PREPARING INTERNATIONAL ICT STUDENTS FOR THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE: AN AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Globalisation is leading to an increasing incidence of multinational/multicultural work teams across the globe. This is particularly the case in the world of business, where English also dominates as the most commonly used language in intercultural situations. This paper describes a project which aimed to prepare English as a Second Language (ESL) students for the English speaking work environment in Australia. Information Systems majors in their final year of a Bachelor of Commerce degree at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia undertook a specially-designed, preparatory two-day intensive communication skills program, followed by a 16-week work placement in large local companies. The preparatory program aimed to give students socio-linguistic knowledge and skills for formal and informal work-related contexts. Students were also required to engage in a reflexive activity, which they discussed with a member of the project team, whom they met on a regular basis. Evaluation of the program indicates that structured intervention can assist ESL students to prepare for an English-speaking workplace, particularly in developing confidence. However, a shorter preparatory program, coupled with more targeted support, is likely to be more effective if spaced out over the period of the internship, and addressing particular workplace needs and dilemmas as they arise.

KEYWORDS

Globalisation, ICT education, ESL, Work Integrated Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Australian universities have seen increasing enrolments from international students since the late 1980s (Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock, 1995). This, combined with the phenomenal spread of English as a global language, particularly in a business context (Crystal, 1997; Brutt-Griffler, 1998; Graddol, 2000 & 2006) makes it imperative for people to become more proficient in intercultural communication in English.

While some may think that the spread of English around the world will make communication easier and that if one is a speaker of English, a little knowledge of the 'other' culture will suffice to ensure effective intercultural communication, nothing could be further from the truth. The global spread of English, in fact, makes the situation more complex (Crystal, 1997; Kachru 1992; Scollon & Scollon, W 1995; Zachary, 2003; Graddol & Meinhof, 1999). Indeed, as Garcia and Otheguy state, "a serious consequence of the spread of English has been that it has created a false sense of mutual intelligibility" (Garcia & Otheguy, 1989, p. 2). This being the case, it becomes imperative for ICT and other students to develop intercultural communication skills, since multinational/multicultural teams are likely to become an increasing feature of the future employment landscape (Smith & Berg, 1997; Distefano & Maznevski, 2000). Furthermore, business schools are perhaps best placed to assist students in developing a global mindset (Kevia, Harveston & Bhagat, 2001).

Although this is an issue for all students, in Australian universities ESL students require targeted support to enable them to develop the skills they will need to operate confidently in an English-speaking workplace. Indeed, there has been so much concern expressed in the media (The West Australian, 2007; Campus Review, 2007 & 2008; The Australian 2007; The Australian Financial Review, 2009) with international graduates' 'poor communication skills' that the Federal government has provided funding for a Professional Year Program to equip international ESL graduates in the ICT and accounting fields with the communication skills needed to enable them to operate more effectively in Australian workplaces.

Just what kind of communication skills students require is, however, debatable. While employers and others are vocal about the need for 'good communication skills', there is no clear agreement as to exactly

what this means. As Holden (2002) reports, while everyone talks about the need for good communication skills, there has actually been very little observation in real workplaces (a notable exception being Holmes [2000] in New Zealand). Moreover, although there is some agreement about the importance of intercultural communication skills (Liddicoat, Eisenchelas and Trevaskes, 2003; Crosling & Ward, 2001) there is a paucity of research on just how such skills can be developed and nurtured.

Research undertaken in multinational companies (Briguglio, 2005) indicates that intercultural communication competence for global workplaces requires a number of closely interrelated skills that are often simplistically referred to as 'good communication skills'. Briguglio's four-dimensional model includes the following elements:

- a high level of competence in English
- knowledge of and familiarity with other Englishes/varieties of English
- cultural knowledge and understanding
- competence in intercultural communication.

These, then, are the skills that ESL students need to develop in order to become competent and confident in operating in Australian workplaces. This pilot project sought to address some of these issues by developing a two-day preparatory program for a group of ICT students, followed by a 16-week work placement in real business environments.

2. THE STUDENTS AND THE CONTEXT

In order to for international ICT graduates to obtain permanent residence in Australia, and thus the ability to work in the Australian labour market, they must meet a minimum English standard as measured by the International English Language Assessment Testing System (IELTS). This test ranks English ability in terms of nine bands, ranging from 'Non user' (band 1) to 'Expert user' (band 9). In the past, graduates have been required to have an English ability of at least band 6, or 'Competent user', which is defined as follows:

Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations (IELTS Handbook, 2007).

However, Kinnaird (2005) argues that 'Good user' (band 7), defined below, is more appropriate for employment in the ICT field in Australia:

Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning (IELTS Handbook, 2007).

Kinnaird's point is that it is unlikely that ICT graduates will be able to succeed with anything less than operational command of the language. Similar views have also been expressed by accounting and other professional bodies in more recent times (papers) Insufficient language proficiency may well be a contributing factor to the finding from a study conducted in 2004 by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) that international ICT graduates, of whom the large majority are ESL, "did not do well" in the Australian job market (Kinnaird, 2005).

