or power can be forged only with an ‘acceptable’ use of English. That is, one that the gatekeepers think of as acceptable, because it means they can talk without having to check their use of speech for its complexities, for its implied and indirect meaning, or the use of slang and colloquialisms that are not in any dictionary, and euphemisms. To take this ease of communication one step further, it means that gatekeepers also take it for granted that the foreign students who have achieved this level of English also share their ideological outlook and world view, and so will just fit into the academy and workplace. Such an approach has been used for decades for students who come from immigrant families where English is seldom spoken at home. It has not been challenged by this group in the past, so the gatekeepers have not needed to adjust their attitude.

However there is another point of view – that of the NESB students. Do they want to change their whole outlook and cultural viewpoint, or, rather, do they believe that some modification to their level of English is all that is needed? Experience shows that it is the latter that is indeed the case. Language and culture usually so closely intertwined may need to be separated.

As long as the gatekeepers and their students think there is a solution that lies solely with the students just improving their level of English, there will continue to be intercultural miscommunication, frustration and both academic and work placement failures. The students may work hard, but still receive comments from lecturers and workplace supervisors that they do not fit in, or need to improve their English. This is a stipulation, and does not deal with the daunting prospect of the need for change in New Zealand. As long as it is thought that ‘more English’ will solve the problem, academic gatekeepers will find that NESB students do not produce work that complies with Western academic norms, and that work-placement trainees do not fit into the discourse of the workplace.

There is of course a global spread of the English language, but the English-based culture does not need to be accepted by these learners of the language. Indeed for many there is the taint of colonialism in the use of the English language, and an accompanying resistance to the cultural aspects. A lot of the norms of so-called Western society are in fact rejected by other cultures. Yukio Tsuda, a Japanese scholar, wrote:

The Diffusion of English Paradigm [is] an uncritical endorsement of capitalism, its science and technology, a modernisation ideology, monolingualism as a norm,

ideological globalisation and internationalisation, transnationalisation, the Americanisation and homogenisation of world culture, linguistic culture and media imperialism. (Tsuda, 1994, p.274)

The gatekeepers need to see that these NESB students should not be made to fit into society, but allow space for a parallel and mutually enriching pathway. University lecturers need to be reflective practitioners who see change as a necessity, and find ways to facilitate it. They need to support linguistic and cultural pluralism, and open a space for diversity. Considering how dominating and disempowering academic practices can be, and the cooperative education workplace is, NESB students should be asked what *their* understanding of the different situations is. For example, there is a vast difference between the Western tradition and the post-Confucian world view held by Asian people. Discussing students’ feedback can be a rich source of learning and collaboration. Those who would like to isolate the politics of global society from academic work, have been labeled “liberal ostriches” by Pennycook (2001), a sociolinguist now working at the University of Sydney. If the opinion is maintained that each individual NESB student has needs that can be solved by one-on-one extra coaching, and a bit more English, the fact that there is a political problem is denied. Increasingly the global attitude is that language is a communication tool. Global English is being divorced from its earlier cultural association. Gumperz’s research gives an example of how different approaches to the gatekeeping interview can be:

The Indian English speakers have a quite different concept of the ‘gatekeeping’ interview, assuming that this should be conducted more in the manner of a petition to a benevolent superior, compared to the British expectation that one should make a case for one’s rights under the rules. (Gumperz, 1982, p.252)

Language support for NESB students enrolled at a New Zealand university should not just be a matter of helping students to ask for clarification of job instructions, call in sick, follow safety regulations and make a little small talk; but should also include how to make suggestions for change, and how to find the forum to express such ideas, and how to tactfully challenge the gatekeeper, so that necessary changes can take place without hostility or rejection. As long as the gatekeepers have a clear idea of their own personal ethnic identity and literacy, then they will better be able to relate to individuals who belong to other ethnic groups. However if they see themselves as part of the dominant societal group and believe that others must change to join it, the students are being done a disservice.

The American James Banks wrote:

Legal and educational institutions must have the commitment to affecting the conditions that will permit members of ethnic groups to become fully participating members of the larger society. Respect for ethnic differences should promote, not destroy, social cohesion. Research has shown that separatism is

not the desire of most members of ethnic groups. Rather they are demanding that their ethnic traditions be respected as an integral part of society. (Banks, 1981, p. 252)

Strategies for Academic Administrators

The program leader or academic administrator involved in work placement at today's New Zealand universities has to deal with a number of conflicting variables. The program leader is responsible for quality control of the program, needs to use best practice according to benchmarks, and also needs to help international students feel that they are getting their money's worth, and are not going to fail. Most often the English of these students is barely adequate. However if they have passed the required IELTS or TOEFL test at the level set by the institution, then they have every reason to feel they should be able to succeed.

