Learning Experiences of Overseas Non-English Speaking Background Students: a case study of an Australian university

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In recent decades, there are increasing number of Asian students who choose to study abroad. This paper addresses the academic needs and learning difficulties of a group of newly arrived non-English speaking background (NESB) Asia-Pacific students who registered to study a Bachelor of Education (in-service) program in an Australia Tertiary Institution. Funded and supported by an equity grant, a learning support program was set up to allow these NESB students to share among them their experiences in academic needs and learning difficulties. The outcome revealed a need to provide mentoring assistance to the newly arrived NESB students in the areas of academic and social support in order to enable them to adapt quickly to a new and different social-educational environment.

1 Non-English speaking background student is defined in this paper as to student who does not speak English as his/her first language (or mother tongue) at home.
INTRODUCTION

According to the statistics of Hong Kong Education Department, the total number of students leaving Hong Kong for study in Australia has been on the upward trend. It registered a 37% increase from 3109 students in 1994 to 4200 students in 1996 (Howlett, 1997:467). With this great number of students leaving Hong Kong for Australia, a substantial proportion of them sought enrolment in the various programs offered by the Faculty of Education of the leading Australian universities. For example, Queensland University of Technology in 1996 had 31 out of a total of 168 registered NESB educational students spoke Cantonese at home (1996 QUT enrolment record). This number represented 18% of NESB educational students from one ethnic group (Cantonese) compared to an estimated total of 34 other ethnic groups. If we consider ethnic groups around the Asia-Pacific region as a whole (i.e. students speaking Mandarin, Vietnamese, Malay, Japanese, Korean, Hindi, Bangladeshi, Fijian, Samoan and Tongan at home), they accounted for 36% of NESB educational students in QUT (1996 QUT enrolment record).

Being fairly new to Australia, these NESB students have to cope with the unfamiliar cultural educational environment. As a result, they experience a number of adjustment problems when they embark on an educational program. These newly arrived NESB students, mainly of Asian origin, speak English as their second or even third language at home. The language difficulties, to some extent, limit their ability to participate fully and actively in lectures and tutorial discussions.

Some earlier research has indicated that students from different cultural and educational background possess markedly different learning styles. For instance, East Asian students are used to a passive learning style whereby textbooks and lecture notes are rote learned without many questions being raised. They regard the lecturers as experts in the various disciplines and who have the authority to always provide 'correct' answers. Hence to ask questions in class indicates a challenge to the lecturer's expertise and shows one's own incompetence in understanding (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Marton et al., 1993;
Tan, 1993). However, Australian academics often expect students to be able to demonstrate that they can learn through independent self-directed study and justify their own opinions and viewpoints critically by comparison of alternatives (Kwan & Tang, 1997).

Kaplan (1961) stresses a culturally different style of discourse. Asian students tend to study phenomena from a holistic perspective and use a loose circular argument rather than a connected linear argument to synthesize textual information (Adair, 1985; Kui, 1991). On the other hand, Australian academics expect writing to be clearly focused on the set topic and that students are to present a reasoned analytical argument, which based strongly on wide extensive and critical readings. They have to present such argument clearly to other peer members in a competent and coherent manner (Clanchy and Ballard, 1981).

However, the difficulties faced by NESB students are not always readily noted and addressed by the teaching staff of the Australian universities. Being shy and hesitant to raise their difficulties to the attention of the lecturers, the NESB students are often left by themselves to struggle just to meet the minimum expectations of the unit and the basic requirements of the program (Kwan & Tang, 1997).

With this background scenario, a “New Arrivals” project was conducted in Semester 1, 1997 with the support of an Equity Grant from the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology. This paper reports the findings of this project with the aim to achieve the following objectives:

• provide learning support to a group of NESB students of East Asia and Pacific origins;
• find out the academic needs and learning difficulties experienced by these students;
• identify strategies to help the NESB students enjoy their studies and learn effectively in a new and different social-educational setting; and
• provide recommendations and suggestions to other Australian university to help meeting the academic needs of the NESB students.
THE “NEW ARRIVALS” PROJECT

The target students participated in this project were a group of newly arrived NESB students of Asia-Pacific origin who enrolled to do the 1-year B.Ed. (in-service) program. This group of students was selected because of the relatively short duration (2x14 semester weeks of teaching) of the academic program. These NESB students, coming from a different cultural setting, did not really have time to adapt quickly to the new learning style and educational expectations in Australia. Hence, it is envisaged that this group of NESB students would face many more challenges and need extra support from the faculty almost right at the beginning of their educational program.

