

# Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience

---

**Erlenawati Sawir**

Education Faculty, Monash University, Australia [erlenawati@education.monash.edu.au](mailto:erlenawati@education.monash.edu.au)

*Globalisation has placed a growing importance on English language speaking and listening. Prior research indicates that many international students from Asia, studying in Australia, face serious learning difficulties and lack confidence in speaking and taking a proactive role in classrooms. The paper reports on data gathered in interviews with students from five Asian nations, which suggest that these learning difficulties are grounded in weaknesses in students' prior learning experiences – focused on grammar and reading skills in teacher-centred classrooms, not conversational skills – and in beliefs about language learning instilled during schooling. The paper proposes strategies for overcoming these problems.*

International students, international market, English as a foreign language, beliefs about learning, conversational skills

## **INTRODUCTION: GLOBALISATION AND THE USE OF ENGLISH**

Globalisation, which is the tendency to world-wide convergence in education and other sectors (Held et al., 1999), is changing the environment in which English is learned as a foreign language (EFL) or second language (ESL). First, economic and cultural globalisation includes the globalisation of language, and in particular the spreading role of English as a universal global *lingua franca* (Crystal, 2003):

It is English that stands at the very centre of the global language system. It has become the *lingua franca par excellence* and continues to entrench this dominance in a self-reinforcing process. It has become the central language of communication in business, politics, administration, science and academia, as well as being the dominant language of globalised advertising and popular culture. (Held et al., 1999, p. 346)

At the same time the balance of emphasis in the use of English as a common cross-border language has shifted, from a primary focus on written communication to continued written communication plus a growing emphasis on oral communication. Linguistic globalisation, which is driven by more and closer cross-border ties in business, education and other sectors, becomes manifest in intensified communication and travel. Increased spoken voice interactions, and English language exposure in media, have placed a growing importance on listening and speaking skills. When people need English competence for their practical life – and in nearly all professional and business domains, in every nation, English is more and more necessary – they often need oral skills. This is especially the case if they are working in sectors involving international dealings or actually crossing national borders themselves.

However, traditional EFL pedagogies in East and Southeast Asian nations are not fully adequate to meet the need for an expanded emphasis on oral communications. These traditional pedagogies take a scholastic approach in that they tend to treat English as if it is outside the national or local linguistic environment. Thus they focus almost exclusively on learning to read English-language

documents, and to prepare English language essays and letters, with little attention to the skills of conversation in English, let alone the ultimate communicative goal of native speaker-level proficiency. Teachers who were themselves schooled in a scholastic approach to the language, and focused on grammar and correct usage with little attention to oral communication, normally feel most comfortable in reproducing this same approach with their own students. However, the scholastic approach has become obsolete because of the growing role of English both inside every local environment, and at the borders between nations. The profound need for listening and speaking skills cannot be avoided. Strategically it is essential that EFL pedagogies in Asian nations move beyond the 'scholastic' tradition. The communicative approach to language teaching takes up this strategic imperative (Savignon, 1993, 1997).

In some quarters the communicative approach is still contested – for example it is sometimes wrongly alleged that the communicative approach is indifferent to questions of correct usage including grammar – and although it now commands policy support in most Asian nations, it is yet to be fully implemented. The problems created by a scholastic fixation with grammar to the exclusion of oral communication are still with us, as the evidence presented in this study shows.

### **International education**

Globalisation also entails the globalisation of education in the form of the expanding market in cross-border study. Approximately 1.7 million students, almost half of whom are from non-English speaking developing nations in Asia, cross borders every year to acquire a foreign education. Altogether 73 per cent of Asian cross-border students entered English speaking tertiary institutions in 2001 (OECD, 2004 p. 211; Marginson and McBurnie, 2004). Many of these students come from nations (for example, China, Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia) where English is learned as a foreign language and the teaching and learning of English is often shaped by the scholastic approach. International education is now of major importance to Australia. Between 1990 and 2003 the number of foreign students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions rose from 24,998 to 210,397. Education is Australia's third largest services export after transport and tourism. Hence from the viewpoint of people working in higher education in Australia, there are two reasons why it might be important to focus on the learning difficulties of international students. First, like all students, international students are valued as students. Second, international students are also a source of revenue, and any improvement in their educational experience has the potential to build a positive reputation for Australian institutions.

