Speak Up: a program to help international students find their academic 'voi ces' in Australian university tutorials.

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Abstract:

A major challenge for international students in adjusting to the learning environment of Australian and New Zealand universities is learning to con tribute to tutorial discussio ns and in gaining the necessary self -confidence to make effective oral presentatio ns. This can be difficult for native speakers of English who are making the transition between high school and university, but it is more difficu lt for ESL students from cultures where passive learning is often the norm and their own opinions are not valued in the classroom. Thus, they are reluctant to challenge the authority of their texts, or their lecturers and tutors. Their task is made more ex acting by their unfamiliarity with the Australian (or New Zealand) accent, idioms, and discourse patterns. Frequently, the international students' own accent and discourse patterns hinder their ability to communicate effectively, leading to a further decli ne in their self -confidence. The Academic Skills Program (ASP), at the University of Canberra, runs a weekly program for international students to help them build confidence, become active learners, make effective presentations, and to find their academic 'voices'. This paper surveys the literature on international student participation in tutorials, outlines the activities of the 'Speak Up' program, and suggests some practical learning and teaching strategies to help foster the self -confidence and tutorial skills of international students.

Key Words: international students, tutorials, oral presentations, voice, teaching strategies, ESL

Introduction

The building of independence and confidence is essential for international Second Language (L2) [1] students entering a new language and academic culture, particularly within the challenging discourse that they may face in Australian tutorials. L2 international students are often reluctant to challenge the authority of their lecturers and tutors, or even the dubiou s authority of their Australian peers. Thus, these students can benefit from academic preparation courses and practice sessions which can help to make them more aware of the Australian accent, idioms, and discourse patterns, as well as what is required of them in tutorials, and help to build their self-confidence. However, as Littlewood (1996) reminds us, teachers of English academic discourse in intercultural contexts must be careful that they do not suppress the individual expression and creativity of international students when introduci ng students from other cultures to the linear nature and conventions of English rhetorical patterns. He suggests that the peer feedback group can be an effective tool to help develop the English 'voice' of L2 students in a non-threatening and supportive environment where t hey can become more confident in their ability to function in the new culture. Similarly, Cadman (1997) urges teachers to provide courses which capitalise on L2 students' talents and knowledge, and which e ncourage the transfer into English of the knowledge and confidence that they display in their own language.

In order to foster the development of L2 students' international English 'voices' without suppressing their individual expression and creativity, u niversities need to provide L2 students with supportive learning contexts, in which their developing English -language identities can feel comfortable. One of these contexts is the Speak Up group at the University of Canberra where, with the scaffolding gui dance of an academic skills lecturer, and the mutual support of their own peer group, international students can develop their English 'voices' in a non -

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[1] L2 students/L2 international students will be used throughout this paper to indicate international students from a Non - English Speaking Back ground.

threatening and supportive environment, within which they can gain the necessary self -confide nce to actively participate in tutorial discussions and to make effective oral presentations in the new culture.

Tutorials – the nature of the problem

The tutorial, as an oral teaching and learning platform, has become an integral part of most university studies i n Australia and New Zealand. Academics and employers have come to expect (or at least to hope) that our graduates would have acquired a degree of competency in interpersonal oral (English) communication skills, even if they had not always mastered the theo ries and frameworks of their disciplines. Tutorials have been pedagogically justified for helping to facilitate the communication and discussion between students, which is said to promote 'real' learning "because it enhances the acquisition and development of knowledge, develops analytical and critical thinking skills, verbalises understanding and clarifies misinterpretation"(Rabow et al., in Lee 2001, p.255). Tutorials provide opportunities to practise skills students need for their particular subject or career. Students can also learn group work skills, which are important in professio nal life. They can ask questions, clarify ideas and find out more about the subject. Most importantly, the tutorial audience gives students the opportunity to develop confide nce speaking in front of others and discussing new ideas. As Lovejoy (2001) points out, "the very fact of interaction may motivate students to think and articulate thoughts not possible in solitary learning activity."

