The use of practical teaching strategies for teaching international students: a case study[1]

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Abstract:

This paper reports on research undertaken in a university department to determine if academic staff used a range of theory-based practical teaching strategies that are promoted to assist international students adjust to Australian academe and support their learning. The department has an enrolment of 50 per cent international students and is located at a medium-size Australian university that is in the planning phase of internationalising its teaching and learning activities. A 'mixed methods' research approach used a questionnaire and interviews to collect data from the academic staff. The results indicate that whilst a range of teaching strategies that have the capacity to benefit international students were used, the possibility exists that some staff are approaching this from a student-centred learning model that does not necessarily exhibit a well-developed cultural dimension.

Key Words:

Internationalisation, Teaching International Students, Teaching Strategies, 'Mixed Methods' Research

Introduction:

Coaldrake & Stedman (1998) suggested that Australian universities have had a poor track record for supporting student-centred approaches to teaching and learning. They commented "until very recent years there has been little interest in students: their presence was a given and there was little substantive attention given to the quality of university teaching" (p. 144). Perhaps symptomatic of this was Ryan & Hellmundt's (2003) observation that currently there is still "a general lack of awareness amongst university lecturers of teaching and learning issues in relation to international students" (p. 1). Whilst this may be due to a variety of factors, it cannot be solely attributed to a complete absence of theory that exists to inform academic staff in terms of their teaching practice. Some theory does exist, particularly in relation to practical strategies for teaching international students, and it can be tested against what is happening in practice. Accordingly, this paper investigates the research question, "To what extent do staff in a teaching department with a large international student enrolment use practical teaching strategies that are promoted as being particularly beneficial for international students?" The research incorporates a degree of parsimony in the sense that it is a snapshot of one aspect of a complex area. Given the relative absence of research into the experiences of academic staff with international students, however, this is an acceptable point at which to begin.

Review of the literature:

The fact of descriptive relativism means that most people will face a range of challenges when moving between cultures. International students who come to Australia to study not only have to adjust to different environmental, social and cultural situations, but they also have the additional task of responding to a wide range of characteristics and expectations of Australian academe. For many, it is an educational environment

[1] The paper is based on a section of a larger project that tested Teekens's (n.d.) model of the Profile of the Ideal Teacher for the International Classroom. As well as investigating the experiences of academic staff in a deeper and broader manner than is presented in this paper, the larger project also incorporated the views of senior staff outside the teaching department who could comment on the institution's internationalisation history, processes, policies and strategies. The views and experiences of international students in each department were also sought to provide a greater appreciation of the internationalisation of the teaching and learning environment.

that is quite different from what they have previously experienced (Ballard & Clanchy 1991, pp. 12-15). This is particularly so for many international students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) and cultures that are different from those which can be described as 'western' with Anglo roots.

This research is particularly interested in determining whether academic staff utilise practical classroom strategies that facilitate the adjustment of international students to the Australian academic environment and support their learning needs. Bretag, Horrocks & Smith (2002) have identified a range of such strategies and examples of these are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. **Examples of practical teaching strategies for teaching international students**

Description of teaching strategy
Provide opportunities for international students to work with Australian students;
Inculcate students into Australian academic culture;
Establish names (including pronunciation) early in the semester;
Provide opportunities for students to use their English writing skills for non-assessment tasks;
Elicit responses, rather than just wait for them to be volunteered;
Provide explicit expectations about assessment;
Provide clear instructions for oral presentations;
Provide opportunities for success. For example, allow students time to discuss issues in pairs or small groups before speaking to the whole group;
Use a staged assessment schedule to enable students to build skills;
Encourage students to take advantage of support services offered on campus;
Provide 'model' answers that are easily accessible to all students;
Provide opportunities for students to speak as an expert (for example, about their own culture or personal experiences).

Whilst Bretag et al (2002) focussed on the use of such strategies to support NESB international students, it is clear that most of them would also benefit international students whose first language is English. In fact, they would also be appropriate for Australian students, regardless of whether English is their first language or if they come from a non-English speaking background. For example, providing students with model answers to sample academic questions so they can understand what is expected from them is a positive thing. So, too, is eliciting answers from students in class, and providing them with clear, written instructions for oral presentations.