As well as English ability, international ICT graduates also face other problems. Employer satisfaction with ICT graduates in general in Australia is relatively low, and such graduates have poor communication and teamwork skills (Hagan, 2004). However, such skills are difficult, if not impossible, to teach, and are best developed through experience (Eleftherakis, Dimopoulos & Dimopoulos, 2007).

Finally, international ICT students' low levels of 'willingness to communicate' is often a barrier to effective participation in the workplace. A range of factors influence ESL students' willingness to communicate, including low self-confidence, lack of familiarity with interlocutors, lack of familiarity with the topic of discussion and cultural influences that lead to the communication being perceived as inappropriate (Cao & Philp, 2006).

In order to address these problems, a work placement program was introduced for ICT students. The intention behind the program was to provide an immersion experience in order to improve students' English ability, and to provide a significant amount of professional experience in order to develop professional and intercultural skills. Additionally, students were prepared for the work placement by way of a two-day

intensive preparatory program, in which workplace expectations and intercultural issues were addressed. The work placement involved a 16 week position in large organisations in Perth, Western Australia. In addition to the duties required of them by the organisation, students were required to keep a reflective journal and to meet with the ICT lecturer on a weekly basis for the duration of their placement. The preparatory program and the work placement are described in the following sections.

3. THE PREPARATORY PROGRAM

The preparatory program was developed by two academics in the Curtin Business School (CBS) one an ICT specialist, and the other an academic language and learning specialist. After some discussion of what we hoped students would achieve through the program we decided a two day intensive program, which could be implemented before the start of semester, would be appropriate. The focus of the first day would be on formal and professional language, while the second day would focus more on the social and interpersonal language of the dominant culture (in this case the Australian workplace culture), the characteristics of which were likely to be unfamiliar to international students. We were dealing with a small group of six to eight students, so it was decided that the language specialist and IS specialist would facilitate these classes together in an informal workshop style, with plenty of interaction and discussion. The two-day program was broadly structured as indicated below in Figure 1 and was implemented two weeks before students were due to begin their work placement.

Day 1	*Day 2*
Communication Skills Survey (pre)	Impromptu brief presentation
The time capsule – describing how you feel, looking back 20 years from now	Speaking out – offering opinions
Writing a professional CV/resume	Debating techniques
Students revising their CV/resume	Class debate in two teams
Demonstrating your suitability for a position (addressing criteria)	Australian ways of speaking
Interview techniques	Australian social chit-chat, particularly related to sport
Mock interview	Office culture in Australia
Analysis and discussion of day 1	De-brief, discussion and evaluation and Communication Skills Survey (post)

Figure 1. The two day preparatory program

Many of the activities were designed to improve students' confidence. For example, in order to counter the common tendency of self-criticism leading to insecurity, the mock interviews were videotaped and played back to students to demonstrate that their performance was no worse than that of other students and to suggest improvements. Similarly, the impromptu brief presentations were conducted in order to create stressful, but safe, communication situations that students could later look back on as proof of their own capabilities: essentially, forcing them to prove their capabilities to themselves.

The mock interviews also forced students to communicate with interlocutors with whom they had little or no familiarity by using other university staff as members for the interview panel. Further, in other sessions, including the one on interview techniques, students were coached on cultural issues such as the level of modesty and deference that is appropriate in an Australian context.

3.1 Evaluation of the Preparatory Program

The preparatory program was evaluated through: a pre- and post-survey which focussed on communication issues and a written feedback/evaluation form of the overall two day program. These are discussed below with the inclusion of some excerpts from students' written comments.

3.1.1 Communication Skills Survey

The results from the pre- and post-surveys cannot be considered statistically significant due to the small number of students in the program. However, they represent all of the students in the program and do resonate with the staff members' personal experiences as educators.

The pre-survey indicated that students had concerns about IT skills, time-management issues, working under pressure, "*interpersonal skills within the Australian context*" and communication skills more broadly. Students were unsure, at this stage, about the nature of communication issues they might face in the workplace. The post-survey revealed that the two day program had given them a greater awareness about the sorts of communication skills they would require, and reinforced the importance of interpersonal communication skills. Some students had found the mock interview and other oral communication tasks particularly challenging. Students also reported they were now much more aware of the need for communication skills for social and informal interaction in workplaces and they expressed a strong desire to improve their fluency in English. One post-survey student wrote that the skills which would be most relevant for the work placement would be:

communication skills, including listening and speaking; being more confident in describing your ideas and being able to be more social with colleagues.

3.1.2 Written Evaluation of the Two-Day Program

Students' comments were generally positive, indicating the program had benefited them in a number of ways. Among other things, students felt the program was useful because it improved their speaking skills and helped them to understand Australian English. Most reported increased levels of confidence. They also felt that the program had provided the opportunity to develop skills in unfamiliar situations in a non-threatening environment. This was particularly the case with the mock interviews from which all felt they had benefited. Overall, they liked the supportive and informal interaction with the two staff members and other staff who presented short sessions. In this regard one student reported that the best/most useful aspect of the course was "*the very intimate conversation between students and [staff who ran the course]*".

In summarising the impact of the two day program, another student wrote:

This is a really useful course to improve overseas students' communication skills. I hope this program carries on further.