Despite all these potential advantag es of tutorials, to be an effective form of learning they require the active participation of students who clearly understand what is expected of them and the guidance of an experienced tutor. Unfortunately, in many tutorials, students are unsure of their roles and are reluctant to participate and tutors, particularly in large first -year subjects, are frequently inexperienced postgraduate students. Tutor inexperience and the trend towards large tutorial groups of 20 -30 students has tended to exacerbate the problem by not giving equal opportunity to all students to participate in discussion.

This is contrary to the egalitarian nature of tutorials in the Australian and New Zealand context, where (at least in theory) the opinions of all participants (includin g the tutor) are deemed to be equal, regardless of experience, nationality, culture, religion, etc. In the Australian context there is a high degree of informality , where tutors "ask to be addressed by their first names, invite interruptions, and in genera l encourage free participation through much of a class" (Jones, 1999, p250). Students are often actively encouraged to employ colloquial language, instead in formal academic discourse, to challenge to opinions of the tutors and their peers. This makes it easier for native speakers of English to participate in discussion, but harder for L2 students to understand and to participate in the discussion.

The participation rate of L2 international students varies depending on a range of factors, such as their personality, preparedness for the tutorial topic, previous study, thinking and learning styles, and level of fluency in the particular 'English' spoken in the classroom. Extrovert L2 students with high levels of self -confidence and greater motivation to perfo rm will find ways of participating, regardless of their English competency. Conversely, more introverted students may be unable to challenge the strident assertiveness of some Australian and New Zealand students and thus withdraw from participation. Volet & Kee (1993) have found, for example, that Singapore Chinese students reported the behaviours of Australian students to be quite inappropriate. These behaviours included "interrupting someone who is talking to make a point" or asking the 'simplest question s that you would just keep quiet and try to find out from your friends later" (cited in Volet, 1999, p.635). Cotton (2001, p7) who surveyed international postgraduate students expectations of tutorials and seminars, recorded similar comments. "It is impoli te to interrupt when someone is speaking. In group discussions, it is polite to wait until asked before speaking."

Even if L2 students had prepared well for their tutorial topic and had experienced tutorials in previous study, they are often unprepared f or the informal, conversational tutorials common in Australian universities. The tutorial experience of international students from Hong Kong, for example, is more formal and structured, where students either take turns to speak, remain silent while their tutors do most of the talking, or are assigned turns.

Nevertheless, these same students understand the importance of tutorial discussion and th ey commend this learning method (Lee 1999, pp.259 -61). These findings reinforce Volet's belief that the low parti cipation of L2 students in Australian tutorial discussions need to be interpreted in relation to specific aspects of the educational system in the home environment, rather than reflecting L2 students' "fundamental beliefs about learning and are not part of their fundamental dispositions" (Volet, 1999, p .638).

L2 international students learning styles and beliefs, however, do play a part in their ability to participate in tutorials; although the extent to which learning styles impact on this participation i s debatable, and perhaps depends more on the adaptability of the individual student than on culturally specific ways of learning. As Biggs (1997) suggests, i t is probably not helpful to categorise L2 international students as surface and passive learners, rather than deep and activ e learners, even if many do fall within this stereotype, as this is often the result of inadequate English skills. As Bilbow points out, "the problem for many overseas students with poorly developed English skills is that they are rarely able to get past bottom -up processing to achieve the higher order, deep learning that is achieved through interpretation (B ilbow, 1989, in Mulligan & Kirkpatrick 2000, p313). This problem is compounded for students with inadequate English skills in tutorials where, in order to follow the discussion and participate, they have to "move continuously between at least two language and epistemologica l systems"(Cadman, 1997, in Cadman 2000, 479).