The universal nature of many of the strategies outlined in Table 1 reflects Metzger's (1992) advice to teachers that "many [strategies] you will already be using in your teaching practice. The acquisition of additional skills will improve the quality of your teaching for all students, not just international students" (p. 215). This point was also made by Ryan & Hellmundt (2003) who suggested "such strategies will be of benefit not only to international students but also all learners in a diverse learning environment" (p. 1). Essentially, this describes a student-centred approach to teaching where, whilst the learner is ultimately responsible for their own learning, teachers can assist students from a diversity of backgrounds to make the connections necessary to bring about meaningful learning outcomes (Fraser 1996).

Whilst this represents a contemporary approach to teaching and learning, it has two implications. Firstly, if the research were to demonstrate that the staff did not use such teaching strategies, then it is likely that *all* students in the class would be disadvantaged; not just NESB international students. Conversely, if staff were to agree that they used such teaching strategies, this by itself would not necessarily demonstrate that they knew *why* they benefit international students in particular. It could conceivably be the case that the staff might not know much about international student learning needs at all, despite using strategies like those listed in Table 1. Although some observers may see this latter scenario as a moot point (because the strategies are being used anyway), the subtle distinction is vitally important in terms of demonstrating a connection between teaching practice and its theoretical underpinnings. This position is supported by Teekens (n.d.) who suggested that 'attitude' and 'knowledge' is equally important as 'teaching skill' for effective teaching in the 'international classroom' (pp. 22-39).

Methods:

The research site
The research site was an Allied Health department at a medium-size Australian university that taught undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs. It was anticipated that a department in which international students made up half of the 100 students in total would be a good place to find examples of practical teaching strategies that benefit international students. Also, given that the academic programs in the department had a coursework focus, it was supposed that the staff might be proficient at teaching. Further, during the initial informal discussions with the Head of the department, it was suggested that other departments in the faculty regarded it as a leader in the field of working with international students. Although these three criteria did not guarantee that academic staff utilised a range of teaching strategies for international students, they were sufficient to proceed with the investigation.

The use of 'mixed methods'
A 'mixed methods' approach used a questionnaire and interviews to collect the data. The questionnaire fielded a 12-item scale, based on the sorts of teaching strategies identified by Bretag et al (2002), to gauge whether or not staff used them. At interview, staff were asked to list a number of teaching strategies they used to address the learning needs of international students. The use of a questionnaire and interviews not only provided more scope in terms of increasing the range and types of data that were collected, but it also represented a triangulation technique for data collection which increased the validity of the research. Both instruments were pre-tested and pilot tested.

Regarding the questionnaire, the wording of each of the 12 statements in the 'Use of Strategies for Teaching International Students' scale sought varying levels of agreement or disagreement from the academic staff about whether or not they used specific teaching strategies (see Table 3 in Appendix A for the questionnaire format and items). The research construct underpinning the questionnaire scale (in fact this whole piece of research) is, therefore, the 'Use of Strategies for Teaching International Students'. Although the responses were made to specific strategies, the questionnaire was not intended to provide data for item analysis. The subtle advantage leveraged by considering the (one-dimensional) items as a summated scale was that it would enable a statement to be made about staff in terms of their engagement in a certain behaviour; in this case, the use of teaching practices that support international students.

The interview question asked staff to list a number of strategies they used for teaching international students. The interview format had three characteristics. First, the question was open-ended. Second, staff were not directed how to answer. They could have listed specific strategies or they could have chosen to begin more broadly by reflecting, for example, on a philosophy of teaching for student-centred learning and what this meant for teaching international students, followed by some specific teaching strategies. Third, they were not prompted in any way to list any more strategies than they themselves offered. The rationale behind these three decisions was that whilst the questionnaire presented staff with a great deal of information from which they selected their responses, the unguided interview question was designed to allow staff to identify the things that were important to them when teaching international students. As such, the interview can be said to have worked with the questionnaire in both contrasting and complimentary senses.

