

Working with Global English: The Experience of English Language Teachers in a University Language College

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Abstract

Through in-depth interviews and focus groups with English Language teachers employed at a university bridging college, this paper explores the challenges that teachers face in preparing international students for university life in Australia. Findings from this research suggest that the narrow business focused objectives of the English Language market undermine more holistic approaches to teaching English. A more holistic approach is required to respond to the social and cultural needs of students while they are studying in Australia. Nevertheless, this research suggests that regardless of the instrumental and reductionist neo liberal philosophy which informs these programs, meaningful intercultural dialogue, critical thinking and some holistic learning does take place.

Introduction

This paper documents and describes the experiences of English language teachers in an Australian university language college. The teachers in the college are involved in preparatory English language programs for international students who are seeking entry into university courses in a range of disciplines. The teachers are experienced English teachers whose role is to ensure that their non English speaking students meet the required standard for entry into their chosen course and also become accustomed to life in Australia. The preparatory programs that these teachers work in fulfil an important role in acting as a conduit to university studies for the students and maintaining a viable commercial profile for the colleges and the university in an increasingly competitive trans-national market in higher education. The paper explores some of the dilemmas and tensions concerning the teaching of English in the context of a highly competitive education market and the way in which teachers and their organizations respond to the pressures of the market, as a well as, the dynamic and changing nature of English within academic settings.

If there is one salient feature that differentiates English from other global languages, it is the way in which English has been subject to commodification



and characterized as a marketable product (Habermas, 1990). The English Language teaching business has been, and remains, one of the main growth industries in the past 50 years (Crystal, 2003, p.112). The growth of this industry has been partly fuelled by the movement of international students moving across the globe to gain overseas credentials in English speaking countries where the status and esteem of degrees from developed nations are seen to provide advantages in opportunities for careers, migration and further education. Many Asian international students travel to Australian universities to gain credentials and expertise and this has placed a new significance on English as the medium of instruction and as the principle language of the academy. Combined with the ascendancy of English in communications, technology and entertainment, the English language has assumed a hegemonic status that has provided Australia with a lucrative business opportunity within the Asia Pacific Region (Singh and Doherty, 2004, p.10).

There are added complexities for students and teachers because English has never been a pure and single language and there are a huge variety of Englishes across the globe (Singh, Kell and Pandian, 2002, p. 29). Australian English represents one of these hybrid Englishes and presents international students with challenges in comprehension and understanding of the colloquial and informal nature of Australian discourse (Kell and Vogl, 2005).

While this diversity of Englishes is a feature of English across the globe, many of the products and pedagogies of English programs in a commodified market context have a hegemonic quality by legitimating ideas about immutable universal standards that obscure ethnocentric bias (Singh and Doherty, 2004, p.16). The consumption of this hegemonic English language is increasingly being viewed as imperative to achieve upward social mobility in the international marketplace (Singh and Doherty, 2004, p.16). Crystal (2003, p.74) provides the example of how in 1999, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong of Singapore speaking at a National Rally day asked Singaporeans to cut down on their Singlish (a mixture of English, Chinese and Malay) and to use 'Standard English', to enable Singapore to maintain a competitive edge in the international arena.

In the Asia Pacific region, Australia has led a major shift towards the commercialisation of English Language which has resulted in ELT, once seen as a non-commercial vocation being placed within a very narrow business orientated framework. This transformation of English into a marketable commodity creates ethical dilemmas for English language teachers (Singh et al, 2002, p.7).

ESL teachers often experience a range of dilemmas and conflicting pressures. They find themselves increasingly working within a neo liberal context which both undermines their own working conditions and their ability to teach English



to international students in a broader and more situated context. Furthermore, they have to grapple with the tension associated, on the one hand, with providing students with the skills to survive mainstream university, yet on the other hand, a feeling of uneasiness about imposing on student's ethnocentric Western constructions of what it is to be an "ideal" learner.

According to Singh et al (2002, p.185), the IELTS industry is characterised by a 'just in time culture' where the demands of the global market produce a range of contradictions for teachers. Teachers face increased anxiety over proficiency, quality assurance, and the constant need for flexibility in responding to clients while coping with the increasing casualisation and de-professionalisation of their vocations.