When students from Asian countries enter English-speaking nations, they must adjust rapidly and learn fast, coping both academically and socially. No element is more important in this than communication: in the classroom, in dealing with university administration, and in other social sites. These students are reliant on their prior English language-learning experiences – especially at school in their home country – as the base on which their later learning will be built. They are therefore closely affected by the kinds of pedagogies that were used before coming to Australia, the beliefs about language learning that were installed in them, and the numbers of hours of effective experience in conversation already acquired.

### **Twin purposes**

This paper has two main purposes:

1. The explanatory purpose: to use data drawn from research on the conversational strategies of Asian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners studying in an English language setting in Australia, to help us understand better the difficulties of such international students with English, including the influence of their prior language learning experience, and their beliefs about learning.

2. The normative purpose: to point towards better learning strategies. It is hoped that the findings of this study will help educators and administrators, both in international students' home countries, and in the countries of study, to conceptualise better strategies for solving the English language difficulties and associated learning problems of international students.

In summary, the paper begins by considering the relevant scholarly writings: it discusses the findings of prior studies concerning the language problems of international students; and studies concerning the formation of second language competence, which include the relationship between beliefs about learning a language and the formation of language competence. It then focuses on the English language experiences of EFL students after they enter Australia, especially their conversation. Specifically, it examines the English language experiences of twelve English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners from five Asian nations, Vietnam, Japan, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Thailand. These twelve students were interviewed as part of a research project on learner beliefs about language learning and how these beliefs are reflected on their communication strategies. In the interviews, they discuss their English learning experiences at school, in and out of the classroom, and the pedagogical framework of that English learning. They also talk about their difficulties with English in Australia, their beliefs about language learning, and their conclusions about language learning in the light of their Australian experiences. The final sections discuss the implications of these findings and present the conclusions of the paper.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND ENGLISH LEARNING

### Language difficulties experienced by international students

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 in Australia and elsewhere (for example Robertson et al., 2000; Bayley et al., 2002; Borland and Pearce, 2002; Mulligan and Kirkpatrick, 2000; Hellsten, 2002; Hellsten and Prescott, 2002; Wong, 2004). 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.

Robertson et al. (2000) explored the difficulties experienced by international students studying at one Australian university. The researchers surveyed both international student and local staff perceptions of those difficulties. Staff and students emphasise language as a key source of difficulties in teaching and learning. The students manifest a lack of confidence with English. They have incomplete understanding of lecturers' spoken English, and feel unhappy with their oral performances in the presence of Australian classmates. There are also concerns about colloquial language, writing difficulties, and problems of interpretation. Robertson et al. (2000) concluded that language issues were the major area of unsolved problems facing international students. Research in Australian universities by Bretag et al. (2002) found that according to academic staff, international students from a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB students) were unable to contribute effectively, as required, in tutorial discussion; and that due to poor grammar their written work was often hard to read and to assess. According to the research study

by Bayley et al. (2002), university staff reported that many international students had difficulties with writing:

International students have highly variable levels of English proficiency: if an international student does experience problems, it is most likely to be in the first one to two years of their course, particularly with their written work (Bayley et al., 2002, p. 47)

A study by Wong (2004) used interviews with international students. He found that many international students, accustomed to a didactic and teacher-centred environment with less classroom conversation, found it difficult in Australia to make the transition from passive learning. At the same time, his study found that the students acknowledged that their lack of English language proficiency in the classroom, exacerbated by cultural barriers, was a principal source of learning difficulties.

While generic statements about 'Asian learners' should be treated with caution, there is research evidence showing that students schooled in some East Asian and Southeast Asian nations are accustomed to a more passive-receptive style of learning than is the norm in Australian classrooms, especially tertiary classrooms. A study conducted by Hellsten (2002) suggests that international students' passivity is partly due to constraints resulting from their prior learning:

You know in China there are ... lot of vocabulary and I think really good grammar. But ... we can't speak for ourselves. We never tried it. And just, uh ... our education system ... put everything in my brain, not participate. There's only one way. My teacher say. I listen. That's it. So I never say. So I can't speak very well before coming here (cited in Hellsten, 2002, p. 9)

