Southern Cross University
ePublications@SCU

School of Tourism and Hospitality Management

2003

Teaching and learning issues in the multicultural classroom

Mieke Witsel
Southern Cross University

Publication details

Witsel, M 2003, 'Teaching and learning issues in the multicultural classroom', *Proceedings of Effective Teaching and Learning Conference*, Brisbane, 6-7 November, Griffith University, Brisbane, Qld.

ePublications@SCU is an electronic repository administered by Southern Cross University Library. Its goal is to capture and preserve the intellectual output of Southern Cross University authors and researchers, and to increase visibility and impact through open access to researchers around the world. For further information please contact epubs@scu.edu.au.

Teaching and learning issues in the multicultural classroom

Drs. Mieke Witsel
School for Tourism and Hospitality Management
Southern Cross University

"A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry."
(E.M. Forster, 1924, "A Passage to India", p. 262)

Abstract: *As the Western educational system becomes more geared to multicultural society, and a need to find funding outside the usual paddock of local students and research projects emerges, more pressure is being exerted on tertiary institutions to open their doors to foreign students. This paper explores the intercultural communication issues facing the lecturer teaching in the multicultural classroom. The original research draws on studies of Dutch lecturers and ancillary staff upon teaching (in English) within the multicultural tertiary classroom, in locations across the Netherlands, Belgium and Indonesia. However, additional findings emerged which allow for an interpretation of the impact of functioning in a professional sense with students from different cultural backgrounds, irrespective of the lecturer's cultural background. Working with a diverse, multicultural classroom has an impact on the lecturer's sense of self, on matters of trust, and on confidence. The paper also explores the impact of variations in students' learning styles, logic structures, high and low context communication, and metalinguistic communication. The implications of the use of a second language and the effect on the speaker are investigated, and as a consequence the impact of varying levels of English-language competency can be seen to be quite significant. Both student and lecturer can be seen in many cases to relinquish a level of control that previously had been taken for granted. Finally, the paper suggests some tactics – both practical and attitudinal - which will aid lecturer and student in more effective teaching and learning in the multicultural classroom.*

Introduction

At present, approximately 200,000 international students study in Australian institutions, contributing over AUD$4.2 billion to the Australian economy annually. International education now represents Australia's eighth largest export sector. Future prognoses indicate that the global demand for international higher education is set to grow enormously. Demand for Australian education is forecast to increase nine-fold from 1.8 million international students in 2000 to 7.2 million international students in 2025 (Böhm, *et al,* 2002).

According to the forecasts generated by IDP Australia, trans-national or offshore programs (through offshore campuses and distance education) will account for 44% of this total demand (Böhm, *et al*, 2002). Judging from these figures, the demand for international onshore higher education in Australia will exceed 560,000 students.

My thesis focused on teaching and learning issues in the intercultural classroom facing lecturers from the Holland University, in Amsterdam. The essentially qualitative study followed seven lecturers[1] teaching international undergraduate and masters degree students for a semester in Indonesia, Amsterdam, Haarlem (Netherlands) and Brussels (Belgium). Though the thesis was geared to the Dutch educational system, there are many issues that

[1] The names of the lecturers are Hans, Bertus, Annerie, Rene, Anne-Marie, Liesbeth, and Jeanine. With the exception of Bertus, who requested a pseudonym, the names are original.

are pertinent to us here in Australia. The major difference between those colleagues in Europe and ourselves here, is that they were used to teaching in their own language (in their case Dutch, Flemish and French). The introduction of increasing numbers of foreign students forced a switch to a foreign language – i.e., English – and thus created a situation where everybody involved was teaching and learning in a second language. There are many similarities in the issues that arose, however – not least because Holland and Belgium, like Australia, are first-world, westernised cultures with strong individualistic characters.

General findings, applicable to ourselves

Teaching at tertiary level is not an easy task, even if the students are of the same socio-economic and cultural background as ourselves. One must motivate, teach, assess, negotiate, even admonish large groups of students at any time: a job that requires a giving of the self in ways that less interactive employments would not require of us. When this job (calling?) of ours is complicated by groups of students with differing language backgrounds, different learning styles, varied expectations and hopes, our job becomes more taxing. And, if we can deal with it, it can become more rewarding, too. What follows are some points that may be of interest to yourselves.