Of the sixteen students identified and contacted, eleven of them accepted the invitation to participate in the project. Among them, six were from Hong Kong, one from Japan, one from Taiwan, one from Fiji and two from Philippines. This project had two components:

- providing learning support through a support program; and
- collecting data on the learning experiences of these newly arrived NESB Asia-Pacific students.

Learning Support Program

The learning support program was co-ordinated by a project officer who was also of Asian origin. After soliciting expectations from the eleven participants, a series of workshops were organized in the first term of the semester to meet their learning difficulties and academic needs that they encountered at the beginning of their studies. The foci of the workshops were on:

- increasing self-awareness of their own learning styles;
- understanding the complexity of the thinking, transcribing and monitoring processes in academic
writing; and

- using the on-line catalogue, CD-ROM and other facilities in the library.

When these NESB students began to settle down and found themselves more preoccupied by assignments, presentations and seminars, the learning support of the “New Arrivals” project switched its focus to the provision of individual consultations. The scope of this individual consultations includes areas such as literature search, understanding assignment requirements, structuring and polishing essays, seeking part-time employment, locating further information on higher degree studies and other assistance such as group socialization.

During this stage of individual consultations, the project officer still maintained telephone contact with the participating members to keep track of their adaptation to the new learning environment and to provide appropriate assistance or referral whenever it is needed.

**Data Collection**

The second component of the “New Arrivals” project aimed at capturing the learning experiences encountered by these NESB students. They were invited to participate voluntarily in two in-depth reflective interviews to talk aloud their experiences encountered so far in meeting their learning needs and their difficulties in handling lectures, tutorials and assignments. The first reflective interview took place during weeks 4 and 5 of the semester. The second reflective interview took place at the end of the first semester. The purpose was to reveal if there was any qualitative change in their learning behaviours, which were related to their learning needs and difficulties as expressed in their first interview. Subject to their own choice and preference, the reflective interviews were held either individually or with groups of three or four students.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**
The Learning Needs and Difficulties Experienced by NESB Students at the beginning of the semester

Five themes were revealed from the first round of reflective interviews, which looked at NESB students’ perceptions of their needs and learning difficulties experienced at the beginning of the semester.

1) Lacking knowledge of local education system and educational issues

Since most newly arrived NESB students have little knowledge of the local educational contexts and the contemporary educational issues in Queensland, they found it difficult to follow the lectures and not to mention to engage fruitfully in discussions, tutorials or seminars that required them a lot of such background knowledge. The situation was made worse if their lecturers assumed all students have already possessed this knowledge.

“(Some) units are of immense pains, because we don’t know the Australian educational situations. In class, the lecturers assume we are Australians and so they go very fast, thinking we know everything already. So, it’s hard for us to pick up.” (AL, Hong Kong).

“Background knowledge of the Australian education environment, it’s new, and it’s difficult for me to relate to it.” (SS, Fiji).

2) Difficult to follow lectures
In some units, if the lecturers did not use visual aids in class, this would make it more difficult for the NESB students who are visual learners to follow. This problem was compounded further by their lack of familiarity with the Australian accents and spoken languages.

“Maybe we know the words, but it’s the way they are said. ... When I see the words (on the transparency), then oh! I know the meaning.” (SS, Fiji).

“He (the lecturer) seems to have enjoyed his lectures a lot. But for us it’s different. We have to translate the language before we can understand and catch up with the lectures.” (SY, Hong Kong).

3) Cross-cultural barrier to communication

Although all of the NESB students admitted that their lecturers had encouraged them to speak up, and “hassle” (SS, Fiji) them, they expressed a reluctance to ask questions or seek assistance from their lecturers. The reason for this reluctance to communicate was partly cultural. “It’s our culture that we are (stay) away from the lecturers.” (SS, Fiji).

The Filipino student gave a very vivid and sophisticated description.

