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Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity in Higher Education

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Abstract: Beyond economic imperatives, the process of internationalisation can be seen as presenting opportunities for local and international students and their teachers to learn to interact and participate in intercultural contexts (Trevaskes et al. 2003). While Knight’s (2004) definition of internationalisation seeks to incorporate international and intercultural dimensions, institutional policies and practices often emphasise remedial support for international students over intercultural teaching and learning (Liddicoat 2003). This paper touches on some of the changes affecting Australian higher education, and outlines a range of responses to these. It proposes that responses to linguistic and cultural diversity in higher education take into account the relationships between language and learning. To that end, the systemic functional model of language offers a theoretical framework that provides the means to move beyond a ‘deficit’ approach to diversity, by supporting the integration of academic and professional communication skills with disciplinary learning. Further, given that ‘[t]eaching and learning are largely conducted through talk’ (Wells 1996:74), the paper suggests further exploration of the ways in which pedagogic discourse mediates learning in diverse educational settings, based on Christie’s (2002) work on classroom discourse analysis and drawing on Bernstein’s (1990, 2000) sociological theory.

Keywords: Internationalisation, Diversity, Classroom Discourse, Higher Education

While acknowledging that students’ ability to achieve ‘transnational mobility’ does not only depend on their university education (Singh 2003), it is clear that ‘immigration, multiculturalism and global economic integration’ (Kalantris & Cope 2001a:9) have meant that among other educational goals, many professionally oriented university programs now face the challenges of preparing students to participate in workplaces that are increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse, and where new language demands are being created by organisational and technological change (Johnson & Kress 2003; Kalantzis & Cope 2001b). Meeting the first of these challenges means ‘integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery’ of education, as recommended within Knight’s (2004:11) definition of internationalisation. In meeting both, this paper argues that rather than simply being desirable outcomes that will prepare graduates for professional practice, social, professional and intercultural communication skills also have a role to play in the process of learning.

Internationalisation of Higher Education in Australia

Over the past few decades, universities have been subject to shifting agendas within the broader higher education and economic policy environment in relation to vocationalisation, economic rationalism and globalisation (McIntyre & Solomon 2000; Marginson 2000). As a consequence, student recruitment, curriculum, and teaching and learning practices are being shaped by institutional policies and practices related to internationalisation, now a key concept in Australian universities as a result of changes in higher education funding models and policies, and as one of the socioeconomic outcomes of globalisation (Liddicoat 2003). Concurrent with the trend toward internationalisation, institutional perspectives on the purpose and outcomes of university education are being shaped by discourses on generic skills.

The rise in international student numbers has been one of the most significant and more obvious features of the internationalisation of Australian universities (Harman 2005), with international student enrolments constituting a quarter of total Australian higher education enrolments in 2005 (Department of Education, Science and Training 2006). The internationalisation of teaching and learning is the focus of this paper, but represents only one dimension of internationalisation: the term is generally used to encompass a broad sweep of activities including also the international movement of students and staff (individually or through exchange programs), and international collaboration between governments and institutions, or via international organisations or consortia on a range of teaching, learning and research activities (Harman 2005). Internationalisation is sometimes used as a synonym for ‘globalisation’ (Harman 2005), but the two can be differentiated in various ways. Marginson (2000) for example defines internationalisation as ‘the growth of relations between nations and between national cultures’, and uses the term globalisation to refer to ‘the growing
role of world systems … which are situated outside the nation state, even while bearing the marks of dominant national cultures’ (p. 24). In relation to higher education, Knight (1999) provides a similar definition of globalisation, and regards internationalisation as ‘one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalisation yet, at the same time respects the individuality of the nation’ (p. 14). While often treated in policies as an outcome (Liddicoat 2003), the internationalisation of teaching and learning in higher education is best seen as a process that, requires changing systematic culture from two complementary and converging angles: one that aims to change academic practice (i.e. the mechanics of teaching) university-wide, and the other that promotes authentic cross-cultural understanding through interaction, communication and engagement within and among student and non-student communities (Trevisakes et al. 2003: 7).

Although, in policy terms, the drive to recruit international students in Australian universities can be linked to economic imperatives, this can also be seen as presenting opportunities for students and their teachers to develop their intercultural communication skills (Trevisakes et al. 2003) through the internationalisation of teaching and learning. As noted by Johnson and Kress (2003), diversity can be seen as productive, ‘particularly when different ways of knowing and different ways of doing are brought in to transform that which we think we know’ (p. 6). Rather than being seen as static cultural sites, universities can be regarded as ‘dynamic, evolving and generative contact zone[s]’ that are created and re-created by participants engaged in the educational process (Doherty and Singh 2005:55).

