

Abstract

In my ten years of dealing with international students in the role of study support lecturer, one of the major preoccupations among students is over their level of English language. Although all students enter their course with a minimum level of IELTS 6, many feel disadvantaged by particularly poor spoken English, and suffer feelings of anxiety, shame and inferiority. Low self-confidence means that many feel ill-equipped to engage in class discussion and in social interaction with the host community. A common reaction to stress caused by communication problems is to retreat into communication with conational students, further inhibiting progress in language. Whilst linguistic progress is made by nearly all students, support systems nevertheless must be put in place to alleviate the shock experienced by international students at the start of the academic sojourn. If British universities are to continue to recruit international students with the minimum qualification of IELTS 6, the author strongly suggests that academic and language support should be provided.

1. Introduction

The move to a new environment is cited as one of the most traumatic events in a person's life and in most sojourners some degree of culture shock will be experienced (Kim 1988). Oberg (1960) defines culture shock as anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. A commonly-cited feature of culture shock is language shock caused by immersion into an environment where the dominant language spoken is not the sojourner's native language, inducing feelings of helplessness, confusion, sadness, disorientation and anxiety. Adjustment in a new environment is dependent on the development of understanding between the host and the sojourner, therefore language ability is critical as medium of communication.

In my experience, as study support lecturer for international Tourism Masters students over the last ten years, and Tourism Masters Programme Leader over the last two years, anxiety is experienced by the majority of international students in relation to linguistic competence. Nervousness over language ability is generally experienced before departure, and only intensifies upon arrival when confronted by the foreign language as spoken, and the need to make themselves understood. This paper will consider the feelings of students about being in a foreign language environment and will discuss the strategies students use (or avoid) to improve language ability. Finally, the implications of a growing number of international students for British Higher Education will be discussed.

2. Students' initial level of English

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) tends to be the preferred entry qualification by British universities (Macrae 1997), and entry level for study at degree level at most universities in the UK is IELTS 6 (or less commonly TOFEL 550/213). However the level of spoken and written ability varies significantly, and in any case, there is no guarantee that holding this minimum level of English for study at HE level in the UK is reliable as a predictor of language ability.

All of the students recognised the need for a good level of English, to meet the demands of the course and to cope in an English-speaking environment, as well as to operate in an increasingly globalised business environment, whose international language of communication is English. The centrality of English to professional, academic and sociocultural efficacy means that the majority students express a lot of anxiety over their language level particularly during the first few weeks.

3. Feelings of anxiety and inadequacy

From induction day and upon meeting staff and other students, there is often enormous anxiety among students over their academic and general linguistic competence. As Sharples (1995) and Blue (1995) point out, the academic culture is more important to students than the host culture: and it is the importance of language as related to the academic task that panics students in the initial few weeks.

As Cammish (1997) notes, international students need to be competent in understanding not only the content of lectures, but also in following the more rapid and informal register of speech used in discussion and grasping instructions in practical and face-to-face situations. Many students confess panic over their inability to follow lectures and oral instructions, and suffer embarrassment over their communicative inadequacy, with many students feeling a reluctance to draw attention to themselves, and to identify themselves as foreigners whose English is poor. Words used over and over again by students to refer to English language ability include *nervous, scared, frightened, worried, afraid, embarrassed, and ashamed*.

A common problem reported by students as the first term progresses is their self-reported inability to follow the content of lectures, with some students saying they can only understand 30% of the lecture. It is possible that if lecturers are made aware of the difficulties in comprehension faced by students and of the consequent dips in self-esteem, they may become sensitive to the need to make themselves understood, to monitor their own use of language with a heightened awareness of the extent to which they are communicating successfully. On the other hand, lecturers may beg the question, often asked by the better-speaking students, what students are doing on the course if they cannot follow the spoken word.

Such is the level of distress experienced that many students contemplate leaving the course, after spending nights without sleep, appearing at my office in a state of agitation. Most students are counselled, and change their mind, but out of 150 students altogether in 2004/5, 5 left the course, 3 to return to study with the next cohort. An example is a Chinese student, Yang¹, who came to my office in tears over her inability to understand everyday conversation as well as academic language: like most students her aim was not just to pass the course but also to learn something about life in the UK, something which her linguistic inadequacy barred her from pursuing. Despite achieving IELTS 6 she declared that her language wasn't good enough to succeed, and said that she wanted to go away and prepare herself more by taking another preparatory English course so she could return with more confidence. Her anxiety was reflected physically in pale, spotty skin, dark circles under her eyes, and a frowning harassed look on her face. The only time she smiled was when she was offered the reprieve of a new start, i.e. deferral until the next academic year. As Storti (1990) notes, stress impacts negatively on the ability to study, and, like the afore-mentioned student, many found that their level of anxiety made them unable to concentrate.

Feelings of inadequacy and impotence are commonplace among students. There is a common tendency to use self-deprecating language to refer to linguistic ability; a particular case is an Iranian student, Kiana whose comments on her own level of English frequently contained self-denigrating language, including: "*I am rubbish*"; "*I am really bad*"; "*People think I'm stupid.*" According to Hofstede

¹ All names are anonymised.

(1991), self-doubt and loss of face, with consequences for self-esteem, are common feelings among sojourners as they struggle to make themselves understood in the first few weeks.