The work of education and teachers is also being increasingly framed around the demands for measurable end products driven by national economic objectives. Teachers are also required to produce these outcomes in a context where many of the decisions impacting on their working lives are subject to the unstable and dynamic nature of the precarious markets. This connection to measurable outcomes has created a situation where work that does not lead to easily recognisable outcomes is seen as 'non productive' (Davies and Bransel, 2005, pp. 48-50). This means the need to fulfil the requirements of qualifying for entry into the academy and meeting the required language standard takes precedence over broader social and cultural language needs.

Studies, such as, Novera's (2004, p. 475) show that a crucial element in the achievement of success for international students is not only their academic adjustment but also their adjustment to the social and cultural environment. A more situated approach to teaching English is required for this adjustment but arguably neo liberal conceptions of time and value do not allow for this more holistic focus on English.

Singh and Doherty (2004, p.13) claim that many difficulties that Asian international students may experience in their adjustment to university life in Australia are often explained by "notions of culture shock". This, they argue, places the responsibility of adaptation with the students rather than with the institutions in which they study and there has been debate about the importance of internationalising the curriculum and the way international students are taught, there are questions in this study which explore the extent to which the role of teachers is to teach non-Western international students how to be like 'Western learners'. Singh and Doherty (2004, p.19) argue that this produces ethical dilemmas for teachers who are expected to sell Western conceptions of English, learning and study skills while respecting and valuing cultural diversity. However, many Asian students themselves are not likely to internalise notions of Western superiority uncritically, regardless of the market value of this knowledge.



The data below is part of a much larger trans-national study, "Global English and the Global University" which principally explored how English Language can be enhanced in the Asia Pacific in the context of the globalisation of universities. The usage and proficiency of English language was examined in two Universities in two countries in the Asia Pacific region, Australia and Malaysia. The project was funded by the Global Development Network of the World Bank. This study was part of the Australian component of this project, and involved interviews with English language teachers both individually and in a focus group settings.

Teachers in this study were involved in ten-week programs that can be broadly described as English for academic purposes that "front-end" university studies. These fee-paying programs required International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores of 5.0 to 5.5 for entry and were discipline specific with specialisations in the Arts and Social Sciences and Science and Technology. The programs are conducted on a ten-week cycle and the charges for these programs are between \$3,360 for a ten-week course and \$5,040 for a fifteen-week course. The College is a private subsidiary of a well-known Australian university and intakes include students from over 70 countries. For the purposes of this research the institution will be called Beachways College. The college offered services such as Home stays with Australian families and occasional visits and excursions to familiarise students with the Australian environment. The College has invested in developing its own learning resources and some of the materials are web based. Students are aiming to achieve an IELTS score of 6.5 for entry into the university.

Teachers Talk on International Students

The teachers said that their student groups at Beachways College had strong representation from Asia with a large proportion of Chinese students. The teaching staff talked about the challenges of working with international students and the changes that occurred over the time they had worked in English language teaching. Many teachers described the impact of diversification and the changing nature of the student body:

So for example five, six, seven years ago we had a lot of students that had Australian scholarships and we were actually getting the elite from those countries. But now we are getting a lot of people who have actually failed in their own system and so here we have got different needs, different reasons for coming and this is influencing how the students behave and perform.

The policy contexts of internationalisation associated with neo-liberal education market and the highly competitive environment of English language teaching were well recognised by the teachers. They recognised that Beachways University



might not attract the top-level students and they needed to respond creatively to the tensions between entry standards and the student capabilities:

The attention between educational objectives and values and commercial objectives and values there is ongoing tension continually. I think in an ideal world we would love to have our students enter at a higher level and stay with us a lot longer. But the reality is that there are competitors out there and it is financially impossible.

The tensions in the market were also manifested in the instrumental and functional perspective that students had about English.

I think it depends what they are really there for and students really aren't coming to learn English as such, they are coming to learn purely to get them to university and to go through a degree program. And whilst it would be wonderful to sort of teach them English in general terms, that is not their need.

The language needs of the students emerged as a result of the text-based nature of the learning conducted in their home countries. A college director identified the impact that this has on the program.