Similarly, it is probably not helpful to categorise L2 inte rnational students as lacking critical thinking skills ; although many students themselves acknowledge thi s lack. Typical of these comments are those of international postgraduate students recorded by Cadman (2000, p.480). "It's not really easy to be critic al of the works of others. This is contrary to what I've learned from my mother who was my first teacher". A nd, "To criticize and to judge …are something new for me, because in my undergraduate study in [my home country] our study approaches were more pass ive, we became receivers of knowledge and we rarely argued about our subjects. Ballard and Clanchy (1988; 1997) also emphasise in their classic guides, to both international students and the lecturers who teach them, that L2 students must be taught critica l thinking skills in order to fully participate in academic discussion. Accordingly, the Speak Up sessions are designed to help foster individual students' critical thinking and language skills, increase their knowledge of what is required of them in tutor ials, as well as boost their self-confidence, so that they can more fully participate in academic discourse.

A social perspective on the function of tutorials

The Speak Up sessions that are designed to prepare international students for tutorials are unde rpinned by a social perspective on the function of academic spoken discourse drawn primarily from the theories of Lev Vygotsky (1896 -1934) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 -1975). Within these collaborative sessions, small groups of international students collabor ate in what Clark (1990) would describe as "an exchange of discourse", constructing together assumptions and agreements about each others' arguments and presentations that they can share (p.xvi). Their conversations, guided by an academic skills lecturer, are designed to help each student develop an appropriate English academic voice, and to provide them with an audience with which to practice their academic voice. These two terms, 'voice' and 'audience', are central to the theoretical framework of the Speak Up sessions.

Although both Vygotsky and Bakhtin were concerned with communicative processes, it was Bakhtin who expanded upon the notions of voice and of dialogue. Bakhtin was also interested in the concrete attributes of voice quality, but his account o f the speaking consciousness is more general. Bakhtin emphasised that voices always exist in a social context; that there is no such thing as a voice that exists in total isolation from other voices. Thus, for Bakhtin, voice represented the point of view o r the speaking consciousness of an individual. In fact, Bakhtin (1986) regarded the notion of voice as so important that he insisted that meaning itself could only come into existence when at least two voices come into contact; in other words, when the voi ce of a listener responded to the voice of a speaker (cited in Wersch 1991, p.52). This negotiation of meaning is a key ingredient of the Speak Up sessions, where international L2 students collaborate in an oral process of clarification and revision of the ir respective arguments and oral presentations.

Another fundamental question asked by Bakhtin is: 'Who is being addressed?' In other words, 'Who is the audience?' This awareness of audience is central to effective spoken and written academic discourse in our (Australian/NZ) culture, and is also closely linked to voice. L2 international students, however, often need to be sensitised to the needs of their audience. They are often not aware of 'basic' questions that 'good' academic speakers ask themselves about audience; questions such as: How informed is my audience? How much knowledge do we share? Which terms and concepts need defining? What can I assume my audience will know? Part of the problem arises from the fact that both audience and voice are "largely culturally constrained notions, relatively inaccessible to students who are not full participants in the culture within which they are asked to write [or speak]" (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 1996, p.22). Some cultures, particularly those in Asia, place greater emphasis on the participation of the reader or listener for effective communication. In other words, they consider it to be the audience's responsibility to understand, anticipate, or perhaps even guess what the writer or speaker intended to say. L2 international students, therefore, need opportunities to develop a greater awareness of the audience's role in communication, such as the opportunities offered by the Speak Up sessions.

The Speak Up sessions fit within the rubric of a social perspective of academic discourse and are designed to provide opportunities for students to both develop an academic voice and develop an increased awareness of audience. The social perspective that underpins these sessions is largely that of Vygotsky (1978). His social constructionist theory (sometimes referred to as cultural-historical or socio-cultural theory), and more particularly his ideas of scaffolded learning, as exemplified by the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD), provide an effective framework for the Academic Skills lecturer's and peer feedback to students on their oral presentations. Vygotsky (1978) describes the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or *in collaboration with more capable peers*"[emphasis added].