Learning styles

There are many levels at which learning styles differ from country to country. Naturally, the style used in the "home" country will influence the study skills that the students will have developed, and the way in which they deal with the sorts of study skills that are expected of them in a westernised educational setting. At the EAIE 2000 conference (ten Dam *et al*, 2000) it was suggested that differences in educational styles are to be found in seven areas:

- Relationship lecturer-student (*formal* versus *informal*, *big* versus *small power difference*);
- Interaction in class (*not done* versus *questions and critical answers are expected*);
- Relations between students (*harmony in the group* versus *individual performance*);
- Time (*being on time is not relevant* versus *being on time is important*);
- Regulation of learning process (*mainly by lecturer* versus *mainly by students*);
- Aim of learning (*emphasis on theory* versus *emphasis on understanding and application*); and
- Uses of technical resources/ media (*limited* versus *much*).

Two of the many examples from the research illustrate this:

> **Liesbeth**: They [other culture, i.e. non-Dutch students] will not engage in a discussion with their lecturer as Dutch students do; they accept marks without protesting; when I ask them to do something, they do it without loud grumbling.
>
> **Bertus**: Asian students are not at ease when a lecturer is too familiar with them. So, some specific ethnic groups are moving you to that position of power distance your are expected to stand in. I'm quite aware that later on, Asian students change as time passes, the manners and morals become more proximate to the Dutch standards. Nevertheless, when conflicts or problems arise, Asian students will fall back in that extended power distance-consciousness.

Logic structures

There are many different ways of organising thought and argument ranging from inductive "zooming out" (starting with the details and working one's way up to the general

agreement), to strongly deductive, "zooming in" (starting with the general idea and gradually moving towards closer detail). Scollon's excerpt from a conversation between a Hong-Kong Chinese and an American businessman shows this very clearly (Scollon, 1995, p.1):

> Because most of your production is done in China now, and, uh, it's not really certain how the government will react in the run-up to 1997, and since I think a certain amount of caution in committing to TV advertisement is necessary because of the expense. So, I suggest that we delay making our decision until after the Legco makes its decision.

Although the words and sentences are quite clear, to most Westerners there is a feeling that it is perhaps not quite clear what the speaker's point is because the Asian uses a "topic-comment" order of presentation "'in which the main point (or comment) is deferred until sufficient backgrounding of the topic has been done" (Scollon, 1995, p. 1). In contrast, the Western speaker "tends to expect a discourse strategy of opening the discussion with the introduction of the speaker's main point so that other speakers may react to it and so that he or she can develop arguments in support as they are needed" (Scollon, 1995, p. 2).

What would all this mean for the lecturer teaching in a multicultural classroom? By way of example, let us take a look at the way some of the theoretical frameworks approach thought process and argumentation in conversation. For a lecturer, this would be important in judging whether an essay or a presentation is well-argued. As a lecturer myself, for some years I taught essay-writing techniques, and urged my students to pose their argument in a concise and logical way - by starting with an introduction which would lay out the path they wished to follow, summarised in the "thesis statement", and to start each paragraph with a topic sentence, followed by several "support" sentences which would justify their topic sentences. This, I would emphatically point out, was the clearest and most logical way of arguing a point in an essay. However, in a multicultural classroom, this would patently not be the only logical way of structuring an essay. It might be the one which would appear most obvious to the Westerner trained in this approach, but to other cultures other ways of structuring logic might seem as logical, if not more so. It is important, therefore, that the lecturer in a multicultural classroom is trained in these various approaches.

Direct and indirect: Being blunt and being evasive; and matters of *face*

Within any communicative event, the speaker makes a choice as to how indirect he or she is going to be. This choice is determined by many factors (Thomas, 1995, pp. 124 – 133) - the differences in power and social standing between the participants (what I term the "who" aspect), the size of the imposition (the "what") and the relative rights and obligations (the "why"). Therefore, within the communicative event there will be a range of choice varying from the relatively direct and the relatively indirect. It is clear that different cultures have different norms in terms of acceptable degrees of indirectness – compared to the Australian "norm", Israelis are quite direct, and Greeks tend to be very indirect (Wierzbicka, 1991). German and Dutch people are traditionally quite direct in comparison to the Australian average, and being forthright is appreciated on the whole in Germanic conversations. Also, as there is only a relatively small amount of power distance in Dutch society, the "who" aspect as described will not generally have as large an impact on the level of directness as it would, for example, in Belgium, where power distance is greater and social status perceived as being more important. Seen from that perspective, the Dutch and Germans (like the Russians, incidentally) have a reputation for "bluntness" in intercultural communication situations. This is seen quite strongly in situations where there is a matter where the participants do not see eye-to-eye - the Dutch or German method generally would be to say "I don't agree" and proceed to explain why, whereas an Australian person, for example,

might prefer to say "I see what you mean, but ..." or "You have a point there, however ...". This can lead to situations where sometimes the conversation "stops". The Dutch, German or Russian person expects a return sally to his disagreement, while the other (Australian) partner is left with a discouraged feeling of "oh, well that's that then", and that it is fruitless to continue negotiations.