It's their listening and speaking and in particular their listening that is very low. I remember one student arrived who almost got one hundred percent on the placement test in the writing and the vocabulary and the reading, but he could speak hardly a word of English. So he had to go down to a very low level class because of this. So it has meant that we've had to sort of put in more activities in the listening and speaking areas into the program.

The staff confirmed the observations of students that the prior learning of English was conducted through formal reading based courses and that this left students with problems in dealing with aural and spoken English.

When I ask my students to give me some background as to how many years they have been learning English and how they have learnt English it is usually the same method, you know, I've learnt from a textbook or I've learnt English from a teacher who is not an English native speaker. So some of them have actually been learning English for anything up to twelve, fifteen years. But what they forget to talk about is for how many hours a week they have been learning English and their lack of practice in spoken English. It is mostly written work.

One teacher described how teachers needed to adjust their teaching to incorporate more situated language teaching that assisted the students' spoken English. This also involves approaching the teaching of English in a more informal manner.



The challenge is really getting or giving them the opportunity to speak English in a more relaxed atmosphere. They have their classes, you either teach them skills or context say in Geography but all of them, particularly when they are coming from the one culture, I think although they have academic listening and speaking as a subject, because we have so many students from one nationality in particular we are having a major problem getting them to practise speaking English, especially in a more relaxed atmosphere. So getting their pronunciation improved. So I think there needs to be more emphasis on this because they have to learn how to speak it and build up their confidence.

This need for more spoken English practice and exposure was also seen to be something that the mainstream international university students appeared to need. One area identified as being of particular difficulty for students of non-English background has been the formal tutorial presentation. A teacher spoke of the strategies adopted in responding to this need

When the students come to me from the University they can't do their presentations properly and the lecturers are complaining. I actually set them on a program where they come and talk with me for half an hour and we go through some of their vocabulary and so on and then I put them on to a particular program and then they come back. So it's drill, pronunciation practise and then personal conversation.

In the context where communication skills are minimal the teachers also spoke of the additional requirement to meet various pastoral and welfare needs that the students had in adjusting to the Australian way of life and the university study routine.

I think there is a double challenge as well for me in that I'm trying to reach educational outcomes but also their welfare. There is more in terms of nurturing and student's welfare which I never really had to worry about before.

Teachers' views of students were positive and they spoke of their students with respect and understanding. They saw students as hardworking dedicated and showing improvement in their proficiency as well as growing as individuals:

I'd just like to look at this the other way round. What often surprises me and impresses me with the students is despite all the pressures which you have talked about which are very real, how many of them survive and flourish and do well and make the most of the experience and take it back with them and it will be a turning point in their lives for many of them. It is difficult but when you are twenty years old you can cope with that kind of difficulty and it's good for you and it's a terrific experience.



Teachers spoke sympathetically of the efforts of their students and empathised with their situation in having to demonstrate proficiency in both academic English as well as colloquial English. The teachers spoke of students experiencing extreme fatigue:

They also get exhausted. There is a nice fine line between the pressures of getting through the course. They want that figure so they can get to Uni. They've got that goal and exhaustion from learning and being able to deal with all they have to learn and using the English language. At a Home stay when they come home, you know quite often they just can't speak anymore in English.

Teachers were impressed with the commitment of students and made favourable comparisons to Australian students who with the advantage of first language status, failed to display the commitment and success of their overseas counterparts:

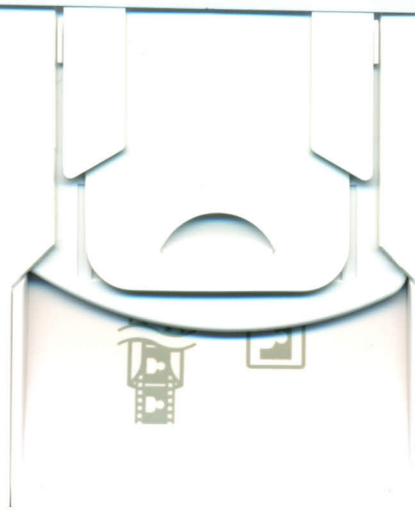
I am overwhelmingly impressed comparing them with Australian students at that level; many of whom I don't know because I haven't done research into Australian high school students at the moment. But I would doubt that very many of them could produce the sort of essays that our students are producing with English as a second language and they are struggling with both content and the actual language. I think basically a lot of them are doing very well.