Results:

Six staff completed the questionnaire in October 2003. See Table 4 in Appendix B for participant details. Regarding the sample size of six academic staff, although the number of participants was small, there were only seven staff in the department who were eligible to participate. As such, the research was carried out on a *population* rather than a sample. That is, the data that was gathered is highly representative of the *majority* in the department rather than the views and experiences of a small sample from a larger population.

Questionnaire results
Figure 1 outlines the questionnaire results. To preserve the anonymity of the respondents and the confidentiality of their responses, pseudonyms are used in place of their real names. The reliability of the scale was established with Cronbach's alpha. A result of 0.85 meant that the scale had a very good level of internal consistency (DeVellis 1991, p. 85). Each individual's score is the sum of their responses to the 12 questionnaire items, where Strongly Disagree attracted the lowest value (1) and Strongly Agree attracted the highest value (4). This followed the well established convention for scoring a Likert or summated rating

scale (Spector 1992, p. 22). The minimum score, therefore, would be 12 and this would reflect an overall response of Strongly Disagree. Clearly, scores between 12 and 24 would indicate that these teaching strategies were not a feature of teaching practice. Alternatively, scores from 36 to 48 would indicate that the teaching strategies were used. Scores that were closer to 30 would point to an approximately equal level of use and non-use of the various strategies listed in the questionnaire. The actual scores show that four of the six staff were either on or above the point that indicates agreement with use of the particular teaching strategies. Dahlia and Jenny (the youngest staff member with less than one year of teaching experience in higher education) had summated scores of 34 and 31 respectively. These scores can be described as a 'mixed response' and indicates an almost equal level of agreement and disagreement with the questionnaire items.

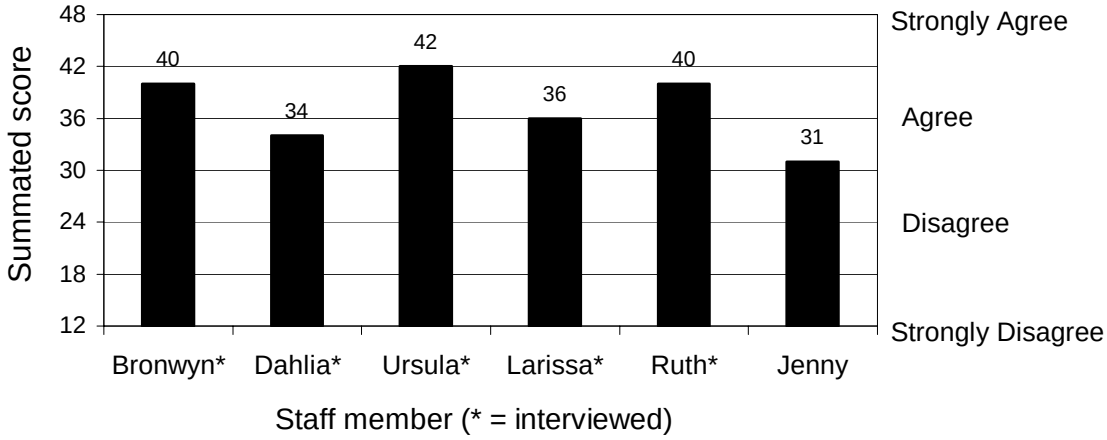

Figure 1. **Summated scores for the 'use of strategies for teaching international students' scale.**

Interview results

Five of the six questionnaire respondents volunteered to be interviewed. The interviews were carried out through November and December in 2003, and January 2004. Each interview was recorded on audiotape and verbatim transcripts were produced. These were returned to the respective interviewees for checking and their permission was subsequently sought to release the information for use in the research. In total, the interview data recorded the use of 13 individual teaching strategies for international students. They are listed in Table 2, along with the names of the staff members that identified the particular strategies.