Vygotsky believed in socially mediated learning, where effective learning requires the active involvement of the learner in collaboration with other people, and his work focused mainly on small group interaction. In the classroom, learning is also socially mediated. As Wilson (1998) points out, "Students, particularly at undergraduate level, are not expected to pluck original ideas from the air, but to reach an understanding of new concepts through intense intermental exchange with lecturers, each other, and with written texts" (53). Vygotsky (1978) asserts that an individual's understanding of their world is derived from social interaction which has been mediated by communicative language. His ZPD, which recognises the importance of peer assistance in the solution of tasks and, consequently in learning, seems particularly applicable to the kind of collaborative instructional activity that occurs within the peer feedback process during Speak Up sessions.

The Speak Up sessions provide mutual scaffolding in various forms, as in the ZPD, to help students exercise their academic voice, and become consciously aware of their audience. Providing scaffolding was a general strategy whose main function was for the students to assist each other to improve their oral skills. Both speakers and listeners provide scaffolding to one another, designed to assist their peers extend the ZPD. The activities of these peer feedback groups can, therefore, be described as an example of cooperative, or collaborative learning, where learning, as well as mutual understanding and development, takes place within a reciprocal Vygotskian framework.

A social perspective on the function of academic discourse, drawn from Bakhtin's ideas on voice, dialogue and genre, and placed within a Vygotskian framework, provides valuable insights into the social nature of learning, the role of conversation in academic discourse, and the interplay of different voices in this process (Collins 2000). In addition, locating learning in a socio-cultural context helps to explain some of the difficulties that L2 international students have in adjusting to new perspectives of audience and voice. L2 students, therefore, need opportunities to develop a synthesis of elements from their native culture, the second language culture and their own personality, so that they can speak with their own academic voice through a new language. The scaffolded assistance provided by the Speak Up sessions, underpinned by Bakhtinian and Vygotskian theory, provides one such opportunity.

The Speak Up Program.

The Academic Skills Program (ASP), at the University of Canberra has been running the Speak Up program for the last five years in the form of weekly two-hour sessions during the teaching periods of first and second semester. The size of the student group fluctuates, but is usually no more than six students (if more students wish to attend a second group is formed). The small size is designed to maximise students' chances of participating in group discussion, practicing their presentations, and in creating a tightly knit group that will generate mutual learning support for group members. Normally, students self-select to enter the group; although sometimes lecturers or the international student adviser will recommend to individual students that they join the group. Students come from a wide variety of cultural and ethic backgrounds; in second semester 2004, for example the group included students from Nigeria, the Maldives, Bhutan, Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, Poland, Hong Kong and Mainland China. The group is composed mostly of undergraduate students, but postgraduate students sometimes join the group to practice their seminar presentations on a supportive audience. Undergraduate students benefit from observing what is usually a more polished presentation performance, and postgraduate students are usually quite generous in sharing their knowledge with undergraduates.

A supportive environment has been set up in the ASP's small teaching room, which can cope with about a dozen students and has internet access, a laptop computer, projector, screen, whiteboard and overhead projector. A range of teas, chocolate biscuits, an urn and coffee-making facilities are also in the room, helping to create a relaxed, informal environment. This environment is designed to suggest the ideal tutorial, which "should have a happy, relaxed atmosphere and be seen as a place in which every student will be respected, valued and encouraged to take risks" (Chapple, 1998). Students and the academic skills lecturer sit around three sides of a long rectangular table; leaving one end clear to facilitate the projection of oral presentations and online materials.

