SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Narrowing Communication Gaps in Teaching International Students

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ABSTRACT

Research into the adjustment experiences of international students in higher education institutions has been undertaken over the past 50 years. In the related literature, much of the discussion has focussed on academic challenges that international students have encountered during their transition. Debate has also centred on the methods of support that academic staff could provide to assist the transition of international students. This paper highlights the findings of a case study on pedagogical approaches of academic staff in a Malaysian Technical University in narrowing communication gaps when teaching international students. Nine academic staff were interviewed to explore their experiences on communication challenges in the classroom and methods they implemented in encountering those issues. Findings illustrated that low English proficiency was the most significant challenge these staff encountered in teaching international students, and two specific pedagogical approaches were implemented in assisting this issue, namely, (i) using simple English with teaching aids, and (ii) teaching in two languages were. These methods were perceived to have assisted not just the learning of international students, but also to have narrowed communication gaps between the students and academic staff.

Keywords: Academic staff, adjustment, international students, pedagogical approaches

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has become one of the more active countries in recruiting international students. In 2008, there were 49,916 international students in public universities in Malaysia, 45% of whom were from countries in the Middle East and Africa. This number increased to 89,919 international students

in 2010 and it was targeted that in 2020, there would be approximately 200,000 international students studying in Malaysia (Knight & Sirat, 2011, cited in Bhandari & Lefébure, 2015). Therefore, researching the experiences of this growing population is an important undertaking not only to understand the students' points of view, but also to ascertain how academic staff and institutions are responding to having more international students in the Malaysian higher education classroom.

In relation to linguistic proficiency, international students encounter difficulties in understanding the language and using English as expected by the institution (Akazaki, 2010; Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012; Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; De Foote, 2010; Fritz, Chin, & De Marinis, 2008; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). These issues have arisen because international students are not familiar with the use of English in a particular culture, especially when communication in English involves several different non-English speakers, for example in the Malaysian Technical University (MTU, a pseudonym).

The Malaysian Technical University is located more than 200 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur, which is the capital city of Malaysia. It was first developed as a training institution and then established as a focussed university in 2007. MTU offers diplomas and undergraduate and postgraduate courses in engineering, technology management, teacher training and information technology. To date, MTU has more than 15,000 students (including approximately 500 international students) learning in various TVET programmes offered at the institution. Its local staff and student population represent multi-ethnic Malaysians in the local communities, with approximately 70% students and staff being Malay, while the remaining 30% are of Chinese, Indian and indigenous ethnicity. The majority of international students (approximately 95%) originally come from the Middle East and Africa. The formal and common language used in MTU is Bahasa Melayu; however, MTU mandates English as the language of instruction in all lectures involving international students.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research involved nine academic staff (lecturers and tutors) from three different engineering faculties in MTU. They each had between three and 10 years of teaching experiences, and each had at least a Bachelor's Degree in Engineering. All of them taught subjects that required students to be involved in individual or group assignments and projects to conduct case studies, solve engineering problems with numerous calculations and conduct laboratory experiments. At the start of each interview, the academic staff were asked to describe their foundational teaching philosophies. All the participants indicated that their principal philosophy was "to transfer knowledge" so that students were able to "demonstrate their understanding." They described teaching as "delivering knowledge with satisfaction," with the satisfaction derived from succeeding in

making "students understand." Another important aim was to be "just" and "fair to all their students," regardless of whether they were international or local. This was conveyed through statements that stressed that their teaching must "be fair" or must "be equal" to all their students.

RESULTS

The teaching experiences of the academic staff in relation to teaching international students were characterised by a range of challenges. The most challenging was communicating with international students in English. In particular, the academic staff raised three issues related to communicating in English. Firstly, they said it was difficult because they believed their level of English proficiency was inadequate for teaching in English. Secondly, they raised concerns about the English proficiency of local students. The final challenge was related to their difficulty in understanding the English used by international students, which differed from Malaysian English in terms of accent, rhythm, intonation, expressions and structure, among other language features.

The research data indicated that academic staff used two basic strategies to adjust to having international students in their classes. Firstly, they used 'simple English' together with teaching aids. Secondly, they taught in two languages. Both approaches were driven by objectives that were fundamental to their teaching philosophy, that is, to gain satisfaction when they taught and to be fair to all students.