“It is not in our culture to keep on asking ... and get close to the teacher. Because in our culture, if you keep talking with the teacher, it seems you want to be close to him, just want grades. (Project Officer: Favouritism?) Yea, favouritism. ... Another thing is when you keep on asking the teacher that means you don’t understand, that you’re dumb, you know, ... that’s why I said to myself: I mustn’t ask that simple question. ... I know we need to ask because we are studying here, but it takes a long time to adjust.” (LN, Philippines).
It was also partly due to their **non-critical learning style.**

“We’re used to not asking any question in our home country. ... It’s acceptable if we copied (verbatim) from texts into our assignments.” (KA, Japan).

All these expressions of worry agree to a large extent with what were noted by Ballard and Clanchy (1991), Marton *et al.*, (1993) and Tan (1993) that Asian students do not have the cultural confidence to ‘challenge’ their teachers to imply their incompetence in understanding.

4) **Feeling of isolation and not participating in tutorials**

As a result of their lacking local knowledge, inadequate English language proficiency, and their cultural submissiveness, these NESB students had little involvement in class and they felt isolated by their fellow Australian classmates.

“I also found it quite lonely in tutorial because I am the only black there, and felt segregated ... I thought there’s a cultural difference. In Fiji, students are very close, sort of like neighbours. But here, it’s more individualistic.” (SS, Fiji).

“... We felt insecure. We felt out of place. That’s why when the lecturer asked us to share ideas, we felt ashamed. We couldn’t talk because we don’t know the people there. It’s good if we know each other.” (LN, Philippines).

“... Not knowing their system, their changes. The whole semester, we sat there as if we were idiots. In tutorial, we were invisible.” (AL, Hong Kong).

“During discussion, you just sat there, getting lost. You couldn’t follow their conversation.
Sitting there, it’s as if you’re not attending the lecture. ... And what is worse, in the end, some students complained about the overseas students, that we’re not participating in the discussion.” (TT, Hong Kong).

This ill feeling has led to the formation of a vicious circle - the more these students have this feeling of isolation, the more reluctant they are to open themselves up and to participate. To speak up and to share experiences in class, which is vital to the success of experiential learning especially in the Western education world, is simply too risky for them to bear because they feel insecure, are afraid of mistakes and are being ridiculed.

When these students could no longer trust their own personal authentic experiences, they would find it extremely difficult to relate themselves to the educational concepts and theories presented by their lecturers, not to mention the discussions and debates which went on all the time in the classroom. The result is their further avoidance of participation, and using superficial, surface learning strategies to cope with the stressful learning situation.

5) Use of Surface Learning Strategies

As mentioned above, many NESB students failed to relate new knowledge to what they have already known, they inclined to use surface learning strategies (Biggs & Moore 1992; Ramsden 1992; Marton, Dall’Alba & Beaty, 1993). When it came to learning activities, such as writing and presenting a reflective journal, which aimed at high level reflective thinking and linkage of experiences to theories, these students resorted to tactics of avoidance approach. The following episode illustrates the use of counter-productive learning strategies by some of the NESB students.

In one unit, the lecturer asked her students to write a reflective journal based on material presented in a previous lesson. Students were to take turn to present it to the tutorial class in groups of three.
Not being able to comprehend most of the lessons due to a combination of the reasons suggested above, three Hong Kong students who were in the same tutorial group chose to avoid doing it. They understood that such presentation should be seen as a valuable learning experience, an opportunity for them to rattle ideas and clarify understanding. However, they just did not have the courage to face it.

“There are three volunteers to present in each lecture, and we just keep avoiding, hoping that we don’t have to do any presentation at all until the end of the semester.” (TT, Hong Kong).

Another remark made by a Japanese student sums up clearly this reproductive, uncritical approach to learning:

“I am not used to thinking for myself. In Japan, we didn’t have to think. It’s all right to copy from text (into the assignment). So when the lecturer asked me to think for myself, I didn’t know how to.” (KN, Japan).

The use of surface learning strategy is far from isolated phenomenon, but is commonly employed by many NESB students. As a result, they resorted to doing the minimum just to get over the assessment requirement.

“We concentrate only on the simple assignment topic, tackling it together ... To study here to get a pass is no more than handing in the assignments.” (SH, Hong Kong).