Here the strong focus on grammar and correct usage coincides with a didactic pedagogy, both reinforcing a teacher-centred form of learning in which there is relatively little interest in developing the student as an active speaking agent. Research by Hellsten and Prescott (2004) also investigated factors affecting international students' learning, and reported on language difficulties experienced by them. The researchers used one-hour semi-structured interviews with first year undergraduate students studying in Australia. They found that feeling inadequate in spoken English hindered many Asian international students from participating in classroom discussion. For example:

It's just hard and difficult. I don't know the feeling, the nuance, I don't know those in English so I ... I am not a good English speaker at all. It's very uncomfortable when I talk with somebody (quoted in Hellsten and Prescott 2004, p. 346)

These studies provide valuable data. However, while they describe the English language problems of international students effectively, they focus on the symptoms rather than the underlying causes. The research conducted so far has largely focused on language constraints as they have been experienced by international students once embarking on their studies in a new social/academic environment. One way to inquire more deeply into the problems of international students is to examine the influence of students' prior learning experiences and their beliefs about learning.

Unless researchers focus on the whole learning biography of the international students, they will not fully understand the difficulties faced by both these international students and their teachers. No-one who enters the classroom on the first day of a new course is a so-called 'blank sheet'. All learners are affected by what they already know, and how they have learned to learn. Further, by focusing merely on the language difficulties occurring after the student arrives in the English speaking country, it is implied that the solution of those difficulties lies solely with the students concerned plus the institutions in which those students are studying. But their previous institutions

of study in the students' countries of origin, and in many cases the government responsible for these institutions, also have responsibilities.

Responding to the gap in previous studies, the study on which this paper is based started from the assumption that prior learning experiences were likely to be important in influencing the EFL experience in the English-speaking nation.

### **Success in second language learning: contributing factors**

Success in language acquisition is influenced by many interrelated factors. These include the social context of the learning, cultural beliefs about language learning, the status of the target language, and the processes of language learning itself (Ramirez, 1995). Walqui et al. (2000) argued for the importance of contextual factors in second language learning. Factors such as language (language distance, native language proficiency, and language attitude), learner (diverse needs and goals, role models, and support) and learning process (learning styles, motivation, and classroom interaction) need to be considered. This points to the importance of formal instruction and classroom practices in shaping learners second language learning.

Some researchers have also pointed to the importance of learner's belief system in understanding ways in which learners approach their language learning (for example, Wenden, 1999; Horwitz, 1999; White, 1999; Benson and Lor, 1999; Yang, 2000). Language learners possess a set of beliefs about the nature of language learning. These beliefs have the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners (Horwitz, 1999). Benson and Lor (1999) state:

If learners believe that the best way to learn a foreign language is to memorise its component parts, it seems likely that they will hold positive attitudes towards vocabulary and grammar learning and they will be predisposed to adopt a range of strategies involving analysis, memorisation and practice. If learners believe that the best way to learn a foreign language is to absorb it in natural contexts of use it is likely that they will hold positive attitudes towards communication with speakers of the language and that they will be predisposed to adopt a range of social and communication strategies. (Benson and Lor, 1999, p. 459)

This research has implications for language teachers. Benson and Lor (1999) argue that if teachers wish to influence learners' beliefs, the underlying beliefs on which they are based need to be addressed.

Learners' beliefs derive from a variety of sources, including the learner's previous learning experience. Current teaching and learning practices are another factor and language teachers need to remember that what they do in the language classroom continues to shape students' beliefs and expectations about learning (Mori, 1999). The fact that intervention in current learning programs can reshape beliefs about language learning, including any learning blockages that may have been created in past learning experiences, is good news because it provides teaching opportunities. Tudor suggests that learners should be trained in relation to beliefs, incorporating stock-taking and evaluation of the learners' current beliefs; exposure to alternative approaches and options; and guidelines to assist in exploring these options (Tudor, 1996:53).

The implication for the study reported in this paper was the need to investigate the EFL learners' beliefs more closely, and as far as possible to tease out through interview questions the relationship between learners' prior learning experiences, the beliefs about language learning instilled in them, their current beliefs and their current language experiences and problems in the English-speaking nation.