At the very least, local and international students can benefit from the experience of increasing their cultural awareness and finding new ways of interacting with each other – experiences to draw from when later working with culturally diverse groups of colleagues and clients in Australian workplaces or elsewhere in the world. The changes within the higher education context outlined above are mirrored in changes in language use in working life that demand greater interpersonal and intercultural skills from all graduates, although Kalantzis and Cope (2001b) note particular difficulties that the rise in informal networks and increasing role of informal oral and written communication present for those from non-mainstream backgrounds. In addition to these ‘postfordist’ changes to social relationships in the workplace (Gee 1994: cited in Johnson & Kress 2003; Kalantzis & Cope 2001b), globalisation and socioeconomic change have led to increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in local workplaces, as well as opportunities for mobility in higher education and among professionals.

Definitions of Diversity

Increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in Western universities has been described as the ‘most visible and widely publicized indicator of educational globalisation’ (Singh & Doherty 2004:9). Definitions of diversity vary in educational literature, although generally extend beyond the variables of ‘race, maturity age and international entry’ (Lawrence 2005:244). Lawrence (2005) for example argues that such definitions should take into account other variables such as previous educational experience, and a range of ‘learning skills and attitudes’ including English language proficiency, proficiency in academic English, numeracy, study skills, confidence, motivation, and disciplinary knowledge and skills (p. 244, based on Kelly 2003). Smith and Schonfeld (2000) argue that ‘intuitive conclusions’ about the value of diversity in higher education have been supported by research that has found a range of individual and institutional benefits, including: improved access, equity and success for minority groups of students; improved ‘intergroup relations’ on campus; better cognitive and social outcomes; and enhanced institutional viability. Further, at a more abstract level, they note links between diversity, social justice and democracy.

The terminology used in relation to linguistic and cultural diversity varies widely. Singh and Doherty (2004:9) note that the term ‘international student’ is generally used to make a distinction between ‘full-fee paying overseas students’ and ‘domestic students’. Rather than refer to students as ‘domestic’ (or ‘local’) and ‘international’ which implies two distinct and homogeneous categories, some researchers refer to students’ membership of ‘diasporas’ (Rizvi 2000; Rampton et al. 2002, Asmar 2005). Asmar notes that the boundaries between international students, migrant students and local students are not well defined, and that research that focuses only on ‘international’ students fails to address issues that may be experienced by a wider group, including ‘local students from diverse backgrounds’ (2005:292). The label of ‘international student’ is often used to suggest disadvantage, or worse, used in a pejorative sense: Devos (2003) for example analyses the ways in which the label ‘international student’ has been conflated with ‘fee paying’ and ‘a reduction in academic standards’ in media reports. Rampton et al. (2002:378) argue that where the term ‘minority group’ for some southeast Asian students suggests disadvantage, representing these students as ‘members of diaspora in an era of global flows and networks’ highlights their language and cultural skills and networks that can be seen as an advantage, particularly in terms of the la-
bour market. In the remainder of this paper a distinction is made between monolingual English speaking students, and NESB students, rather than ‘local’ and ‘international’, although it is acknowledged that language is by nature ‘blended, multiglossic and transcultural’ (Luke 2002:108).

**Responses to Diversity in Higher Education**

Responses to diversity in higher education are not always based on attributes that influence learning. Kalantzis and Cope (2004: 41) make an important distinction between ‘gross demographics’ – ‘ethnicity/race (and indigenous, immigrant and colonising positions), gender (and sexual orientation), socioeconomic group, locale (global and regional) and (dis)ability’, and the human attributes that lie behind these – ‘experiences, interests, orientations to the world, values, dispositions, sensibilities, communication styles, interpersonal styles, thinking styles and the like’. They note that gross demographics do not affect learning, and that programs based on cultural and other stereotypes (for example Chinese learning styles) are ‘counterproductive’ (p. 41). Similarly, McInnes (2001:112-113) notes that rather than defining students as members of ‘target populations’, it is more important to focus attention on students’ identities ‘as learners in their chosen field’ as this is more effective in supporting student engagement and learning. Further to this, Bondi (2004) draws attention to the limits of a narrow and singular view of ‘identity’, referring instead to a ‘multiplicity of cultural identities’ (p. 63).