Table 2. **Interviews with academic staff: Summary of practical strategies for teaching international students**

Specific strategy	Staff member who named the strategy
Speak clearly	Bronwyn, Larissa
Explain idiom	Bronwyn
Get to know students' names	Ruth
Pronounce students' names correctly	Ruth
Use email for communication	Bronwyn
Promote learning resources	Bronwyn
Discuss case studies before seeing patients	Larissa
Spend more time with international students	Larissa, Ursula
Get international students and Australian students to work together	Ruth
Use of small groups to encourage participation	Ursula
Encourage participation by letting international students be the experts about their home country and culture	Ruth, Ursula
Early assessment with feedback	Ursula
Support with assessment. For example, explaining what it takes to succeed in essays and assignments.	Ursula

Note: See Table 5 in Appendix C for transcript excerpts.

Ursula listed five strategies, Bronwyn and Ruth listed four each, and Larissa listed three. There were only three instances where more than one staff member offered the same particular teaching strategy. This suggests that perhaps there is no coordinated approach across the department in terms of staff development in this area. Bronwyn and Ruth, despite between them having offered over half the number of total teaching strategies, both indicated that this was not an area they were really familiar with. Bronwyn said "I'm not brilliant at sort of coming up with teaching strategies … in terms of international students." Ruth commented "well, I don't know if I've specifically actually thought of a list of strategies to use."

Dahlia, who reflected that "my teaching is a bit more on a one-to-one basis than in a group", listed none. Her response to the interview question was "I guess to be honest I would say I probably don't apply them specifically. I'm happy to provide support when requested, but I actually don't.. in the areas I teach.. I personally don't employ specific strategies beyond what is generally used in the department." Of interest, Dahlia also had the second lowest summated questionnaire score.

Discussion:

An initial inspection of the questionnaire and interview results relating to staff use of teaching strategies to assist and support international students shows a favourable outcome. Four of the six staff had summated questionnaire responses of "Agree" or stronger and although the remaining two staff had mixed responses, their scores were closer to "Agree" than "Disagree". In addition, 13 separate strategies were offered altogether at interview. Whilst these are positive findings in relation to the research construct of 'Use of Strategies for Teaching International Students', it really only reveals to us this very thing. That is, overall, the sorts of strategies identified by Bretag et al (2002) were used by staff in the department.

Within the parameters of this research design what is perhaps equally as instructive is considering the questionnaire and interview results in relation to the participants' details and some particular comments made at interview by Bronwyn, Ruth and Dahlia. The interview comments from Bronwyn that "I'm not brilliant at sort of coming up with teaching strategies … in terms of international students." and Ruth who said "well, I don't know if I've specifically actually thought of a list of strategies to use" are noteworthy. They express a lack of familiarity and confidence with teaching strategies specifically for international students. Yet, not only were the summated questionnaire scores for both staff above "Agree", but they also mentioned eight out of the 13 teaching strategies offered at interview.

In part, an explanation of this paradox could be that whilst their teaching practice may support student-centred learning, it may not have a strong cultural dimension. This could have something to do with their relative inexperience in the tertiary teaching and university work environments. Both had been teaching at university for between two and five years and neither had attended any professional development activities for teaching culturally diverse learners (including activities with a focus on cross-cultural communication skills) in the last three years. In the same time period, neither Bronwyn nor Ruth had attended conferences with content about teaching culturally diverse learners or cross-cultural communication. Coincidentally, these same work characteristics apply to Dahlia, whose gave a mixed response to the questionnaire items and did not identify any particular strategies for teaching international students at interview, preferring instead to couch it in terms of responding to student needs on a case-by-case basis. Jenny, the youngest member of staff, was also new to teaching at university. It was her first year and she had not participated in any professional development activities or conferences that were concerned with teaching international students.