Another wrote:

This course helped me to build up my confidence, gave me some experiences and knowledge, and taught me to listen and speak to native English speakers.

4. OVERALL STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF THE WORK PLACEMENT

Students' experience of the work placement was evaluated in an ongoing way through a reflective journal and at the very end through a presentation, where students summarised their experience.

4.1 The Self Reflective Journal

Students were asked to email their journals to the ICT lecturer on a weekly basis and were encouraged to send the journal one or two days in advance of the weekly meeting in order to give the lecturer time to read it prior to the meeting.

This was the first time students had been asked to keep such a journal in their educational careers, and consequently they were initially unsure about what was appropriate. To minimise their apprehension, the journal was 'scaffolded' by asking the students to reflect on four key issues each week:

- What they did well and would do again
- What they could have done differently
- What they thought could have happened if they had done things differently
- What support or information might help to improve things in future.

This structure encouraged students to think reflectively and avoided a simplistic, event-by-event approach. From the feedback it became clear that students and staff may, in some cases, attribute different reasons for workplace issues For example, several students experienced problems that seemed to the ICT lecturer to be caused by a lack of confidence in their own abilities, particularly their ability to communicate effectively, rather than lack of communication skills *per se*. However, students' journals focused only on communication skills and intercultural issues. Such issues were discussed during students' meetings with the lecturer, and during these sessions the lecturer provided feedback on focus topics for subsequent journals. In this way the students' reflections were guided so as to maximise their personal development.

Further, it became clear that not all communication situations can be anticipated during the preparatory program. For example, while one student had to deal with difficult clients, another had difficulty with different accents in spoken English. Such events are specific to the unique circumstances of each placement. The method in which students are given regular, weekly guidance in response to the placement as events unfold is therefore an extremely useful aspect of the program.

The ICT lecturer's impression from the journals and weekly meetings was that confidence, communication ability and willingness to communicate all increased over the duration of the work placement as students' familiarity and confidence grew. All students felt much more prepared for the workforce at the conclusion of the work placement.

4.2 The Final Student Presentation

At the end of their four month placement students had to prepare a presentation for a mixed audience, including staff, employers, fellow students and project staff, reflecting on the benefits of the entire program, what they felt they had learned, and suggesting any improvements.

The feedback on the workplace experience was extremely positive and all students felt they had learned an enormous amount. There is little doubt that they considered the placement in a real life business context to be invaluable. Students felt they had acquired many relevant IT professional skills and were proud of their achievements. They also and looked and sounded much more confident.

In relation to intercultural communication, the following points emerged. Students felt that establishing relationships in the workplace through communication can be difficult. Indeed, the whole area of dealing with informal situations in an Australian business context was tricky for them. Among other things, they found it sometimes difficult to understand different Australian accents. Students were also unsure about how to treat seniors in an Australian work environment; some found that what appeared to be more casual relationships with superiors was very different to what would be expected in their country of origin. They also noticed some other cultural differences, but were unsure as to whether these issues related to organisational and discipline-specific culture or national culture.

5. DISCUSSION

The value of real workplace experience seems undeniable; it provides students with a rich experience on a number of levels and teaches them skills that are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to replicate in the classroom. The preparation program and workplace experience of students was generally very successful. However, considering all the evidence from the various evaluation tools used and students' final detailed presentation and report, the following points require further consideration.

It became obvious from reports and the evaluation that students and staff cannot accurately predict the sorts of communication skills they need to develop, except in broad terms. More regular meetings of students with project staff to monitor their progress in an ongoing way is therefore likely to be more effective. Input to develop communication skills identified in the particular workplaces could be spaced out with targeted sessions on identified areas of need during the semester. For example, students reported the need for more understanding and interpersonal communication skills for 'how to find out' certain things, asking politely and asking for assistance in appropriate ways. The program could consist of sessions every few weeks with project staff, where students could work on the real workplace dilemmas related to language, culture and behavioural aspects that they encounter.

The preparatory program could perhaps be reduced to one day, so that only some of the more immediately useful sessions are undertaken. A one day program might target resume writing, interview skills and some cultural awareness rising, since it is evident that some of the contextual issues cannot be pre-taught. Similarly, some of the sessions dealing with language and culture would no doubt be more effective if spaced out over the semester, so that students can then apply workplace observation to the issues and theories discussed.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper outlined and analysed a preparatory program for ESL student undertaking an internship in an English-speaking workplace in Australia. The program sought to address intercultural communication and related issues, to better prepare students for the placement.

Student evaluations of the course as well as reports at the end of their four month placement indicate that some preparatory activity is useful, but some communication needs cannot be accurately predicted. It is considered that it would be more effective to shorten the preparatory program and then intersperse intercultural communication sessions regularly during their placement, analysing real workplace dilemmas and cultural issues, and addressing these as the need arises.

This pilot study involved a small cohort of students making the transition from university to the workplace. There is scope for further research with a larger cohort to establish the generalisability of the findings. There is also scope for further research into the ways in which students' cultural backgrounds might have influenced their reactions and experiences, and additional research to investigate experts' evaluations in addition to the students' self-evaluations.

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