## METHODS

The data reported in this paper were derived from a larger study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) among international students. The study investigated the EFL learner's beliefs about English language learning and how their beliefs were reflected in their communication behaviour. The empirical research for that larger study included interviews with the EFL learners about their prior English language learning at school. Interviews were conducted with twelve international students, from Indonesia (two males and two females), Hong Kong (one male), Thailand (one female), Vietnam (two males and two females) and Japan (one male and one female). These students had just finished schooling in their own countries and had come to Australia to pursue their undergraduate study in an Australian institution. They had been in Australia from six to ten weeks. At the time of the interview, these students were undertaking a bridging program for ten weeks to supplement their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score as required by the university, a test of the standard of English which is used as one of the requirements for entry into Australian universities.

The students were asked to comment on various aspects of English language learning, including questions regarding their classroom practices, resources enabling them to use the language in a practical way, and difficulties in language learning. Students were also asked about their language learning experience after arriving in Australia. The interview was transcribed and analysed. In order to maintain the truth value of the students' comments, the extracts quoted are presented as they are without any editing. (The number in brackets identifies each individual participant. Gender and home country are specified).

## FINDINGS FROM STUDENT INTERVIEWS

The students provided many comments that bear on the relationship between their prior English language learning experiences in the home nation, their present difficulties with English-language communication while in Australia, and the relationship between their beliefs about learning English and their actual English language experiences.

### **At school there was a common focus on English grammar, rather than on communicative competence**

In the prior English learning of students from all the countries, the main focus of the teaching was on English grammar and other aspects of standard usage. Essentially, learning English was seen as learning a scholarly skill for the purposes of reading and writing, not as learning a living language of use. Thus in learning English at school, the main pedagogical medium was reading and writing, rather than conversation. The main pedagogical style was didactic, in which students were positioned as largely passive learners. In their interviews, the students made frequent references to all three of these aspects, which interacted in the practices of didactic teacher-centred classrooms, and had become combined in their recollections of school. In the typical school lessons on English, teachers explained the grammatical rules, students did the exercises set out in the text books, and classroom interactions were largely one-way. Oral communication skills such as speaking and listening were almost totally ignored. Students rarely had the chance to use English in conversation in the classroom, and were under no pressure to become competent in this.

When I was in Vietnam my teachers just taught me they just taught me the the grammar and writing but they I think they rarely let the students to have a chance to to speak English to practise to give ideas on a topic for example they can rise a question and students can answer. I like that way rather than just answer the question first and then later discuss. (F 2 Vietnam)

They only focus on grammar and writing all I have to do at school is grammar they read some text books and do the exercises and they just mark the exercise about the grammar there are listening test but a little bit not much they taught me how to learn vocabulary and grammar. (F 3 Vietnam)

I think I have problem with listening and I can't speak fluently because I didn't communicate with other people much I had no chance to talk with people in English. (F 3 Vietnam)

Basically we were taught reading and grammar. That is why... my listening and speaking skills are not good enough. That's why I tried to learn English by watching TV or listening to music with English words. (F 11 Japan)

I think for me the most difficult part (now) is speaking. I feel very shy when I speak English in my class. I rarely speak I just listen because I am very shy. (F 2 Vietnam)

I think in school the teacher only in one way the teacher only explain the grammar and we just write it down and do the exercise I think just that it's no enough we have to try to speak and show our ability in English. We are just passive and just listen to the teacher. (M 4 Indonesia)

It's really important for teachers to encourage student to participate in what they teach. They should create interesting activities in class, so that students would have a chance to speak. In my country it's quite difficult for the students to learn English. The teachers just teach grammar. When we have to speak we find it hard. We are not used to it. (F 6 Thailand)

### **This was reflected in the balance of activities in the classroom**

In English lessons at school the students lacked a balanced access to the four skills of listening, speaking, writing and reading. A large part of the teaching time was devoted to the teaching of reading, and then writing.

We didn't have much time for speaking because we have some and the class were very crowded so many students in the same class so students didn't have much chance to talk about and to listen in one class like in Vietnam we have very very many other things to study like writing and reading but normally reading specially consumed and required more time than speaking so and less time for speaking. (M 10 Vietnam)

When examinations excluded speaking skills, this also inhibited conversational skill-development.