Many teachers spoke of the difficulties that their graduates experienced in the mainstream university environment where they believed that university lecturers, while well versed in their disciplines, lacked the skills to assist students in their formal academic English.

I suspect and I have no evidence about this one way or the other is that the non-specialist universities, staff who are specialist in their own subjects rather than in English, really don't have any idea how little the students are understanding them while they are lecturing. I mean I don't know whether this is right or not but it is a gut feeling that I have and certainly they probably don't have much preparation to help them to teach international students.

These challenges were seen positively as part of the changing nature of the English

I guess something else that works is the power of positive thinking, always encouraging them and looking at the good, you know, the glass is half full not half empty and encouraging people to keep going and keep their dreams and their goals in sight no matter what the obstacles and saying that the obstacles and problems are natural and normal and hopefully give constructive criticism.



Teachers Talking About Teaching Global English

The teachers considered that the demands of the market and the need to qualify for entry had reduced student's interests in English beyond the requirements of academic English. There is confirmation of the vocationalisation of English but one teacher suggested that the very nature of English had changed significantly and that there was a new form of English:

We are teaching people essentially who want to be able to go back to Shanghai and Beijing and do better than they can now because they can use English. The kind of English that we are teaching is, the phrase that I heard last week is "this is starting to be called Off-Shore English", that is an English which is not the first language of anybody who is using it and which is therefore stripped of a lot of its idiomatic richness and peculiar vocabulary. The language of International Business if you like and the question then is to what extent is that we should be teaching or do we actually try to teach them some of the richness, the poetry and the beauty of this language and give them access to the culture that they are going to be living in for three or four years. Where are the limits of our professional responsibility in that respect.

Teachers in the language college do not parallel the employment practices of mainstream university, The English language school Beachway was a company owned by the university and had been structured to compete on equal terms with private language schools in the English Language Intensive Course of Studies (ELICOS). This gave the university company flexibility in its employment practices. Several teachers spoke of the way in which their work was considered by their university community and how this positioned their work as a commercial activity.

People often see the College as not being "real university" or they often get very suspicious of our motives or where our money is coming from or what function we actually are performing; the commercialisation of education as not a pure form of academia.

They also spoke of the impact of the employment conditions which were dependent on the ability of the university college to attract students and the dilemmas in keeping a teaching workforce in place.

At the moment there is not enough work for everybody. Most of us or those of us who have got casual or sessional have got a few hours... The supervisor tries to spread it across to try to keep everybody.

As participants in the casual employment market, teachers spoke of the demands that this places on the teachers' lives as having up sides and downsides that contrasted with other teachers in schools:



*The other side of that is that although we have insecure employment we also have the strange situation where we don't have regular holidays so we may finish the end of a course, bang the following week immediately you start a new course with a new group of students. So we've got a **fairly flexible**..... Whereas I've got friends who are school teachers and they are getting regular breaks. So that can be physically and psychologically challenging.*

The teaching duties as mentioned before demanded social opportunities for students and the calendar particularly around Christmas but have to be squeezed into an intensive and demanding fifteen week period.

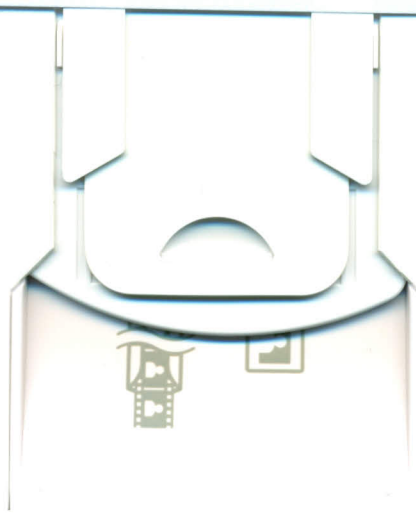
In the last cycle that I was working on it was a fifteen week cycle and it straddled Christmas, the two week Christmas break and my students desperately wanted to do things out there in the community. So they asked me would I organise something. So we had a day in Kiama at the weekend. They really want to do more things like that but the time restrictions don't allow them to do that. So at Christmas we had a bit of free time. They really do want to get out there and see things and experience things but there's no time.