Another way of looking at this is to consider Ursula's case in relation to the use of strategies for teaching international students. Ursula was the only staff member with at least ten years of teaching experience in higher education. She was one of two people who had education qualifications in addition to her Allied Health qualifications. She was the only person to have worked overseas, having undertaken at least 10 short-term, work-related missions to Asia or the Sub-Continent. Ursula was one of two staff members who had participated in professional development activities for teaching culturally diverse learners (including activities with a focus on cross-cultural communication skills) in the past three years. Compared with the other staff members, it is clear that Ursula is quite experienced in teaching at the tertiary level and working in an academic capacity in the university environment. Still, whilst Ursula's personal details are different from other staff in the department, it is clear that in terms of the research construct of 'Use of Strategies for Teaching International Students', all we can say for certain is that she had the highest summated score in the questionnaire scale and she also offered the most teaching strategies at interview. This represents a

quantitative difference between Ursula and the other staff members. Why this difference is actually so and what it implies cannot be ascertained in the context of this paper.

Conclusion:

One of the most pertinent conclusions that can be drawn from this research is that relying solely on reports from staff about their use of teaching strategies that are promoted to assist international students, can only indicate that the teaching and learning environment has the *capacity* or *potential* to support that particular cohort of students. On this basis, it has been shown that, overall, the Allied Health department under consideration can be said to demonstrate this potential. The candid interview comments by Bronwyn, Ruth and Dahlia, however, point to the possibility that some staff in the department have yet to develop a cultural dimension to their teaching. This speculation is heightened by an assessment of the participant details, particularly in relation to length of teaching experience and lack of professional development in areas relating to teaching international students.

The next conclusion arises from the first and is a recognition that more research is needed to understand and explain staff approaches to teaching international students. Whilst the paper is a contribution to the literature concerning the teaching of international students, its scope has necessarily been delimited to teaching practices as reported by a small sample of six academic staff in one department at one university. It did not attempt to balance their views with the experiences of other stakeholders. It did not expand on matters such as where or how the lecturers learned their internationalised teaching strategies, their experiences with international students, or any departmental or university-wide initiatives that provide teaching and learning support for academic staff (or international students). Investigation into such areas should produce more meaningful outcomes.

A further conclusion is that the use of mixed research methods is a powerful way to approach educational research. Without the use of both the questionnaire and interviews to investigate the research construct, the outcomes associated with this paper would have been much more restricted.

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Appendix A

Table 3. **Questionnaire format and items for the 'use of strategies for teaching international students' scale**

For each statement below, tick (✓) the column to the right which best indicates your experience	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You provide past or sample exam papers to your students to assist them to prepare for exams.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You employ specific strategies for Australian & international students to work together.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You provide clear, written instructions for students who have to give oral presentations.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You provide students with model answers to sample academic questions so they can understand what you expect from them.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You generally elicit responses from your international students, rather than wait for them to volunteer answers to questions.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You provide all your students with opportunities for success. For example, allowing them time to discuss issues in pairs or small groups before they speak to the whole group.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You encourage your international students to use academic & pastoral care support services offered on campus.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You rarely provide lecture notes (hard copy or online) to your students *[negative presentation recoded to positive correlate for data analysis]*.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You do not see it as your role to help international students understand academic / technical / professional vocabulary that is used in your teaching *[negative presentation recoded to positive correlate for data analysis]*.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You quickly establish the names of your students.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You make efforts to pronounce the names of your students correctly.	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
You use a 'staged' assessment schedule in your teaching (that is, building marks throughout a semester rather than relying on, for example, one assignment & one exam).	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree

Note: The 12 items were randomly dispersed throughout the 56-item questionnaire used in the larger study.