As described by Trevaskes et al. (2003), the internationalisation of teaching and learning, as one response to diversity, can be conceived of in terms of teaching practice and curriculum (Liddicoat 2003). Harman (2005:133) notes that research in this area in Australian higher education is limited, but also points out that much of the research to date has been in the accounting, business, management and computer science areas – a trend that most likely reflects relatively higher proportions of international students in these fields. Other research has indicated that in Australian universities, many staff and students have been unable to fully engage with internationalisation – a situation that has been attributed by some to a lack of theoretical and practical (institutional) support for this (Trevaskes et al. 2003). Further, while Knight’s definition of internationalisation above seeks to incorporate international and intercultural dimensions of internationalisation, curriculum approaches have often focused on incorporating international perspectives in content as this is more easily achieved than the development of intercultural understanding (Liddicoat 2003). Such approaches are often based on a ‘static’ view of culture, treating culture as a static object (Liddicoat 2002; Doherty & Singh 2005) and cultural differences as fixed (Kubota 2000). As such, they can be seen as a means of ‘cultural reproduction, reproducing and legitimating “fixed” retrospective subjectivities’ rather than offering new ways of expressing identity (Doherty 2004:6) or new ways of knowing and doing as proposed by Johnson and Kress (2003) above. In contrast to static views of culture, ‘dynamic’ views define culture in terms of social practices (Liddicoat 2002).

The intercultural dimension of internationalisation is often overlooked, or treated separately in educational terms (Crichton et al. 2004). Liddicoat (2003) suggests that this division is reflected in institutional policy and practice, which often emphasises remedial support for international students over intercultural teaching and learning. The former view sits with a ‘deficit’ approach to diversity, an approach which ‘conceptualises differences as “deficits”, effectively blaming students for their lack of “preparedness”’ (Lawrence 2005:244). This approach is one that underpins some preparatory programs (Doherty & Singh 2005), and remedial models of English language support for enrolled international and local NESB students, including models of support based only on ‘adjunct’ academic English workshops (Wingate 2006). While preparatory programs, particularly those that provide English language preparation can be extremely valuable, some can be criticised for constructing international students as deficient - as ‘outsider or Other’ in relation to ‘Western’ students and ‘Western traditions’ (Doherty & Singh 2005:53).

Likewise, while adjunct workshops offered to students during their degree program undoubtedly have a place within a comprehensive institutional response to student needs, in the case where students have already achieved the level of language proficiency required for university entry, they are not a complete answer, suggesting that further language learning is separate to and should precede disciplinary learning. Gibbons (2002) discusses this issue in relation to the language and academic development of ESL learners in school classrooms, arguing that there is not time for second language learners to learn language before learning through language. Wingate (2006) discusses a number of limitations of a ‘bolt-on’ rather than ‘built-in’ approach (Bennett et al. 2001) to supporting student learning in higher education, including that students who need support most are less likely to attend and that students are unmotivated due to a lack of relevant content (p. 458). Perhaps more significantly, a model of support that involves only adjunct workshops brings with it the risk of shifting responsibility for the development of academic and professional communication skills away from lecturers and their subject learning outcomes, promoting
both the idea that these skills are in some way separate to discipline content, and the view that any problems experienced by international and local NESB students are a product of student ‘deficit’ rather than something that might be addressed in any way through teaching or curriculum.

Although difficult to document, a ‘deficit’ model can underlie an attitude among teaching staff that diversity creates an extra burden, rather than offers an opportunity for individual and program enrichment. Another possible response to increasing class sizes, decreasing resources and growth in international and local NESB student numbers at unit or program level is to reduce the linguistic and cognitive demands of assessment, and at the same time reduce the marking load for lecturers by introducing multiple choice and short answer assessment tasks (see Kirkpatrick and Mulligan 2002 for a discussion of this response to increasing class sizes and decreasing resources). Similarly, lecturers may opt to avoid individual and group oral presentations or tutorial discussion which may be perceived as too linguistically challenging or too difficult to manage with larger class sizes. It should be noted here however that there are many examples in higher education literature of more positive responses to the changes outlined above, that are taken either at unit level by a lecturer or small group of lecturers (e.g. Doherty 2004), or at program level, for example by a program coordinator or committee (e.g. Curro & McGaffart 2003; Lawrence 2005). At the same time, a small sample of recent research literature (e.g. Hellstén & Prescott 2005; Clifford 2005; Leask 2005) suggests that the international experience of teaching and learning within many Australian universities remains less than ideal.