Although they had experienced uncertainty in their employment conditions and intensification of their work lives teachers spoke of a sense of achievement at the end of courses and a sense of camaraderie that energised their work:

I feel terrific at the end of an ETS course ...when you have been through this experience with this group of people and you have all worked very hard together for two or three months and you do get something that is really quite special at the end. I mean it is really sad because we have forgotten most of their names. But there is a sense of "we have been through something together and wasn't it good".

The importance of the social aspects of their work was also highlighted when courses finished as a way of celebrating the achievements of students. However the teachers suggested that this role was very important and the opportunities for this to assist student achieve better outcomes with the spoken English but had been neglected

At the end of the course we have a token barbecue or we take them on an excursion but it is very, very limited. But in the General English course there are attempts to have quite a few excursions but again they are basically amongst themselves. There has been talk in the past of inviting other mainstream students here or setting up debates or doing social activities or maybe some work experience programs or volunteering out in the general community.



Teachers confessed that while they saw the value of the social interactions, the expectations that they would undertake these in an environment in which they experienced uncertainty over their own employment and in intensified courses were high. All the teachers saw the value of extra curricular activities. They experienced dilemmas in responding to this need as they were already overloaded. The teachers saw that the organization was seeking to remedy this.

Student welfare and student socialisation is one of the areas that the College is trying to work on at the moment. We don't know what the answers are but we just know that we have to do more to get them out there in the community.

The importance of someone to negotiate interactions with the Australian community was reinforced by the teachers experiences with students who had seen the benefits to students who had been able to establish social networks and felt that for those that experienced difficulties there was a need for this to be done by in a more systematic structured way that had been experienced. One teacher spoke of their experience of one successful student:

I was approached by one of my former students last year who had just got back from Christmas in Thailand and she said she had actually joined up with some University class. She had been studying for six months and now she said she had the confidence and she had just gone along and joined up at the tennis club and some other club and I thought that was fantastic. But we need someone. If universities could have someone like that or English colleges attached to Universities could have someone like that, even part-time would be good.

The teachers recognised the barriers to establishing communication between international students and Australian students but pointed to several successes that they had observed and experienced. One teacher recalled a case where a more confident African student had taken up the challenge to establish contact with the Australian students.

But then I saw one student who was from Africa and she had very good English as well and she went over and she started the communication with the Australian students. She broke the cycle of "us and them" just by asking a question about what they do on the weekend. And then they started to involve her and then she involved some of the Asian students. The Asians found it very difficult to engage in conversation.

Many teachers observed how the environment of the classroom featured a diverse range of political and social perspectives that characterised the Asia Pacific. The classroom provided a place where many of the potential sources of tension and division were often diffused by the goodwill that occurred in the classroom



I spoke to one of my students about that issue this week because half my class at the moment are Chinese and half are Thai and there's one from Taiwan. And I said to one of the Chinese "what is the relationship between you and the Taiwanese" and he said "it's fine, we're good friends we just don't discuss politics, it's a no, no, we don't discuss it at all".

In this way the language classroom of the 21st century appears to be a place intercultural negotiations of the diversity across the region are manifested in complex ways.

Conclusion

The nature of teachers' work and language teaching in the global university is characterised by a number of contradictions that are a direct consequence of the intensified market in English language teaching. The English language teaching industry features a competitive trans-national market in which university bridging programs are a major provider giving students access to university programs. The principle objective of students according to teachers is the achievement of entry requirements for English related to a selected study option. There is an instrumental quality associated with language teaching that is directly related to both the dynamics of the market and the objectives of the students to qualify for entry into the academy. These dynamics of the market limit the nature and scope of language to a more discipline based or vocational teaching of language directed to fulfilling the needs of the academy. This reduces the opportunities to develop a communicative approach that responds to some of the social and cultural aspects associated with life as a student in Australia. In the opinion of some teachers this also confined the opportunities for students to gain a broader understanding of the English language. Indeed teachers identified a contradiction that many of the students had learned English through text based means and that further academic English did not directly respond to the need for the students to develop the spoken and listening skills that they saw as essential for living in Australia as a student.