Using Simple English with Teaching Aids

The majority of the academic staff indicated that teaching using simple English together with teaching aids helped the international students to better understand their teaching. Zulkifli shared his experiences:

> International students usually don't know what I was talking about … So I have to lower my expectations so that I can make sure they can receive knowledge easier … I have to ask them a lot of questions and simplify my teaching by using simple English and examples … Usually as a part of my introduction in class, I showed them structures of buildings … I have to make the effort to browse the Internet and show them the pictures of buildings and structures … I also have to ask them many times, "Do you understand what I was talking about?" … Let's say, I was talking about a building and asked them to look at the structure or design of the building. I have to give simple ideas like, "Where is this building? Is it next to X?" … Or, "What do you think about the design?" … "How do you think of this floor plan?"

Mastura and Zubaidah also used teaching aids in addition to using simple English. They used diagrams and videos to assist international students' learning. Mastura explained:

> I always use diagrams and simple English. They seem to understand better.

If I have to teach in laboratories and conduct experiments, I will show them some videos on how the application of some lab work is used in real life. I also did some extra lab sessions for them.

Zubaidah stated:

Before I had international students in class, I didn't use videos to aid my teaching … But when I have international students, I was afraid they will not understand what I'm teaching, so I used teaching aids. I did not make any obvious change to my teaching slides, just put simple notes on the slides and searched for videos on the Internet … They enjoyed it, they liked it, they understood, they liked watching pictures and diagrams, and they were saying 'OK, OK'.

Mastura and Zubaidah perceived that their international students understood the lessons better when diagrams and videos were used in teaching. The responses of the international students showed that they enjoyed and understood this approach; this helped to make the staff feel satisfied with their teaching. They also believed that they were being fair to the local students when they taught using simple English. Shahrul explained:

I use simple English when I teach and deliver teaching slowly … Of course, because when I was in the UK I had hard times to understand my lecturer … But

I don't use Bahasa Melayu at all … So I am sure that whatever I teach is equally understood [by international students and local students].

Shauki supported Shahrul's statement. He too taught entirely in English using simple language. He said, "We tried to use simple sentences, we give simple analogies, sometimes local students' English is just as bad, but it's fine, both [local and international students'] English is the same."

The experiences of academic staff suggested that their intention to teach using simple English together with teaching aids was perceived to benefit not only the understanding and learning of international students, but also that of local students. Hence, this was the most common strategy implemented by the staff when teaching international students.

Teaching in Two Languages

Apart from using simple English, there were also times when the academic staff did not feel confident enough to teach in English, or when they observed that teaching in English did not help the local students. In such cases, they used another approach, which was to teach in two languages. The academic staff who used this strategy as an adjustment effort initially taught the class using Bahasa Melayu and then taught their international students in English. Some of the staff implemented this by holding separate sessions for the international

students and the local students. Fahmi was one of the lecturers who used this method. He explained:

> I said to him [the international student], "Please bear with me for a while, let me finish where I started, and I would like to see you after this class." So, after the session, I met the student and asked whether we can have our class separately from the other local students at a different time … He said, "Yes." I was so relieved! I can teach using Bahasa Melayu to the class, and teach him personally in English … My English will not be exposed then … But after individual sessions with that student, I realised we have common issues in speaking English … He used the African kind of English. I used the Malaysian kind of English. I think that was a challenge but in an interesting way … Because we have the same difficulties in speaking. We don't know the correct verbs or grammar. But that made me feel free to speak English as well.

Fahmi believed that it was a good decision to teach in Bahasa Melayu and then in English because he could ensure that both the local and international students benefitted when they were separated. In addition, Fahmi perceived that it helped him not to "expose" his limited English proficiency. Marina had a similar strategy. However, she separated the class because of her sense of inadequacy in teaching in English. She elaborated:

> I was not confident [teaching in English] … So I requested that the classes be divided into two smaller classes. There was one lecturer who was willing to teach international students, so I asked international students to register in her class. I took the class which had no international students so that I can teach in my mother tongue.

In a follow-up interview, Marina indicated that despite her desire to teach classes without any international students, there was one international student who pleaded to be in her class. She confessed to the student her weakness with regards to teaching in English, but she accepted the student in her class on the condition that her class would be conducted partly in English and partly in Bahasa Melayu.