The Learning Needs and Difficulties Experienced by NESB Students at the end of the semester
After one whole semester of studying, many of these NESB students still found the above problems persisted though with some slight improvements. They were still not too clear about local educational system but they admitted that the situation has improved a bit because they had done some research on this topic in the library. They still felt isolated and very much reluctant to “hassle” the lecturers but agreed that if they did hassle the lecturers, they usually got good support and advice from them.

Some of them still indicated that they preferred their learning to be more teacher-controlled (Ames and Ames, 1984). The irony is that they appreciated the usefulness of self-initiated and interactive learning. However, due to their cultural baggage, they were still very reluctant to participate actively in the lectures and tutorials. LN was a typical student to show such a big contradiction in enjoying a class, which stressed interactive learning. Nevertheless, she lacked confidence to speak up in other lectures.

“It’s also your self-esteem. You don’t have confidence. Your self (esteem) is very bad. Lacking of encouragement for us to speak, share ideas. ... because most of us are very ashamed, thinking that maybe I’m not good enough to share my ideas, maybe to speak English, they will laugh at me. That was what I think.” (LN, Philippines)

“The active participation is a good learning style, but it’s not much useful to us. The lecturer did not encourage students from other backgrounds to say their ideas. They just ask the whole class questions. They didn’t pinpoint. They should do it one by one. We would be encouraged, forced to say what we’re thinking, we (then) could really share it.” (LN, Philippines)
However, in another episode shared by the same three Hong Kong students, showed how easily they could become exhilarated when they were given the opportunity to speak up and share their own experiences with the other classmates.

“In one lecture, ... suddenly she (the lecturer) asked us what the situation is like in Hong Kong. So I told them and the atmosphere became very different. We are in a sharing mode. There is interflow. It is not boring, not just we listening, but we were talking to them.” (SH, Hong Kong).

TT, SH’s classmate in the same tutorial, added:

“That occasion, I was too happy to describe in words. It is the first time I spoke so much in the tutorial. But that depends on the topic. If I knew nothing about it, then I said to myself, oh, don’t ask me or force me to speak. It must be a topic that we can share. There must be exchange of ideas.” (TT, Hong Kong).

They have also revealed continuing difficulties with the four English macro-skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing throughout the semester. In terms of speaking, they had to spend three to four times longer than the Australian students to prepare for oral presentations or seminars. They often wrote down the full script of presentation and spent long time to rehearse the script mainly by recitation. They were also sensitive to their accents, which may cause communication breakdown and embarrassment.

In terms of listening, they still found many lecturers spoke very fast making comprehension and note-taking extremely difficult. The situation got worse if the lecturer spoke with heavy Australian accent and used a lot of colloquial in the expression.
With regard to reading, they found it difficult to cope with the vast amount of articles that they had to read for each lecture and assignment. Eventually, they could only ‘surface’ read for assignments and seminars. Often, they could not afford to spend time to pre-read for the lectures. Even if they could, they spent long time to look up new word and terminology from a bi-lingual dictionary, which constantly broke their line of thinking and hence caused disturbance in understanding the text.

In terms of writing, they found using appropriate genre and terminology difficult. Often, they felt the lecturers’ expectation on them to write perfect Australian English. As a result, they had to draft assignments many times to polish their written language expression before they were ready for submission.

**Students’ Evaluation of The Learning Support Program**

The Learning Support Program has been perceived as useful by the NESB students in three aspects:

1) **Emotional support and peer network**

During the first few workshop meetings, the NESB students treasured the opportunity to meet and share experiences with other students of similar backgrounds (e.g., NESB and new to Australia). They realized that other people also had similar problems to their own. Hence, they did not feel as bad and lonely as when they first arrived to Australia.

“This program is good because you talk to other students, different backgrounds. You talk to them about your problems. Maybe they can help you.” (LN, Philippines).
“The first meeting was useful. You get to know other NESB students, and to share your worries. I feel more comfortable when I know other people have similar problems. I am not the only one.” (SS, Fiji).

Moreover, when they knew each other, they could offer support to each other.

Project Officer: Did you get something out from this program?

“Well, contact, you have lots of contact with people.” (LN, Philippines).