A focus on the opportunities created by increasing diversity in university classrooms, rather than student ‘problems’ or ‘deficits’, involves not only an examination of teaching practice (e.g. ways in which ‘students’ first culture perspective can be adopted and/or adapted in existing teaching and learning contexts’ (Liddicoat 2003:16)), but also focuses on learning and interactions from the perspective of all students – local and international, and their teachers. The approach advocated by Liddicoat bears many similarities, although is not identical to, ‘contextual’ approaches to diversity described by Biggs (2003:136), drawing on work by Vosdet and Renshaw (1996). Biggs sees ‘learning in context’ as ‘simply aligned teaching: the [teaching and learning activities] encourage students to engage those cognitive processes most likely to achieve the objectives’ (p. 137), and as consistent with a view of teaching as ‘educating’, rather than as ‘assimilating’ or ‘accommodating’ (p. 124). He suggests that in teaching international students, teachers ‘focus on the similarities between students rather than on the differences’ (2003:139). While this advice usefully serves to shift some responsibility for student learning onto teachers and highlights the importance of good teaching, it overlooks the interrelationships between language and learning, and misses an opportunity to draw on diversity as a resource. A similar point is made by Asnar (2005) who asks ‘whether making difference invisible is really in the overall interests of a student body whose members will graduate into a globalised and multicultural world’ (p. 294).

It is noted here that the form of constructivism advocated by Biggs (2003) places little emphasis on the role of language in learning, but rather, is grounded in a focus on cognitive processes and an integrated view of learning is offered within systemic functional linguistics by Halliday (1978, 1992) who sees learning as a semiotic process. Halliday argues that

[cognitive and linguistic processes] are not two different things, they are two different ways of looking at the same thing. We can interpret such processes cognitively, as thought, or semantically, as meaning – as one aspect of the total phenomenon we call “language” (Halliday 1998: in Painter 1999:62).

This form of ‘linguistic’ constructivism can be seen as complementing the approach taken within ‘socio-cognitive’ constructivism (e.g. Biggs 2003): where ‘the construction of experience [in the latter] is usually thought of as knowledge, having the form of conceptual taxonomies’, systemic functional linguistics treats ‘experience not as knowing but as meaning; and hence as something that is construed in language’ (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999:1). Vygotsky (1978, 1981) also conceived of learning in terms of semiotic mediation, referring to the mediation of activity through the use of abstract and concrete tools, although a fuller explanation and critique of Vygotsky’s work are beyond the scope of this paper.

The systemic functional model of language is multilayered: meaning (or the semantic system), is realised by wording (or lexicogrammar) which in turn is realised by sounds (phonology) (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999). The systemic functional model also provides a framework for analysing the interrelationships between meaning (and lexicogrammar) and the contexts of language use: specifically the context of situation (or register) and the context of culture (or genre). Meaning is seen as expressed through a combination of ideational, textual and interpersonal modes or metafunctions, defined by Halliday and Matthiessen (1999) as follows:

The ideational metafunction is concerned with construing experience – it is language as a the-
ory of reality, as a resource for reflecting on the world … The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with enacting personal relationships through language, with the adoption and assignment of speech roles, with the negotiation of attitudes, and so on – it is language in the praxis of intersubjectivity, as a resource for interacting with others. The textual metafunction in an enabling one; it is concerned with organizing ideational and interpersonal meaning as discourse – as meaning that is contextualised and shared (pp. 7-8).

In this way, meaning (and hence learning) can be seen to extend beyond words and concepts to include interpersonal and textual dimensions. The form of ‘socio-cognitive’ constructivism advocated by Biggs (2003) can be seen as centred on an approach to meaning that draws from the ‘logico-philosophical’ tradition (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999:415), in that it regards meaning as ‘closely associated with representation, reference, denotation, extension or “aboutness”’, deeming it to be ‘outside the limits of language’ (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999: 416-417). Halliday and Matthiessen argue that approaches drawing from the logico-philosophical tradition generally rely on a model of semantics that only takes account of the ideational metafunction, either disregarding the interpersonal or textual metafunctions altogether, or dealing with the latter as pragmatics rather than semantics.

The systemic functional model of language provides a general framework for developing the academic and professional communication skills of students within the context of disciplinary learning. It offers the opportunity to view learning, not simply as the construction of knowledge, but as a ‘process of making meaning’ (Halliday 1993:93). Where learning is seen as a process of constructing meaning, learning outcomes extend to incorporating interpersonal and textual dimensions. This provides practitioners with a means of moving beyond a focus on the influence of gross demographics or cultural stereotypes learning, to reconsidering teaching, learning and assessment practices – in the first instance by providing explicit guidance on the expression of interpersonal and textual meanings in written and oral assessment tasks. As an example, practitioners may provide guidance on, and develop assessment criteria that take into account, language features that express relationships between writer and audience, levels of formality and modality (interpersonal meanings), and the expression of these through elements of structure at clause, paragraph and text level (textual meanings).

