

Ongoing academic orientation: Bridging the academic and cultural gap between international students and their teachers?

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Abstract

This paper first outlines a 12 week programme of Ongoing Academic Orientation (OAO) which was trialled in the Waikato Management School (WMS) during the 2004 A and B semesters and then reports the results of a questionnaire survey given to the students who followed the programme in A semester 2004. The questionnaire had three functions: to gather data on the trial programme's efficacy, content, timing, and length; to gain some insights into the extent to which these students were engaging with their New Zealand English-speaking environment on a daily basis; and to determine if those taking the programme had also sought one-to-one Language and Learning (L&L) help, and if so, had they found it helpful. While the majority of students found the OAO programme and the one-to-one tutorials useful, the results on their daily use of English were of concern. Hence ways of encouraging intercultural contact through conversation classes are discussed and then recommended for inclusion alongside the OAO in future.

Keywords

Acculturation, academic support

Introduction

Along with many other New Zealand and Australian tertiary education providers, WMS has seen a rapid escalation in its numbers of international students in recent years, in particular students from The People's Republic of China (PRC). In the last few years, over 35% of WMS' 4,000 students have been from overseas. While these students have met the IELTS entry requirements of 6.0 overall for undergraduate study and 6.5 overall for graduate study, they are often inadequately prepared for the major cultural adjustments they will need to make if they are to flourish within the New Zealand academic environment. Consequently, finding an effective mechanism to help international students to quickly acculturate to their new academic environment is one of the major challenges which the Language and Learning Development team in WMS has recently confronted. This paper outlines the trial of our 2004 A and B semester OAO programme and discusses the findings of a questionnaire survey we conducted with students who were offered this programme in the A semester.

Background

A number of the ISANA 2002 conference papers sowed the seeds for this paper and for the trial programme of ongoing academic orientation which it reports. It was influenced most particularly by Sefton and Taylor's workshop "Conducting Orientation Programs for International Students: Bringing the Diversity Jigsaw Together", by Kernebone-Tobin's "An Exploration of the Adaptation Experiences of International Students at Victoria University of Wellington", by Moncrieff's "LAS Advising: More Than Just 'Fixing Up Their English'", and lastly by Pickering's "Plugging the Plagiarism Plague". These four pieces struck a chord which resonated with issues we had been grappling with for some time; for example, how could the Language and Learning Development team best help new international students to adapt quickly to the academic culture of our School?

In their workshop, Sefton and Taylor invited participants to work together in groups to answer five questions:

1. Why do we deliver orientations?
2. What do we have to cover?
3. When?
4. How do we do it?
5. How do we know we are doing it well?

While most groups seemed to agree on why they deliver orientation to new international students, there seemed to be little clear agreement on the other areas. The wide variation in the responses to these questions, however, most likely reflected the diverse roles which ISANA members play in their institutions. As Language and Learning Developers our primary interest lay in discovering what other Learning Developers thought was important in terms of an academic orientation programme's content, timing, and approach. Furthermore, we were eager to know how we could evaluate the success of such programmes in helping to orient recently arrived international students to WMS.

While much has been written about the adaptations which international students may need to make, for example, to their preferred teaching and learning styles when studying in Australia (c.f. Samuelowicz, 1987; Gordon, 2004; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Beaver & Bhat, 2002), Kernebone-Tobin's paper particularly interested us because it focused on the ongoing cultural adaptation required of international students in another New Zealand university. Such a focus recognises that international students, to all intents and purposes, enter a "foreign" culture when they come to study in New Zealand, a "foreign", academic culture which they often, at best, only partially understand on arrival. In addition, Moncrieff (2002) notes "even students who have been very successful in their own countries may have to learn new skills due to the different natures of western and some other academic cultures" (p. 63); most importantly, she goes on to note "Many of these skills are not taught along side the subject content" (p. 63). Consequently, it would seem that there is a rationale for offering new international students an additional programme which orients them as quickly as possible to the rules and expectations of their western academic institutions.

Over the years, international students have provided the WMS L&L tutors with ample anecdotal evidence to convince us that many students struggle to recognise, negotiate, and adapt to their new academic culture. In particular, WMS international students struggle with the academic conventions surrounding plagiarism and critical thinking, and as Pickering (2002) pointed out they are not alone. Again much has been written on the topic of Confucian heritage cultures and their attitude to “knowledge”. Ballard and Clanchy (1991), in particular, have provided considerable insight into the ways in which different cultures conceive of and treat knowledge. Those who come from a culture with a “conserving” attitude to knowledge, for example PRC students, are often expected to modify their previous acculturation considerably when confronted with an “extending” attitude to knowledge such as that found in WMS. However, lecturers and subject tutors do not always appear to make these culturally bound academic expectations sufficiently transparent or intelligible to their international students. At worst, there is perhaps an unquestioned assumption on the part of teachers that all academic cultures are the same or, at best, an expectation that international students will immediately adapt to the New Zealand practices simply by being told to “think critically”, to “use APA referencing”, and to “read the university’s regulations on plagiarism”.