“What this program did for me is that it ... gave me the opportunity to make friends with and learn from other sisters. ... I felt being taken care of. ... I could take the initiative to approach you (the Project Officer). Without this program, I wouldn’t have known who to contact, fearing that I might cause others too much trouble.” (SY, Hong Kong).

2) Academic Support

Due to their non-English speaking background, many of these students experienced great difficulty in academic writing. At the beginning of the semester, a workshop on thinking and writing was specifically organized. The workshop was to help them to be more aware of the complex thinking and transcribing processes involved in academic writing. They also learned some general strategies to make academic writing more enjoyable.

In the second term of the semester, the writing support took the form of individual consultations, helping them re-organise and clarify the ideas expressed in their essays. This assistance was greatly appreciated:
“This program, for me, has been very very useful, largely because I took the initiative to seek help from you (the project officer). ... My grammar, ... my organisation was very poor, ... I now know where my weaknesses are.” (SS, Hong Kong)

“It (the workshop) is good for the first-timers in the university. ... The big thing is the assignment. I think we all need that help.” (LN, Philippines)

“The writing workshop is very important and useful if you can teach them how to write at the beginning. Like us who came out from the college of education, we really didn’t know how to write an academic essay.” (TT, Hong Kong).

Through referral, a number of NESB students sought assistance from the Learning House of the University to help with reading their assignments. One student found it very helpful because she now understood why the way she wrote was considered inappropriate:

“Mr. Xxxxx, the learning advisor, explained to me: This is the topic sentence, and so should be here, ... and these points should be re-organised ... Looking back, I learnt a lot from him.” (AL, Hong Kong).

3) Use of Computer Facilities

We have long entered the high technology era. It becomes a necessity for all students to acquire a certain degree of familiarity in using such information technology in the study of the university programs. However, the needs in this area varied between individuals because of their very different computer background knowledge. The NESB students were given two workshops, organized by the project officer, on how to use the electronic resources in the library to search
catalogues on web and use CD-ROM to locate reference materials. In general, they had picked up some basic but essential computer skills that they were not aware of before. Their confidence in using the library effectively to locate resources to complete their assignments has also increased. In fact, some students wished this program could extend to provide them assistance on learning how to surf the Internet and how to send email. At the time of doing the reflective interviews, they had not yet fully acquired such confidence and knowledge.

“The library sessions, using the library catalogue, CD-ROM, and microfiche were useful. ... But I still don’t know how to use other computer facilities - the Internet, email. I wish to learn how to use them.” (SS, Fiji).

Recommendations and Conclusion

The findings of this Project can hardly be regarded as surprising. Yet it has collected strong evidence to show the existence of academic, social and cultural learning problems faced by the Asia-Pacific NESB students. Such evidence is perhaps useful as well to be considered by other Australian universities who also take in many international NESB students from the Asia-Pacific region in the recent years. From both the educational and equity points of view, there is a need to raise the cultural sensitivity and understanding of the teaching staff to make NESB students feel at home when studying overseas. The Learning Support Program had successfully fulfilled its academic and social functions. In one form or another, similar service of this kind should be made available to as many NESB students as possible. It is, therefore, recommended that to become a truly international university, mentoring support should be regularly and systematically resourced and provided to the newly arrived NESB students in the following areas:

- strengthening of the English language in oral communications;
- development of academic writing skills; and
• adapting their beliefs about and opening their attitudes towards learning in a new social-educational environment.

To achieve that, it would seem appropriate to employ persons from similar cultural background to play the mentoring role to ensure the NESB students feel more comfortable to speak to and seek help from them. Alternatively, these mentors could be academic staff members recommended by each department who demonstrate a kind of cultural sensitivity to the academic and social needs of the NESB students.

With regard to the language barrier, NESB students are strongly advised to attend workshops on language and learning skills to help themselves better understand the language expectations at the tertiary level in an overseas environment.

Lastly, the university should provide support and facility to encourage peer support among NESB students from similar cultural background so that they do not feel that lonely and isolated during their course of study.

In this global world stressing understanding and acceptance of different cultures, it is of critical importance for the NESB students to open up themselves and take the initiative to immerse themselves to a new culture. It is also essential for the tertiary institutions to appreciate the difficult adjustment made by the NESB students in a very different cultural and academic environment.

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References:


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