In addition to separating local and international students, another method of teaching in two languages was by teaching the whole class initially in Bahasa Melayu and then repeating the content in English immediately afterwards. However, this was dependent on the response of the students. Fauziah expressed the following, "All teaching slides are in English, the explanations are also in English. When there are Malay students who did not understand, I will explain in Bahasa Melayu. But whenever I explain in Bahasa Melayu, the

foreigners [international students] will say they are lost." She added, "The problem is, when I speak in English, the local students will not like it. They hardly understand my English. So, if I explain anything in English, I will have to repeat the same information in Bahasa Melayu."

Both Zubaidah and Fauziah clearly illustrated their dilemma. While Zubaidah described the international students as being 'lost' when she taught in Bahasa Melayu, Fauziah stated that local students disliked it when she taught in English. This situation often forced the lecturers to teach in two languages because they were aiming to fulfil their fundamental teaching philosophy of being fair to students and ensuring that they understood the lectures.

Shahrul provided a clear example of how repeating information in two languages was in line with his teaching approach:

They [local students] were having problems last time, so I will explain it in Malay. I explain in English first, I will talk in Malay after that, and I will explain again in English. Just for the sake of accommodating the international student so that they won't miss any information.

Although teaching in two languages provided a sense of satisfaction for the staff, the situation created a predicament for them, stretching their capacity to comply with the mandated use of English as the language of instruction in MTU. Repeating lectures in two languages required extra time and energy, and it added to the workload of the staff; however, not teaching in two languages would have violated the philosophy of the staff i.e. that they needed to be fair to all their students.

DISCUSSION

The English language, which has been identified as an indispensable competence for international students in previous research (Fritz et al., 2008; Andrade, 2010; Vanderford & Grote, 2012; Zhang & Mi, 2010), is also critical in this study of the academic adjustment of participants. The majority of participants argued that limited and different styles of speaking English led to incidents of miscommunication and misinterpretation, which further interrupted the process of learning and teaching. The tensions surrounding language issues among the international students were supported by extensive literature, which argues that English is the major factor that influences international students' ability to adjust when tuition is in English. Previous studies have argued that the level of English proficiency and the differences in grammar, syntax and accents between local variations of English can create confusion, which strongly affects the experiences of international students (Andrade, 2010; Hennebry et al., 2012; Robertson et al., 2000). Some studies have emphasised that English academic writing is a significant major obstacle for international students' academic progress, in addition to English in the oral mode (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Zhang & Mi, 2010; Hennebry et al., 2012). Other studies have agreed that linguistic issues are, to some degree,

related to culture and are not necessarily due to language proficiency (Hennebry et al., 2012).

The majority of the academic staff in this study moved between two languages, English and Bahasa Melayu, to satisfy their philosophy and needs and those of the local students who struggled with English. This decision in turn increased their workload because they had to repeat classes in two languages. These findings support the argument that academic staff who are non-native speakers who have to use English as the language of instruction have a greater task than do native speakers of English who teach in a non-English language setting (Teekens, 2003; Bolton & Kuteeva, 2012). Given the widespread use of English as the instructional and social language, non-native English-speaking academic staff who work with culturally diverse and internationalising classrooms are also faced with the complex effects of language. In the case of MTU, the complexity of the situation was not just due to the limited English proficiency of the international students but also the inability of the academic staff to effectively teach in English. However, Teekens (2003) and Singh, Pandian and Singh (2015) argued that this effect has been greatly underestimated, given that there has been limited research and policy development in this area.

CONCLUSION

Most related studies on English relative to the experiences of international students who are non-native English speakers have been conducted in Western English settings. This paper highlights findings on deeper complexities in a situation where English is used among non-native English international students in a non-English setting that includes diverse non-English speakers. One of the challenges encountered was to provide a pedagogical approach that could suffice the needs of staff's own English proficiency and their teaching philosophy as well as solve issues related to English language proficiency among international students (and local students). In this study, these struggles led to actions that increased the workload of the academic staff involved in terms of time and energy. The predicament revealed in this study suffered by teaching staff at MTU, nevertheless, has revealed a more complex undertaking that goes beyond much of the contemporary understanding of the use of the English language in international higher education.

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