



Managing academic skills development and English language learning and use: The case of Chinese postgraduate coursework students studying in Australia.

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Presented to 11th Biennial Conference of the Association for Academic
Language and Learning, RMIT University, Melbourne, November 2013



Background to the project



This is an OLT funded collaborative project involving universities in China and Australia. The principal partners are Murdoch University, Victoria University and Communication University of China.



Aims of the project



The project aims to address the following key questions:

- How can teachers in China and Australia most effectively prepare Chinese students for postgraduate learning in Australia?
- How are media and communication students taught in China and how does this compare with Australia?
- What does it mean to be a successful student in China and how does that compare with Australia?
- What challenges do Chinese students experience transitioning from study in China to postgraduate coursework in Australia?



Data collection



Interviews, observation and document analysis have been conducted here in Australia and in China. This work has been undertaken by both Chinese and Australian academics. This has resulted in a body of rich data that represents and reflects the different perspectives that are critical within this collaborative project.



Findings to be discussed in this paper



- That the compressed timeframe of a coursework masters program exacerbates the challenges of studying in Australia for Chinese postgraduate students.
- That established understandings of Chinese students about, and experiences of, University discourses (including those associated with English language learning) have a significant impact on transition to study in Australia.
- That because of this we have identified explicit articulation and negotiation of difference as an appropriate strategy to support transition for Chinese postgraduate coursework students.



ELT in Chinese undergraduate programs



- Compulsory (2years) and have to pass college English test to graduate
- Continues to be heavily focused on grammar
- Little exposure to authentic English texts including those that are discipline specific
- Very little writing
- Oral 'interaction' is limited, usually rehearsed (not spontaneous) and generally not critical in orientation



Impact on transition



English is taught to Chinese students with little reference or attention to authentic discourse practices, (academic and social), to culture and to interculturality. This means that many of the students who come to study in Australia have very little knowledge about Australia, and about English language use in real contexts – university and beyond.

Chinese postgraduate students are often unable to put language and culture together and yet this is what is required in order to be successful, particularly within postgraduate programs such as Media and Communication.



So what does this mean? Examples of difference.



- Effective real communication across different language modes in the Australian context is problematic.
- Ability to master and use different academic discourses and discipline specific text types is often an issue.



... in Australia in class we have the different - I mean, we also have the students who are Australians or who are English speakers they can speak out anything they want to say but I cannot do that.

- Tutorials and discussions are very confronting.
- Processing, and then responding spontaneously, are difficult.
- Students often don't know the conventions associated with tutorials and discussions – turn taking, interjection, role of tutor, expectations of students.
- Undergraduate experiences focused students on expressing themselves well in speaking rather than on interacting with and responding to other students. (Lianzhen He & Ying Dai, 2006)
- Undergraduate experiences emphasised students organising their own ideas during group discussion. (Lianzhen He & Ying Dai, 2006)

Mute English – the Latin of China (Yiqing Liao & Wolff, 2009)



We are asked to write 300 words report in a foreign language, which I barely did in my native language, so I found this... sometimes... it's too difficult. ...

- Chinese tertiary students do not have to write extensively even in Chinese. Writing thousands of words in English is a real challenge.
- There will be lots of 'highly', 'diligent', 'cultivate' (and other growth metaphors), and much 'golden' and 'shining'.
- There will be lots of colons / semi colons in writing because Chinese written discourse style features run-on sentences (eg my car is out of petrol we cannot reach town before dark). Chinese students are taught to use colons to punctuate these sorts of sentences. (Chang, 2004)
- Chinese writing is recursive not linear – this is why the content of essays written in English is often repetitive.
- Chinese writing is flowery and long winded and features lots of cliches and trite expressions. These are a mark of quality writing in China. (Wang, 2011)
- Use of proverbs is highly valued in college English writing (Paltridge, 2007).

Not writing 'in circles' like one would in China



What will the project do to help negotiate difference?



- A toolkit that highlight differences. Information will be succinctly expressed, explicit and accessible and able to be used by students and academics in Australia and China.
- A toolkit that provide ideas and strategies. Aimed primarily for use by academics in Australia, these materials are designed to help negotiate difference in unit and classroom contexts.
- Pre-course (and in-course) teaching materials. Designed to be used either intensively as a whole, or as stand alone modules, these materials will require students to engage with difference to support the development of requisite knowledges, discourses and skills.
- A toolkit for English teachers in Chinese Universities. There will be a focus in these materials on oral interaction and on English discourses and text types including the provision of discipline specific authentic texts for use in China.



This project is about transitioning from study in China to postgraduate coursework in Australia.



- In Australia successful transitioning requires what Heyward (2002) describes as the “crisis of engagement”. CFS is about managing (not avoiding) this crisis.
- In China successful transitioning can be supported through the collaborative use of CFS materials.



[In China] ...more work needs to be done in relation to cultivating and developing critical thinking, technology literacy, media literacy, and other forms of literacy that have become increasingly critical to success in the 21st century. Ruan & Leung, 2012, p.xii

In the meantime, the provision of socially, culturally and educationally responsible approaches to support Chinese postgraduate students requires explicit articulation and negotiation of difference through a process of collaborating for success.



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- www.murdoch.edu.au/Research-capabilities/Collaborating-For-Success
- *Support for this project has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.*