While the systemic functional model provides some support in the specification of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, it can also be applied, in tandem with sociological theory, to examining the relation between spoken language and the process of learning. This application of the model supports further exploration of the implications of cultural and linguistic diversity for teaching and learning as discussed further below.

**Spoken Language and Learning in Diverse Higher Education Settings**

Where teaching and learning are mediated through language, it would be expected that discussion of issues of linguistic and cultural diversity in higher education would include reference to the use of spoken language in classrooms, and its relationship to learning. Within the higher education literature however, while discussions of diversity often mention issues of ‘discourse’, they frequently 1) focus on institutional discourses (e.g. Devos 2003); 2) lack systematic reference to a theory of language in use; or 3) are based on the analysis of interview data rather than language in use, with relatively few studies that focus on the analysis of language in use in diverse university classroom settings. Further to this, studies of classroom discourse vary considerably in their focus: where spoken language is considered directly or indirectly in relation to learning, it is variously regarded as facilitating: participation in academic or professional settings (dimensions of this include the construction of roles, identity or community membership, and social development); the construction or distribution of knowledge; or language development. Within many of these studies, the goals of learning are implied through the use of a particular theoretical or methodological framework rather than directly addressed. Where learning is directly addressed, it is generally seen as concerning only participation or knowledge construction or language development, rather than within a framework that links these three, or in terms of the construction of meaning. As noted by Christie (2002) a lack of reference to meaning is a common characteristic of research on classroom discourse:

> [A] great deal of classroom discourse analysis had had a lot to say about the structuring of talk … but it has often neglected to look at the nature of meanings in construction, the relative roles and responsibilities of teachers and students at the time of constructing those meanings, and the placement of such patterns in the overall larger cycle of classroom work (p. 5).

Bernstein’s (1990, 2000) theoretical work on the sociology of pedagogy provides tools for examining discursive interaction as located in classrooms, and particularly the relations between social positioning and participation in social practice. The latter
provides a theoretical framework for analysing and describing the ways that people vary in their engagement in social practices despite a shared context (Hasan 2005), and thus has the potential to contribute to the effectiveness of teachers and learners in diverse classroom settings (Hasan 2005).

Several researchers, notably Hammond (2001), Gibbons (2002) Kress et al. (2001), Hasan (2005) and Christie (2002) have applied the systemic functional model of language to theorising on the relationship between classroom discourse and learning. Christie’s (2002) model of classroom discourse analysis in particular integrates theories of language and learning, and draws from Bernstein’s (1990, 2000) work on pedagogic discourse. At one level this framework provides an interpretation of classrooms as sites in which culture is enacted and transmitted through spoken language, while at another level it provides a means by which classroom interaction can be analysed in relation to longer cycles of teaching and learning. Within this framework, there may be an opportunity to consider the consequences of curriculum and classroom planning for students’ access to knowledge as distributed through lecturer-student and student-student talk framed within broader patterns of curriculum structure. In the first instance this allows for an exploration of the ways in which learning may be shaped by the discursive histories of participants (Bernstein 1990, 2000; Hasan 2002). Rather than identifying student deficits that require remediation, the analysis of teaching and learning practice based on this framework may yield data that can be applied by practitioners in planning for and facilitating classroom interaction, and more generally in curriculum planning.

**Conclusion**

This paper has provided a brief overview of some of the changes affecting Australian higher education, with particular reference to internationalisation and the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of Australian university campuses, and the range of possible responses to these. It has touched on the potential application of a systemic functional model of language to the specification of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, as a framework to guide the development of academic and professional communication skills within the context of disciplinary learning in higher education. It has also suggested that implications of cultural and linguistic diversity for teaching and learning in higher education may be further explored by applying Christie’s (2002) model of classroom discourse analysis. In this way, ‘culture’ can be regarded not as a ‘static’ object of study reflected only in the inclusion of international perspectives in program content, but as playing a larger role in shaping discourse in classrooms that in turn, serves to mediate learning. Findings from such research could lead to responses to diversity that, rather than drawing on cultural and other stereotypes, could maximize opportunities to draw on diversity as a resource, by valuing ‘different ways of knowing and different ways of doing’ (Johnson & Kress 2003:6), supporting future efforts to integrate ‘an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of education (Knight 2004:11).

**References**


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