Speaking is the most difficult aspect for Japanese students. I have not spent much time speaking English. Only when someone asks me to speak in English will I speak English, that's all. In Japan the university places more emphasis on reading and writing. To pass the examination in English, we don't need to speak English. (M 12 Japan)

Though another student revealed that they did have examinations in English speaking:

Yes I did do speaking practice back home at school. We needed to take public examinations in English and this included an oral test. (M 5 Hong Kong)

### **And the weakness of conversational English was reinforced by the lack of exposure to good English speakers at school**

Students suggested that their teachers' lack of oral competence was one of the factors that inhibited conversational learning. English instruction was mostly delivered using the student's own native language. The students thought that it would have been better if English had been taught by native speakers.

Maybe my teachers were not good at speaking English. They didn't use spoken classroom English at all. When I became a university student I had to learn to listen and to speak, of course. It was a conversational class. Because I was not used to speaking and listening I had to work very hard to catch up with the class. (M 12 Japan)

I think the teachers should be native speakers, because then they could talk in English fluently. It is quite difficult to learn to use English when the teacher is not a native speaker of English. (M 5 Hong Kong)

Moreover, as most of the English teachers at schools were non-native English speakers, the students were not sufficiently exposed to specific English language accents. This created major problems when they entered English-speaking environments, especially given the variety of English accents.

I think the most difficult skill is listening, because people (who speak English) have different accents. I listened to one teacher for the whole course at school and I could listen to him, because I got used to him. But when I went to university I was in big trouble. The most difficult thing is listening. Many of my friend share this thought with me – they also find difficulties in listening. (M 1 Vietnam)

We need to know the accent. Here in Australia it is very different. Back home we usually learn American English not Australian English. For example, sometimes when I say to my teacher 'harbour' (American accent) she said it's wrong, it's 'harbour' (Australian accent). (M 7 Indonesia)

I think maybe we need more practice at school. The teachers should give us more chance especially in listening. We never had a chance to listen to another English teacher with a different accent (F 9 Indonesia)

### **There were also few opportunities to use the language outside the classroom**

Most students commented that during their schooling, they did not have enough opportunities to use English outside the classroom, either through structured activities at school, or in the wider community.

In my country I didn't have any chance... well, maybe a little... to talk with people in English. Here (in Australia), every day I can talk in English. I feel sometimes that this is very useful. (F 9 Indonesia)

When I was in high school there was, like, a special class where native speakers came and spoke to us, but it was only once in six months. (F 11 Japan)

I hardly used English in my country, except in school exercises. I didn't talk with anyone in English. (M 3 Vietnam)

A few students did have opportunities to practise their English outside the classroom, to varying degrees, mostly because of international business activity. This points to the role that economic globalisation has played in spreading the use of English in Asian countries (Crystal, 2003):



My father has a business he deals with Malaysian company and sometimes when they called to my house I have to answer the phone in English something like that my father has his own business but at that time I cannot speak English fluently. (F 6 Thailand)

The most (practice I had) was in my last job. It was in a foreign company. I had to speak English with my boss. (F 8 Indonesia)

Usually I practised with my father and my mother. My mother can speak English well, but my father can't speak English. (M 7 Indonesia)

(I only practised English) in the classroom or when I met tourists. I live in Jokya Jokya, which is a tourist city. Sometimes if I met tourists I tried to speak English with them. (M 4 Indonesia)

### Grammatical awareness

As the above quotations indicate, when learning English at school, the students had been loaded with grammar lessons, and developed a strong awareness of this aspect. Regardless of the difficulties this created at the time, or the later consequences for their conversational skills, they had become convinced that grammar was the most important aspect in English language learning. They had absorbed the teachers' lessons that if they first mastered the grammatical aspects of English they would then be able to learn other skills.