Some cultures prefer harmonious relations over frankness and directness, and others prefer to be more "down to earth", and criticisms (justified or not) can be openly expressed. In a culture where harmonious relations between people are important, there is a tendency to use indirect ways of communication, because less explicit messages are less threatening or potentially hurtful, and are therefore a way of saving face. In this indirect or "high context" communication, one has to read more between the lines. In high context cultures like China where it is important not to lose face, classroom interaction between a lower-context Western lecturer and a high-context Chinese student can pose problems:

> **Liesbeth**: The following occurs during a class which contained a number of Chinese students. I go about as I always do, encouraging them to actively participate by asking questions, and in this way eliciting a discussion. Chinese students are, however, quite passive. After class, one of the Chinese students comes up to see me, asking me if I could please not ask him any questions any more in class. I can't remember my exact response, but later I realized that in their culture this direct questioning approach is quite uncommon. Apart from the fact that, as far as I know, the educational system in China is what we would call "old fashioned", the main problem for Chinese/Asian people is the danger of losing face by perhaps giving a "wrong" answer in public, and what would be worse, being *told* that it was incorrect in public by the lecturer.

Metalinguistic communication

Every culture has its own tacit rules as to what is acceptable behaviour and what is not: such as, how much (or little) physical proximity is allowed? How much and what kind of eye contact is acceptable? The study of kinesics and proxemics illustrate that there are important differences between cultures on this front. The classic story of a conversation between an North American and a Latin American which tells how their conversation may begin at one end a corridor, but end up at the other, with neither party aware of the reason why, was explained in a well-known study by Edward Hall approximately 40 years ago (Hall, 1959). In this study he illustrated that due to the differing relative sizes of the "bubble of space" in which interpersonal contacts normally take place, a situation can arise where, during the interaction, the Latin American moves closer to the North American, who instinctively moves back, resulting in an intercultural dance down the corridor, leaving the North American with an indefinable feeling that the South American is being pushy, and the South American with the impression that the North American is being evasive.

There is much that can be explored in the field of non-verbal communication (prosody, paralanguage, gesture and so on). An Asian student doing a presentation before the class will be far more reserved in the use of body language and facial expression than we are accustomed to with Australian students. Intonation patterns will differ hugely, not to mention simply the volume at which the student is accustomed to speak.

Level of English-language competency

Generally, the better the student's (and the lecturer's) English is, the more there is a shift in focus from grammatical and lexical problems to sociolinguistic or pragmatic problems. However, the sense that the foreign student "isn't very good at English" almost always has an impact on the lecturer's perception of the student's success (or lack of success) at

studying. Hans Mol, the manager of the international Bachelor of Business degree course at the Holland International Business School, put it thus:

> Many lecturers are concerned about the quality of, for example, reports that are written - not because they don't believe that the standard of the students is up to scratch, but because the carrier language is considered not to be of sufficient quality, which thus has an impact on the quality of the product that they deliver. The English of the report isn't good enough and hence the report itself is seen as not good enough, which is not necessarily true. (Hans Mol, HIBS).

A sense of self: A second language and its effect on the speaker

Many people have experienced the feeling of disquiet and embarrassment when asked to communicate in a language they are not entirely familiar with. People are afraid of making mistakes, of appearing clumsy or ridiculous. The roots of our cognitive processes are to a certain extent determined by our native tongues, and to be required to function in a second language can have a profound effect on the speaker, whether lecturer or student.