Although sessions are designed to be student-centred and at least one student each week is usually scheduled to give a presentation, modelling is used to give students an idea of appropriate (and inappropriate) tutorial behaviour and thus help scaffold student discussion and presentation skills. As Ballard and Clanchy (1997, p.37) suggest, in preparing for small group discussions, a teacher's most effective strategy is modelling. Students are also encouraged to observe and to emulate the behaviours of those students and lecturers they have observed to be good communicators, as they need to be able to 'control' the class while they are presenting. In fact, ASP lecturers often draw on the literature on what makes a good lecturer or tutor (eg. Lynch 1994; Ballard and Clanchy, 1997) to model presentation behaviour. In the second session, for instance, the ASP lecturer usually gives a short presentation on what is expected of students in tutorials and models ways of expressing opinion, agreeing or disagreeing, appropriate body language, turn-taking behaviour, assertive behaviour and breaking-in to conversations. These skills are also strongly recommended by Mak *et al* (1999) in the aptly titled article, *Optimising conditions for learning: sociocultural competencies for success.* They suggest that newcomers, such as L2 international students, will benefit greatly from learning appropriate ways of conducting some strategic social exchanges useful for a variety of interpersonal situations, "such as seeking information and help, making social contacts and conversation, participation in group discussion, receiving and giving feedback, and refusing a request or expressing disagreement" (1999, p.78). In subsequent sessions the ASP lecturer may also demonstrate a 'good' and 'bad' oral presentation using a range of teaching aids such as cue cards, the whiteboard, PowerPoint, and the OHP.

The first Speak Up session of each semester is devoted to getting to know each other and discussing students' expectations of the Program. Students have name tags with the name by which they wish to be addressed and care is taken over making sure that all participants are aware of the correct pronunciation of their name. As an 'icebreaker', pairs of students are asked to tell each other about themselves, their background, interests, aspirations and study program (past and present) and then individual students introduce their partner to the group. Interestingly, this type of activity was foremost among the suggestions made by University of Canberra international students (interviewed as part of a 1996 *Inclusive Teaching Project*) about ways lecturers might improve the comfort levels of classes. "They were particularly impressed when lecturers took the time to get to know the students and to encourage the students to get to know each other" (Shaddock, 1996, p.23).

In the first session, the ASP lecturer also explains the democratic nature and the broad aims of the Speak Up sessions and asks participants to nominate particular activities or skills they would like to practice. These activities could include group discussion of particular topics they will have to discuss, or oral presentations they have to give, in tutorials in the various subjects they are studying. Sometimes, students use the collaborative power of the group to help them brainstorm ideas for their presentations or seminars. Some students also want to work on pronunciation exercises.

Students are encouraged to bring their subject outlines to the sessions and particular tutorial topics are chosen several weeks ahead of the scheduled week so that they can have a practice discussion with the collective help of the group before the 'real' tutorial discussion. In order to help students to feel more confident about speaking and to help them exercise their voices, the group also reads extracts of Australian plays and classic poems (such as Williamson's *Dead White Males* and Lawson's *The Man from Snowy River*). These activities help students to build on their "phonological and lexico -grammatical knowledge (the ability to distinguish homophones, unit boundaries, false starts and hesitations, stress and intonation, colloquialisms; or vocabulary and grammar of a new culture or discipline)" (Flowerdew, 1994, in Mulligan & Kirkpatrick 2000, p .313). Drama is particularly useful for shyer students who, by playing the role of a more assertive character, can learn to be more assertive in voicing their opinions in tutorials and can assume the 'mask' of the assertive character when they need to present a more confident face in their oral presentations. Poetry can be used to make students more aware of rhythm and stress and is particularly helpful for pronunciation practice.

In most sessions, one or two students are scheduled to give a presentation; ideally , several weeks before they have to present the same topic to their tutorial class. The usual presentation procedure is for the presenter to treat the exercise as the 'real thing' and to pay careful attention to the usual range of factors on which it will be judged in his/her later tutorial. The other members of the group act as the critical audience/tutor and record their comments on a sheet of paper within a template containing a list of headings relating to the organization, delivery, and use of the Whiteboard, OHP or PowerPoint. Their comments focus on areas such as: the structure and coherence of the talk; use of examples; generation of interest and stimulation; timing; body language; voice clarity, speed and pronunciation. After the presentation , the audience feeds back their comments and suggestions to the speaker, who also collects their written comments for future reference. These comments are almost always quite diplomatic and highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of the presentation. If students wish and if time permits, presenters are encouraged to practice their presentation a second time in the next Speak Up session. ASP lecturers consistently report that not only do students' presentations improve as a result of these sessions, but also that over the course of the semester there is a noticeable improvement in their oral skills and more importantly their confidence.