In practising English, the most difficult is grammar. But if we know the structure of the grammar I think it is very easy to talk a lot in English. But academic writing is more difficult, and for writing we have to learn more grammar. (M 7 Indonesia)

At the same time, they were very focused on avoiding grammatical mistakes. This fixation with mistake avoidance made it difficult for them to take the risks that are always inherent when speaking in conversation in a language that is only partly understood. For some, the concern about grammar seemed directly to inhibit speaking and listening skill development, then and now. Here the students' beliefs about language learning, instilled into them both implicitly and explicitly at school, directly shaped the way they used and learned English in later life – and in the case of some of the students, continued to set limits on what they could achieve. If learners believe that making errors will impede their language learning progress, these learners may actually refrain from engaging in communicative activities, thus hindering the development of their communicative competence:

Yah, I am afraid of making grammar mistakes in speaking. When I do make a mistake I try to correct it, to make my speaking better. Sometimes when I speak wrong words or wrong sentences I don't realise till after. If that's what I have said, I cannot take it back, but I try to correct the mistakes later because I know I was wrong. (F 2 Vietnam)

Some people say grammar is not important. But I think grammar is important, because when I know grammar I can change (the way I use English) in many ways. (M 12 Japan)

Despite the great emphasis on the teaching of grammatical aspects at school, the students still found it a difficult aspect of English to learn, then and now. When asked what part of learning English was difficult for them, most students referred to grammar. One reason for this was that as noted by one of the students, there were pronounced differences between the grammatical structure of English and that of the student's own language. Focusing on these elements, continuously translating grammatical structures mentally while trying to talk in English, continued to inhibit speaking.

For me grammar is difficult. I have problems with grammar when I want to speak with somebody. I have to think about the tenses – is that right or not? (F 9 Indonesia)

Before I speak in English I need to concept the word in correct sentences with correct grammar in English. I have to think in my own language first and then transfer it to English with correct grammar usage. (M 5 Hong Kong)

Grammar is difficult. It's true that we learned enough grammar at school, but I find the structure of English very different to Indonesian. This is difficult for me. I also know that for many other Indonesian students, their weakness is in English grammar. (M 4 Indonesian)

### **After living in an English-speaking nation, the students had definite ideas about how the language should be taught and learned**

The EFL students had learned by experience about the importance of developing oral skills in English. Some were still wedded to the importance of learning grammar and some were not, but all wanted to see schools back home using more practice with speaking and listening.

When you study English try to have a real situation if you want to say 'hello' to someone the beginner want to say 'hello' to someone just sit down and follow the teacher but set the real situation so it's easy to remember the situation where it can be used not by looking at the text book or follow the teacher. (M 10 Vietnam)

Now I have heard about communicative approach teachers can give some handouts and some cards in the class and students can discuss about anything about a certain topic and I think it is an effective way, so we are engaged in an activity. (M 1 Vietnam)

It's really important for teachers to encourage student to participate in what they teach like they should be more like make interesting activities in the class that the students have a chance to speak or something like that because for my country it's quite difficult for the students because the teachers just teach the grammar so when we have to speak and do something like that it's hard we are not used to it. (F 6 Thailand)

May be more practice I think at school the teachers should give more chance especially in listening we didn't have a chance to listen from another English teachers with different accent. (F 9 Indonesia)

I think it's better if English is taught in an interesting situation. We don't have to learn more grammar, just practise speaking and listening. (M 7 Indonesia)

### **Language and culture: being in an English-speaking country helps**

The students also now felt having cultural knowledge and living in a second language environment contributed to success in language learning. The majority strongly agreed that it was best to learn English in English speaking countries, where there was more linguistic input and more opportunities to learn. This implies the need for the inclusion of culture as an integral part of English language learning in home country.

When we study in English speaking countries we always speak English and always think in English. But when we studied English in Japan we might still think in Japanese. (F 11 Japan)

Language and culture are related. To study English or to study any language we should know the culture and the customs of that language. We should know what we should

ask and what we shouldn't ask English people, like age or personal matters. To study English is also to study the culture so as to know how to apply English in real situations. When you study the real situation you study the culture. It makes it easier. (M 10 Vietnam)

If we learn English we have to use it, we have to speak more often. If we learn a language but don't try to use it, it's easy to forget. The best way is to go to a country when English is the first language. (M 4 Indonesia)

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Main findings

How do the findings of this study, as reported above, help us to understand better the English language difficulties of international students, and enable educators and administrators to conceptualise better strategies for solving their language problems? In summary the interviews provided five findings.