Although the concept of an individual "self" is in itself a Western concept, it remains an interesting and viable concept when discussing second-language use. Sapir-Whorf's oft-quoted hypothesis states that the (native) language we use determines the way in which we view and categorise the world - including such deep-seated cognitive processes such as the way we deal with space and time. For example, the Navajo consider a tree (which to many Westerners is an object represented by a noun) as a *process*, and it is referred to by a verb. There is in fact no clear category of nouns in the Navajo language (Pinxten, 1994, p. 39), which does give the outsider a sense of how the Navajo might view the world and hints at their philosophy that all things in nature (man included) interact and influence each other. Naturally, however, a Navajo driving his or her truck along the road will avoid colliding with a large tree, just like any Westerner would (Verluyten, 2000). African languages and African thought in general have no concept of future tense, but rather a "long-ago" past ("*zamani"*), and a present tense or time, the "*sasa"* (Mbiti, 1969, p. 17). In traditional African cultures people tend to mirror all values and morals against the remote past where the essence of all existence can be found. Life now (in the "*sasa*" time) needs to be related to and linked with that remote "*zaman"* time, which transcends all time as such, not least because the ancestors have laid there the stories and myths necessary for life.

Obviously, the words and linguistic structures a culture needs to convey its thoughts and messages do tell us a little about the nature of that culture or country.

Do speakers "relinquish control" when using the second language?

People generally prefer to converse in their mother tongue as it gives a sense of security and strength, and a greater degree of control. A speaker is sometimes placed in a position of vulnerability as using the second tongue involves a certain amount of relinquishing of control. For a lecturer, as someone who is traditionally in a position of "power" in comparison to his students, it can be a difficult and unsettling position to be placed in a situation where the lecturer is obliged to use a second language while some of the students may be native speakers. This is not something that would happen readily here in Australia, for most of us speak English as a first language, but in such cases where English is not the first language, the lecturer is thrown back onto himself and must learn to utilise a "strength" which is separate from linguistic ability – his intelligence and knowledge and skills as a facilitator and teacher must stand unaided by the props of native-language competence, leaving behind the familiar tool of expert manipulation of a code. Rene, below, is a professor of Economics at the Holland University:

> **René**: I feel more vulnerable to native speaking students (British) than to non-native speaking students, although in the end it's my knowledge of economics and the way I explain this, that counts. (Questionnaire, q. 14).

The impact of speaking a second language on our international students would be quite similar, engendering feelings of vulnerability, of being inadequate, of perhaps not being able to express one's intelligence in ways one is accustomed to.

Much research illustrates that language and power are inextricably mixed. "All socio-communicative verbal interaction, at whatever level of formality or complexity, reflects the distribution of power among the participants" (Watts, 1991, p. 53). A person who is a good communicator has power at his disposal – and as communication is of such essential importance to the lecturer in his relationship with his students, the use of a second language in the multicultural classroom can lead to subtle shifts in the student's sense of the customary power of understanding that is tacitly accepted in the classroom.

Language choice is more than just a choice of medium, but contains aspects of content and manner too. In a series of studies that have to my knowledge not been repeated since in such an manner (unfortunately), Ervin-Tripp (1968, p. 203) studied the close relationship between language and identity. She demonstrated in her Thematic Apperception Tests (TAT) (Ervin, 1964) that the content of picture descriptions changed according to the language a person used (in these tests, English or French). When bilingual Japanese-English women were asked to do a sentence-completion test, the content of their responses changed dramatically according to the language used. Her most famous example is probably the one where a woman was asked to complete the stimulus "When my wishes conflict with my family…":

In Japanese:
"When my wishes conflict with my family …. *it is a time of great unhappiness*"

In English:
"When my wishes conflict with my family …. *I do what I want*"

Tactics for coping?

It would be interesting and valuable to learn as much as we can about the cultures and learning strategies of the students that come to Australia from overseas, but there are limits to how well-informed we can be. To my mind, however, it is not necessarily the *knowledge alone* of the cultural differences coupled with an awareness of individual character differences, gender differences or generational differences which make a good intercultural communicator, but rather applying the necessary skills to enable us to bridge the gaps (Schnitzer, 1995):

> However, we do not need to impart information on specific, and certainly not necessarily, on Inner Circle [MW: i.e. Non-English speaking] cultures, but rather we need to develop what Storti (1990) has termed "the art of crossing cultures'. We need to develop the ability to recognise and repair misunderstanding by incorporating problem-solving techniques from cross-cultural training - exposing learners to critical incidents, roleplays, and other materials involving people from varied backgrounds who use English as their common medium. We must make learners aware of the culture-based sources of perception and hence, of misunderstanding.