In fact, in evaluations of the Speak Up sessions, 96% of students said that they agreed, or strongly agreed that the Speak Up sessions had "helped to build my confidence"; and 98% of students stated that they agreed, or strongly agreed that they "learnt new skills/improved existing skills as a result of the Speak Up sessions. Students further reported a heightened understanding o f the wide range of skills required of students at university, and more particularly in tutorials. A common response was that the academic skills lecturer and their peers had not only helped them, but had also encouraged and reassured them, so that they now felt more confident of their own abilities. For example:

> 'Very helpful and respectful of my efforts.'
> 'You feel more comfortable because they don't put you down about your effort.'
> 'Big support for me for my developing academic skills.'
> 'I came with no knowledge of Power point. Now I feel I could confidently conduct a Power point presentation.'
> 'How my public speech should improve and main issues that I have omitted in my presentation'
> 'I also feel more confident about succeeding a t Uni'

Conclusion

For international L2 students who arrive at university without the same 'cultural capital' as their Australian peers, "a comfortable climate in all educational settings is not simply desirable, it is a must" (Shaddock 1996, p.23). The Speak Up sessions, which were conducted in a supportive, trusting atmosphere, did apparently give students better access to the 'cultural capital' of the dominant culture and help them develop an appropriate academic voice and a greater awareness of audience. The students in the Speak Up group tended to bond well and thus felt comfortable with each other. They were prepared to talk freely with their peers, in most cases without any obvious awkwardness. Achieving this close bond between members of the group helped students to provide the mutual scaffolding necessary for collective learning within the group. Students learnt to be more aware of the Australian accent, idioms, and discourse patterns, as well as what was required of them in tutorials, without suppressing their individual expression and creativity, nor devaluing their own culture. Moreover, from an observation of students over the course of the semester and from their responses to evaluations of the program, they also improved their social negotiation skills and became more confident in critically responding to academic discourse and expressing their own opinions.

It is this self confidence that international students need to become more assertive, active, intrinsically motivated autonomous learners. They need to have a sense of the right to ask questions, and to know that their opinion is valued (as long as they can justify it with logical argument and evidence). They need to be able to evaluate their own work and to self-monitor, to set goals and make choices. They need to know where and how to seek help, both from their peers and from university support services, and they need to be able to transfer learning from one situation to another (Collins, Shrensky, and Wilson, 1998). Above all, they need the academic literacy and oracy skills facilitated by the guided mutual support provided by the Speak Up sessions. As Confucius said, "A good teacher has to know how to guide students without pulling them, guide students to go forward without suppressing them, and open the way for students to think for themselves" (translated by Lin, 1938, in Lee 1999, p256). The staff at the University of Canberra's Academic Skills Program have endeavoured to use these principles in guiding the L2 international students who have attended the Speak Up sessions, and in helping them to help themselves; we would recommend this approach to other academic support programs.

Recommendations

Brinkman (2004, p6) lists the possible effective components of an academic support group as:
- A supportive group environment with facilitated discussion
- Material drawn solely from learners' own field of study, and specifically actual course content
- Format and instruction based on objective and subjective needs of learners
- Flexible program responsive to changing needs and input of learners
- Reflective practices encouraged to develop learner autonomy.

(All of the above are present in the ASP's Speak Up sessions.)

To these broad guidelines we would add:
- Role play, drama, and poetry reading
- Observation of native speakers, either by watching a video/CD of a 'good' tutorial or getting native English speakers to joint the group (Scarcella, 1990, in Jones 1999, p.255)
- Teaching students to value their voices and cultures (Jones, Robertson and Line, 1999)
- Modelling appropriate behaviour in discussion and oral presentations (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997).

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