- Students' prior English language learning experience has an impact on how well they can cope with the academic requirement of the Australian university.
- The data indicate that students did not have sufficient exposure to English language conversation either in classroom or outside class, prior to coming to Australia.
- Classroom practice was not only largely didactic (one-way) rather than conversational in form, but was largely confined to the teaching of grammatical rules.
- This classroom practice appeared to have shaped some learner's beliefs that grammar was the most important part of English language learning.
- It appeared that this belief had then become manifested in their communication behaviour, so that they were not able to communicate effectively, socially and academically, and the learning of conversational skills was retarded.

In the move from country of origin to country of education, it is common for the primary English language learning goal to shift from grammar and vocabulary, to effective communication. This shift is very typical of the experience of many of the 85 per cent of international students studying in Australia who come from Asian nations. The research summarised here suggests that many of these students are caught in the country of education without a firm foundation for the new requirements.

### Contribution of these findings to research

These findings do not enable new theorisations about EFL learning, about the relationship between belief and learning, or about pedagogical practices of Asian classrooms. Rather, they contribute in two other ways. First, the findings confirm the previous literature about the weaknesses of international students studying in Australia in relation to oral English, and the learning difficulties created by those weaknesses. Secondly, and most important, the evidence presented here makes explicit the connection between the international students' problems with English, and the prior language learning experiences of those international students in their own countries, and their beliefs about language learning. This insight connects two previously separated sets of research and theorisation, the research on language learning experiences and beliefs, and research on the communications problems and English language difficulties of international students. In doing so, the study contributes better to an understanding of the learning context of the many international students from East and Southeast Asian nations studying in

Australia, and similar nations and education systems such as New Zealand, United Kingdom and Canada.

To summarise, in research, policy and pedagogical discussion of international education, the dimensions of prior learning experiences and beliefs about language learning are not being taken sufficiently into account – though clearly these dimensions can have major implications for student learning. It could be argued that given that the dimensions of prior learning and beliefs about learning have not been taken into account sufficiently or systematically, this alone suggests that the diagnosis of international students' learning problems is a poorly developed area. If so, such a weakness in diagnostic approaches would be surprising, given that almost one million international students enter English speaking education every year, and given the economic importance of this market in the provider nations, especially Australia and the United Kingdom.

These findings and this study have implications for both language teaching practices in English-speaking countries such as Australia, and language teaching practices in the countries of origin.

### **Implications for international student programs in Australia**

Australian academics need to be more sensitive to the language difficulties experienced by international students. First, they need to commit significant resources to addressing language difficulties. Australian universities could take the solutions to this problem a step forward by providing sufficient comprehensive language assistance. Language support units have long been provided, but staffing has been much too limited to deal with all the problems. Such units can accumulate expertise and so play a more effective role in assisting international students with their language difficulties.

Second, academics with responsibility for international students need to understand better the root causes of their language learning problems, by familiarising themselves with students' prior learning experiences, and with their beliefs about learning. In turn, this will enable them to design better programs, including compensatory programs.

Third, as suggested in the literature and confirmed by the findings of this study, the literature on language learning points to the importance of beliefs about learning as a factor in learning competence. The study emphasises that the negative effects of wrong beliefs about learning can be quite dramatic. The literature also suggests that it is possible to intervene in relation to beliefs about learning. This suggests that discussion of belief issues needs to be made explicit, and care taken from the beginning of the international student experience to give speaking and listening skills the appropriate status. This needs to be backed by extensive practical programs in these hitherto neglected skills.

### **Implications for programs prior to commencement of international education**

There has been much discussion of strategies and programs designed to assist international students in the country of education (Pantelides, 1999; Hellsten and Prescott, 2004, Bretage et al., 2002, Borland and Pearce, 2002). 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 whom will return to positions of responsibility.

First, there is a need to develop better communicative teaching and learning practices in the home countries. In recent years this has been the explicit purpose of English language teaching in non-English speaking countries, but it appears, given the existing problems of international students, that the results so far have not been satisfactory. Yet language teaching could be made more

interesting by engaging students actively and orally in the classroom, achieving a two-way interaction that would build more confidence and better listening and speaking skills. This change of approach is not easy to achieve, given that it involves a major change to well entrenched teaching practices, and requires the cooperative agreement of both government and educational practitioners.

