

Teaching Languages to International Students

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ABSTRACT

There has been much discussion of strategies and programs designed to assist international students in different countries. However, little attention has been given to improving their preparation in the country of origin. Responsibility for the solution of these problems lies partly with the country of origin, as well as the English-speaking country of education. The government of the country of origin should have a continuing interest in the educational development of its student citizens, many or most of who will return to positions of responsibility.

The influx into their classrooms of large numbers of non-native-speaker students from significantly different cultural backgrounds puts great pressures on tertiary teaching staff who have no special training and little institutional support to equip them to meet these additional demands. It can induce a sense of personal and professional frustration, a concern about declining standards in teaching and assessment, and considerable resentment towards the institutional and national policies that lead to these outcomes. This paper illustrates the contribution that training and experience in Applied Linguistics can make in such a situation. It describes the development by the academic language and learning unit at a major university of a website for academic staff teaching students from other countries, now the major source of international students. Based on a series of interviews with foreign students, conducted in English, exploring their experience in adapting to study in a foreign language and an unfamiliar educational culture, and supplemented by interviews with faculty staff, the website provides a range of resources to help staff to better understand the problems they encounter in teaching such students, and to devise inclusive solutions to them. The paper examines how an informed understanding of the nexus between language, culture and communication can be applied to the task of clarifying the expectations of teachers as well as students, to the benefit of both.

It is probably no coincidence that at the same time that education and business have become more globalised, and the number of Asian students studying in English language nations has grown, research on the issues, difficulties and problems facing international students has also become more extensive and intensive. These works contribute significantly to higher education research. Most recent research studies of international students, in particular those conducted in Australia, identify their problems in coping with English – both academic English and conversational English – in the field of education. These difficulties are felt especially in relation to speaking and writing. This is especially made clear in the evidence of students themselves. Of all the social and academic issues and problems facing international students that are cited in recent studies – differences in learning style, culture shock, homesickness, social difficulties – the problem they themselves most often refer to is difficulties with English.