Appendix B

Table 4. **Participant details**

Attribute / Pseudonym	Bronwyn*	Dahlia *	Larissa *	Ruth *	Ursula *	Jenny
Nationality	Australian	Australian	Australian	Australian	Australian	Australian
Languages spoken	English	English	English	English	English	English
Age group	≥ 46yrs	≥ 46yrs	≥ 46yrs	≥ 46yrs	≥ 46yrs	26-35yrs
Type of employment	Contract, full-time	Contract, full-time	Contract, full-time	Contract, full-time	Tenure, full- time	Contract, part-time
Education qualifications	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Years teaching at university (Full Time Equivalent)	2-5yrs	2-5yrs	≤ 1yr	2-5yrs	10-19yrs	≤ 1yr
Percentage of international students in class	≥ 40%	10-19%	≥ 40%	≥ 40%	≥ 40%	10-19%
Largest international student group in class	Singapore	Singapore	Singapore	Singapore	Singapore	Hong Kong
2nd largest international group in class	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Hong Kong	Malaysia	Hong Kong	Singapore
Professional Development activities for teaching culturally diverse learners (including cross-cultural communication skills)	None in last 3yrs	None in last 3yrs	Attended 3 in last 3yrs	None in last 3yrs	Attended 2 in last 3yrs	None in last 3yrs
Conferences with content about teaching culturally diverse learners and/or cross-cultural communication	None in last 3yrs	None in last 3yrs	None in last 3yrs	None in last 3yrs	None in last 3yrs	None in last 3yrs
Short-term (1 month or less) overseas work-related experiences in Asia or the Sub-Continent	0	0	0	0	≥ 10	0

Note: * = interviewed

Appendix C

Table 5. **Excerpts from interviews with academic staff: Practical strategies for teaching international students**

Name of strategy and supporting interview data
Speak clearly: Bronwyn said she concentrated on "just trying to speak clearly." Larissa, too, said that she helped international students by "speaking slowly.. clearly."
Explain idiom: Bronwyn addressed the use of colloquialisms in her teaching. She said "if I use a word… that perhaps they wouldn't know ... if it's a bit of an idiom or a bit of slang, then [I] deliberately [use] a few other words that might tell them what it is."
Get to know students' names: For Ruth, learning the names of her international students was important. She stated, "One of the things I personally work really hard on now is getting to know their names cos I just find that, to me, that makes such a difference."
Pronounce students' names correctly: Ruth said "I feel so awkward if I can't pronounce their names properly … you know, it's really embarrassing."
Use email for communication: Bronwyn encouraged her international students to be in contact with her by email. She believed that "allowing them to email you allows them to think about their questions a bit more clearly."
Promote learning resources: Bronwyn said it was important to check if international students were "on the same wavelength and that they understand the resources that they can use". The example she gave was making sure that students were aware of important references that were on a reference list and where they would access them.
Discuss case studies before seeing patients: Larissa used case studies to give international students an opportunity to simulate student-patient interactions. She said, "we'll look at the notes, we'll talk about things and we'll discuss potentially what could be done (with) that particular patient … what actions and potential scenarios. So 'what if' scenarios … and we'd spend, you know, an hour or more on that discussion."
Spend more time with international students: Larissa helped international students by "spending a bit more time [with them than] perhaps one would with Australian students as far as … the local knowledge [goes]." Ursula gave extra time to international students in two ways. One was helping them "one-to-one if necessary if I see them struggling." The second way was to devote time to explaining assessment tasks. She said "Some assessment tasks … are particularly problematic and so I try to make myself available for a couple of hours in the classroom to actually take questions and talk about the assignment and clarify things and help try to conceptualise…"
Get international students and Australian students to work together: Ruth encouraged her students to "have a chat in pairs or groups of three or whatever, and make sure you've got a mix of Australian and international students…"
Use of small groups to encourage participation: Ursula invited international students to participate "especially if we're in small group stuff. I don't try and put them on the spot too much in the big classes."
Let international students be the experts: Students were encouraged to participate by letting them be the 'expert' about what goes on in their home country. Ruth said, "if it's relevant … [I] invite them to share information about ... their own culture." Ursula suggested that she would often "try to pick things to ask them that I think that they'll know … things that relate back to their home country … I know that they're pretty likely to have something to contribute."
Early assessment with feedback: Ursula made the comment that students in the department had assessment tasks soon after starting their studies and received feedback on their performance.
Support with assessment: In terms of explaining what it takes to succeed in essays and assignments, Ursula said "I often will do things like give out a sheet of paper that says 'essays that get a distinction or a high distinction have got these characteristics. Or students that have done well in this topic last year did this, this, this, and this'."