The teachers identified the importance of weighing up the competing demands of wanting students to achieve particular educational goals but also the need for students to have some exposure to the community. While aural and oral language needs could be simulated in the language labs, they lacked authenticity and the usage being voluntary was seen as patchy. They recognised the place for recreational and community based English but for an already overcrowded program structure, such programs added onto existing programs in a cost sensitive and highly competitive industry are often difficult to sustain. However the need for authentic local experiences and exposure to Australian English was seen as an important feature in boosting confidence in dealing with the cultural challenges



for students living in Australia. Excursions and other recreational activities were seen as key features in an ideal program to assist student negotiate the intercultural aspects of Australian life.

The need for such programs was seen as particularly important in responding to the diversity of students that typified the contemporary student body. Not only was there an increasing diversity of countries such as China, Thailand, Indonesia, Korean, Japan and Taiwan where most of the population are not exposed to English but the diversity of age ranges was an additional challenge. Students as young as 15 years were now enrolled in programs and this placed a greater importance on the support services and welfare services in supporting teachers. Many teachers, while they recognised the need for such extracurricular support and counselling within the work of the College, found it difficult to meet this demand themselves in an already intensified work schedule.

Teachers spoke of the contradictions of uncertainty and intensity in their work as the cycles of work determined by the markets were hard to predict. Teachers, who were on short term contracts, found themselves often moving from course to course with short timelines for preparation and familiarisation. They spoke of the intense engagement during the ten-week period in some courses and sense of camaraderie and achievement that both teachers and students had at a successful completion. The troughs and down time experienced by many teachers was clearly a problem in establishing a career in the area but in general the continued demand for the programs ensured a regular source of work and the College co-ordinators were seen to be sympathetic to the teachers and attempted to spread work around and maintain a network of regulars to ensure that high demand periods were adequately staffed. Nevertheless the patterns of employment and the nature of the market suggest that such organizations are trapped in a "just in time mode" of operations with the difficulties associated with capacity building being a problem. The inability to give guarantees of regular work as well as the presence of predatory competitors suggest stable staffing is a priority for such organizations but a difficult outcome to achieve.

The teachers spoke highly of the commitment and abilities of their students and recognised the difficulties that learning language in the intensified mode produced. Fatigue and frustration were seen as some of the outcomes of the programs for students. Yet the teachers recognised that students demonstrated willingness and a determination to do the hard work that was necessary to achieve success. They also challenged perception that students were unwilling to tackle oral work and to think critically and cited instances where students had undertaken successful presentations and group work. Teachers suggested that one of the tasks they saw as critical was to develop a shift from dependence on the teacher to an independent mode of learning. This transition was seen as a vital part of "enculturating" Asian



students into an Australian environment where the self-directed learning is an essential part of the student experience. The use of critical literacy and many of the discussion sessions were seen as foundations for this transition.

Even though teachers expressed confidence in many of their students' development and satisfaction that the programs provided the basis for success in the mainstream, university teachers also expressed less certainty about the capacities of lecturers to respond to the language needs of students. They recognised that discipline specialists could not be expected to be language experts and in many ways the teachers compensated for this through such strategies as not speaking slowly to ensure students were attuned to the type of delivery that students would experience in the academy. Some level of overlap between the College and the university was suggested but the mechanics of formalising this seemed to be a difficulty that needed further work.

The intensified and programmed nature of the intensive language programs suggests a one-way situation where Asian students unfamiliar with English are passive and anonymous learners unable to establish a dialogue with Australians. On the contrary, the impression from teachers and students, suggests that the language programs are occupying a role as an excellent forum in which intercultural, social and political discourses on Asia and Australia can be mediated. These programs provide a forum for exploration on the nature and character of Australia and its relationships to the Asia Pacific for potential students. While the goals of such programs have an instrumental and reductionist quality there is also an aspect to these programs that sees a meaningful intercultural dialogue established when teaching features a communicative focus, a commitment to self directed learning and curriculum that features a critical and analytical focus.

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