Second, there is a strong case for the development of an intensive bridging course in the country of origin, before international students commence undergraduate studies in Australia and similar countries, which would prepare and assist students to cope more generally with academic requirements. This could be jointly financed by the Australian provider and the home country government. Bridging programs already exist, but these have been designed mostly to prepare students for their IELTS. As noted by some students in the group interviewed for this study, preparation for the IELTS test does not in itself provide a broad-based preparation for coping with language issues in the Australian academic situation. The whole focus is on the test itself.

This bridging course could take the form of a one year program after the completion of high school. It would involve English native speakers as instructors, and emphasise communicative language skills such as oral presentation. Such a program could play an important role not just in building language skills but in reducing anxiety in Australian classrooms, with spin-offs for all aspects of student learning, whatever the field of study. In such a program, international students would be able to experience a real English-language academic environment before commencing their actual study in Australia. Such a program could help to reduce so-called 'study shock' and 'culture shock'. The student could undergo IELTS preparation and take the test upon completing this one-year bridging program.

#### REFERENCES

- Bayley, S., Fearnside, R., Arnol, J., Misiano, J. and Rottura, R. (2002) International students in Victoria. *People and Place*, 10, (2), 45-54.
- Benson, P. and Lor, W. (1999) Conceptions of language and language learning. *System*, 27, 459-472.
- Borland, H and Pearce, A. (2002) Identifying key dimensions of language and cultural disadvantage at university. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 25, (2), 101-127.
- Bretag, T., Horrocks, S. and Smith, J. (2002) Developing classroom practice to support NESB students in information systems courses: some preliminary findings. *International Education Journal*, 3, (4), 57-69.
- Collier, V.P. (1995) Acquiring a second language for school. *Directions in Language and Education. National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education*, 1, (4), 1-9.
- Crystal, D. (2003) *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Held, D., McGrew, A., Goldblatt, D. and Perraton, J. (1999). *Global Transformations*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hellsten, M. (2002) Students in transition: needs and experience of international students in Australia. *Paper presented at the 16<sup>th</sup> Australian International Education Conference*, Hobart, Tasmania.
- Hellsten, M. and Prescott, A. (2004) Learning at university: the international students experience. *International Education Journal*, 5, (3), 344-351.
- Horwitz, E.K. (1999) Cultural and situational influences on foreign language learners' beliefs about language learning: a review of BALLI studies. *System*, 27, 557-576.
- Marginson, S. and McBurnie, G. (2004) Cross-border post-secondary education in the Asia-Pacific region, in OECD, *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education*, pp. 137-204. Paris: OECD.

- Mulligan, D and Kirkpatrick, A. (2000) How much do they understand? Lecturers, students and comprehension. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19, (3), 311-335.
- Mori, Y. (1999) Epistemological beliefs and language learning beliefs: What do language learners believe about their learning? *Language Learning*, 49, 377-415.
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD (2004) *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education: Opportunities and challenges*. Paris: OECD.
- Pantelides, U. (1999) Meeting the needs of tertiary NESB students. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 22, (1), 60-75.
- Ramburuth, P. (2001) International students and social and cultural implications. *Paper presented at 15<sup>th</sup> Australian International Education Conference*, 25-28 September, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.
- Robertson, M., Line, M., Jones, S. and Thomas, S. (2000) International students, learning environments and perceptions: A case study using the Delphi technique. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19, (1), 89-102.
- Savignon, S. (1993) Communicative language teaching: State of the art. In S. Silberstein (Ed.), *State of the Art TESOL Essays*. Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing.
- Savignon, S. (1997) *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Sydney, NSW, Australia: McGraw-Hill.
- Tudor, I. (1996) *Learner-centredness as Language Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walqui, A. and Ed, W. (2000) *Contextual factors in second language acquisition*. <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0005contextual.html>.
- Wenden, A.L. (1999) An introduction to metacognitive knowledge and beliefs in language learning: beyond the basics. *System*, 27, 435-441.
- White, C. (1999) Expectations and emergent beliefs of self-instructed language learner. *System*, 27, 443-457.
- Wong, J. K. (2004) Are the learning styles of Asian internationals culturally or contextually based? *International Education Journal*, 4, (4), 154-166.
- Yang, N. (2000) Teacher's beliefs about language learning and teaching: A cross cultural comparison. *Texas papers in Foreign Language Education*, 5, 39-52.