Learning styles, language (in)competency, logic structures, metalinguistic communication, second-language issues, control, evasiveness and bluntness are just a few of the topics that can be discussed when talking about the multicultural classroom. There are many more topics that we could pinpoint as being relevant. But where can we start? At what point can we say "This is how I start become a really good teacher of international students"?

Trust and confidence

What is really essential, to my mind, is a belief that its all worthwhile; that the effort one makes to teach under trying circumstances is appreciated, and makes a real difference to those who come here to learn. Generic intercultural skills may be a starting point – they sounds idealistic, but where better to start than with ideals?

- get to know the individual;
- understand others' behaviour from their perspective;
- manage stress and be able to cope with ambiguous situations as well as unpredictable demands;
- be sensitive to the cultural background of the others and adjust the suggestions one wants to make to the existing constraints and limitations; and
- express one's ideas in such a way that the people one is talking with will objectively and fully understand what one has in mind.

It is undoubtedly true that teaching in the multicultural classroom can be an unsettling experience as the familiar tools – communicative skill, teaching and learning strategies and control of a group – are suddenly not as effective as one is accustomed to. But in some cases there are unexpected benefits, too:

> **Bertus:** I'm aware that Asian students put me as lecturer in much higher hierarchy than the Western students tend to do. I wished that the Western students behaved like the Asian do.

Confidence in oneself as a teacher and placing trust in the potential ability and motivation of the students, irrespective of their background, leads to increasingly successful interaction. And, being able to interact successfully with international students is a rewarding and fulfilling experience; which in turn increases confidence and trust as we learn from our students.

Earlier this year, I was talking about communication skills for an international master's unit on management, and after class a Chinese student came to me and drew the Chinese character for "listening" in the board, and then quietly explained that it included equal parts signifying "ears", "eyes" and "heart":

In other words, it suggests that real listening is done not just with our ears, but in equal parts with our heart, and our eyes.

Conclusion

Teaching is not always easy at the best of times, and teaching in the multicultural classroom can have a real effect on the lecturer's levels of confidence as tried and tested tactics do not always have the intended effect. The sense of "other" cultures and being "international" itself is, though, a comparative concept: when I am in Holland I am an international lecturer and the Dutch students are native; when I am here in Australia I am native and any Dutch students I may have in my class are international, yet we are still the same individuals. The study conducted in Europe has shown that many of the issues experienced by "international" lecturers can indeed be valid as a learning tool here in Australia. Despite the practical strategies surrounding cultural awareness and understanding, flexibility and communicative competence, there is however, no real magic potion which we can administer to make teaching in the multicultural classroom instantaneously easy; there is no simple solution or quick fix. Rather, we must explore the issues as they arise and deal with them, and whenever successful interaction is experienced, trust and confidence spiral forward.

References

Böhm, Davis, Meares & Pearce (2002). *Global Student Mobility 2025 - Forecasts of the Global Demand for International Higher Education.* IDP Education Australia. Presented at the 16th Australian International Education Conference, Hobart, October 2002

Ervin-Tripp, S. (1968) 'An analysis of the interaction of topic, language and listener'. In J. Fishman (ed.) *Readings in the sociology of language*. The Hague: Mouton, 192-211. (Repr. from: *American Anthropologist* 66 (1964): 86-102).

Hall, E. T. (1959) *The Silent Language*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
Hampden-Turner, C., & Trompenaars, F. (2000). *Building Cross-Cultural Competence: How to create wealth from conflicting values*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons

Mbiti, J.S. (1969) *African religions and philosophy*. London.

Pinxten, Rik. (1994). *Culturen sterven langzaam. Over interculturele communicatie*. Antwerp; Hadewijch.

Schnitzer, E. (1995) 'English as an International language: Implications for interculturalists and language educators'. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 19/2:227-236.

Scollon R. & Scollon S.W. (1995). *Intercultural Communication – A discourse approach.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Storti, C. (1990) *The art of crossing cultures.* Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press

ten Dam, I. & Hatton, K. (2000) EIAE conference 2000. Session 9.05: *Differences between educational style(s) of guest institute and home country*. Netherlands: ITC.

Thomas, J. (1995) *Meaning in Interaction: an Introduction to Pragmatics*: London and New York: Longman.

Verluyten, P. (2000) *Intercultural Communication in Business and Organisations*. Leuven: Acco

Watts, R.J. (1991) *Power in family discourse.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Wierzbicka, A. (1991). *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.