Entrance Requirements

A simple solution would be to set the entrance levels higher, or to have a content-based English entrance examination. This would allow for prior knowledge of the discipline area to be used, and not a general vocabulary with numerous genres not required by the academic discipline being learnt and tested. However, research shows that while other factors besides the IELTS score lead to the academic success or failure of international students, it still plays a significant role (Dooey, 1999).

Bridging Programs

When NESB students enter the program, there should be a bridging program, depending on the entry level requirements. The bridging program should have several papers taught just for a stream of NESB students, and most importantly including 10 hours weekly of English for academic purposes (EAP) with a focus on the lexis and genres used within the discipline. The EAP program will also teach that plagiarism is an intellectual crime in New Zealand universities, that cheating is unacceptable, that referencing must be perfect, as well as all the structure and paragraphing conventions. During this bridging program, the etiquette and language required of group work needs to be practiced. After the successful completion of the bridging program, participation in a mainstream degree program, and a work placement is far more likely to succeed. A good example of a successful bridging program is *English for Business* at the Auckland University of Technology. There are two levels, each lasting for one semester. It is exclusively for NESB students with a 5.5 IELTS score. An ongoing longitudinal study shows that those students who achieve 75% or higher in these courses go on to do well in the Bachelor of Business (Pers. Com. M Hodges, program leader).

Language Support

There also needs to be ongoing language support available.

Huong (2001) recommends ongoing language support so that academic writing is at a level whereby the lecturer can mark it without undue stress, and without compromising academic standards. A degree that were to accept lower standards from part of its student body, so as to allow for success, would be degrading to the standard of tertiary education in New Zealand as a whole.

Advertising Courses

Clearly agents advertising courses internationally need to advise the costs of the required bridging program. If the entry level English is placed at IELTS 7 or equivalent, as a minimum for entry to a degree program, a full-time six-week orientation program covering the aspects of academic requirements at the university may be all that is needed. It is needed, however, even if the English is superb. Consider the following real-life example. An adult NESB student with excellent English, and managerial experience from his own country, was placed in a managerial position with a leading engineering firm. His report was very good, and was in fact used to initiate some management changes in the firm. He also achieved the academic requirements. However, on his first day there it almost all came to grief. At the end of the day he declared that his supervisor was racist and he couldn't go back. The problem was that she had told him to take his lunch break when it suited him. He had expected a defined regulated lunch break, as he had been used to in his culture. He interpreted her casual remark as implying that he wasn't important enough to have lunch. Thus the language to clarify cross-cultural miscommunication also needs to be taught in the bridging course or orientation program.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided by the author for academic and administrators involved heavily with NESB students in cooperative education programs.

1. Entry level to degree courses is set at IELTS 7 or equivalent as a minimum
2. There needs to be a full-time 6-week orientation program of academic norms and English language, which prepares for communication with people of other cultures to clarify misunderstandings, as well as local politeness strategies
3. There needs to be a bridging course for NESB students who want to enroll in a degree program but whose IELTS level is lower than 7. It should be one semester for people at level 6, or a year for people at level 5.5
4. There needs to be the opportunity for ongoing language support during the academic year
5. There needs to be good counseling for NESB students on application for a degree program, so they know what is expected before they enroll
6. The advertising arm of tertiary institutions needs to inform prospective NESB students what is

involved in getting a New Zealand degree, so that there are no hidden costs.

Conclusions

When NESB students can become a contributory part of classroom and work places, there will be the potential for change and greater internationalization. Those work places which have taken on immigrants and NESB work placement students have sometimes commented on their appreciation of the international perspective these people bring to the company (see, also Coll & Chapman, 2000). One student was given a work placement on an assembly line. He went to management with ideas on how to improve the production line. The company used his ideas, and offered him an engineering position, once his communication skills improved a little. Other employers have commented that staff felt they benefited from interaction with someone from a different culture. New Zealand is a country made up largely of immigrants. Although insularity has protected New Zealand from some negative influences, this mindset should no longer keep international students separate from the mainstream.

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