In a sense, the visitor in a foreign culture reverts to the mental state of an infant in which they have to learn to do simple things again, as reflected in Kiana's likening of herself to a 'little girl':

"Embarrassed! Like getting red! Really! Like little girl! Even I didn't know how to buy ticket for bus or anything you know. And even I asked somebody, I couldn't understand what they said so immediately I said 'ok, ok.' But two minutes later I asked somebody else. But you know you be embarrassed when you can't speak English.

Constrained by the linguistic rules of the foreign language and its rules of use, language learners are placed in a position of subordination and powerlessness (Kramsch 1993), with older learners in particular placed in an uncomfortable position of inferiority in relation to language. Most have been academically successful at home and often professionally well established, and now suddenly they face intense academic pressure and adjustments and painful social vulnerability. This has resonance for the majority of the students I work with who have left behind high status jobs in their country (including teacher, lecturer, director, head chef, purchaser, translator, marketing manager, tourism chief, P.A., travel agent manager).

4. Anxiety over participation in class

Nearly all students identify a link between linguistic competence and the level of participation in class; therefore much anxiety is expressed about the prevalence of class discussion, an academic difference between the UK and many other countries noted in a survey by The British Council (1999). At first lectures and seminars can send students into learning shock: most students sit silently in class for many months, rarely volunteering an answer unless picked on. As Hofstede (1991) notes, a lecturer from a western country expects students to participate in class, to volunteer an opinion and to engage in debate. For many students, however, this is a demand that is overwhelming: unused to this convention, it can take many months before students make the adjustment and start speaking in class. This is often a very painful process, with discomfort manifested in blushing, shy, nervous smiles, quiet, sometimes inaudible contributions, and avoidance of eye contact.

When probed, students say that they wanted to be picked on by lecturers, as their lack of contribution is something they want to change. Therefore, whilst a relativist stance in lecturers is to be welcomed, including an awareness of western academic conventions and the difficulties international students will face in open discussion, students should be nevertheless sensitively encouraged to adapt to the norms of British academic culture. This would also help to counter the resentment of those students in the cohort who are irritated by the passivity of mostly Asian students.

5. A common reaction to stress: the retreat into ethnic communication patterns

It is universally acknowledged that the route to progress in language is through speaking in English. Through determined efforts to mix across national groups and to practise English, students can succeed in becoming functionally fit and well-adapted, socially and academically. But according to Kim (1988), students have to be willing to experience feelings of helplessness and distress in order to make linguistic progress; these are inevitable emotions in the acquisition of communicative competence.

Unfortunately, given the fear of exposure as a badly speaking foreigner, and the comfort associated with mixing with conationals, there is often among international students a retreat into ethnic communication patterns, with conationals sought not just for the comfort they bring, but for the ability to converse easily, without the pressure of speaking English for an extended period, with the following words most commonly used to describe speaking in the native language: *easy, familiar, cosy, home, relaxing*.

Such was the extent of mixing in conational groups that one student from China described to me how during a cold spell, he had stayed at home for a few days, not only mixing with his Chinese flat mates, but also watching Chinese films, and when he emerged from the house, he was surprised to find himself in England again, in an English-speaking environment.

Over the course of the academic year, the patterns of interaction established within the first few months are often maintained. Students need to make individual efforts to overcome linguistic problems: the majority of students impede their own linguistic development by interacting mainly with conationals and speaking their native language, instead of speaking in English.

6. Conclusion

Communication is at the heart of adaptation: students with good linguistic skills describe themselves as having an easier time adjusting to academic life, as well as gaining acceptance in the host community. The anxiety surrounding language ability is high in the initial few months of the academic sojourn, and imposes a huge stress on students in terms of an increased workload, owing to the amount of extra time needed for reading and writing in English, and general unhappiness over their inability to communicate with confidence and ease. It is to be expected then that students do not refer to themselves as being completely settled until the degree of linguistic competence is achieved, which would enable a minimum accommodation with academic tasks.

A central question then is this: should HE English language requirements be reviewed? At present, the minimum entry qualification for most British universities is IELTS 6. However, we must question

whether or not this represents an adequate language level for international students who have to study not only in a foreign language but also often in a foreign academic culture.

The suggestion that the minimum IELTS level should be increased conflicts with the desire of most HE institutions in the UK to continue to attract, and indeed to improve their recruitment of, full-fee paying international students, and of course this feeds into a debate over the increasing targeting of international students as a source of income generation. The likelihood that universities will raise their minimum IELTS requirement is low, given the ensuing reduction in applicants with, for example, IELTS 6.5/7, and the conflict this represents with international student recruitment policy. Almost all universities need to generate revenue independent of the HE funding council and many have sought to do so by expanding their international student intake.

If international student recruitment is to be ethically driven, if we continue to recruit students whose language level we know *may* impede their adjustment and be counter to psychological health, the institution has the moral duty to put in place systems of support to facilitate the acquisition of language skills. The most obvious form of support is the provision of language and study support. There is evidence that international students are starting to take English language support into account when choosing a course, as many realise that good pre-sessional or in-sessional language support can make the difference between success and failure. Furthermore, the shorter the period of study, the better a student's English needs to be before study starts: indeed, on a Masters course, there is little time for in-sessional language improvement. In this case, it should be considered that the most useful study support is not generic, but discipline-specific, as classes are more likely to be well-attended and to be of practical use in assignment preparation.

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