Armed with thoughts on developing a programme of academic orientation for new WMS international students, our next step after ISANA 2002 was to facilitate a workshop entitled “Academic Orientation: What Works When?” for Language and Learning Developers at the ATLAANZ 2003 conference in Hamilton. Drawing on our findings from this workshop, we designed a 12 session programme of ongoing academic orientation for international students starting their first semester in WMS in 2004.

The Ongoing Academic Orientation Programme

The programme outlined below aimed to acculturate new international students to the academic conventions and discourse practices of WMS, and to explore with them the concept of critical thinking, and the importance placed on it by their lecturers. The programme was not compulsory, nor was it credit-bearing, but the 78 students who enrolled were strongly advised to attend at least the first 5 “mandatory” sessions, the remaining 7 being optional. Each class lasted for 50 minutes and, initially, 8 classes were offered each week.

Week 1:	What are your WMS lecturers’ expectations?
Week 2:	Using the ideas of others: Direct quotation, paraphrasing and summarising
Week 3:	Using the ideas of others: Referencing and plagiarism
Week 4:	Writing a “western-style” academic essay – The importance of discussion and argumentation
Week 5:	APA referencing conventions and practice
Week 6:	Report writing
Week 7:	Group work
Week 8:	Oral presentations
Week 9:	Case studies

Week 10:	Critiques
Week 11:	Literature reviews
Week 12:	Taking exams and tests

Method

Although students had already completed an evaluation of the programme halfway through A semester, we wanted a fuller evaluation of the whole programme, and so conducted a questionnaire survey. In early October 2004, a questionnaire was sent electronically to the 78 students who had participated in the A semester trial. Only A semester participants were chosen because we thought that, after almost two semesters in WMS, they would be in a better position to reflect on the usefulness of the programme than those still following the B semester programme. Each student received a personalised email explaining the purpose of the study and a request to complete and return the questionnaire online. A deliberate decision was taken to approach each student individually by name because we were advised by senior Chinese students that PRC students often did not open and read “generic” email.

The questionnaire contained 27 questions. These questions had three functions: to gather data on the trial programme’s efficacy, content, timing, and length; to gain some insights into the extent to which these students were engaging with their New Zealand English-speaking environment on a daily basis; and to determine how many of the new students, in addition to taking the programme, had sought one-to-one L&L help, and whether or not they had found that service helpful.

With these aims in mind, Questions 1-6 gathered data on age, gender, ethnicity, WMS course of study, academic status (i.e., graduate or undergraduate) and year of study. 7 asked about the students’ term-time living arrangements. Questions 8-10 were designed to gauge the students’ opinion of their skills in English, asking them to assess their competence in speaking, reading, and writing. In order to gain some insight into students’ daily language use, Question 11 asked the respondents to indicate on a five point descriptive scale the average amount of time they spent speaking in English each day, while Question 12 asked them to estimate the amount of time they spoke their native language each day, using the same scale. Questions 12 and 13 asked who they spent most of their time with, again using a five point descriptive scale, and how much time they spent with those people. Offering five options, Question 15 sought to discover how much extra time the students spent studying English (rather than just using it). The next two questions probed how well prepared the students felt they were for study before coming to WMS, while Question 17 asked them to re-evaluate their perception of their degree of preparedness once they had been there for 3 weeks.

The next section of the questionnaire dealt with the Ongoing Academic Orientation programme itself. Question 19 asked students if they had found the programme useful, and if so, in what ways. Here an open question allowed them to write whatever they wanted. Question 20 invited students to say in what ways they had not found the programme useful, if they had answered “No” to Question 19. Questions 21-23 asked if the programme should be compulsory, when it should be delivered, and how many

weeks/sessions it should cover. Question 24 offered three options related to the amount of material covered in the programme, while Question 25, an open question, asked if any parts of the OAO programme should have been omitted. The final two questions asked students if they had also had a one-to-one L&L tutorial, and if so, had it been helpful.

Findings and Discussion

Forty-five of the 78 students returned the completed questionnaire, a success rate of around 57%. The appendix provides the questionnaire's full results.

The OAO programme's efficacy

The primary aim of the questionnaire was to determine whether or not the students found the OAO programme helpful: 88.89% did find the programme helpful. One student wrote, for example, that it had helped in "learning how to survive at university", while another wrote "The course gives [sic] me a chance to improve my studying skills and writing skills: The way to study in a western university". Only two students (4.44%) stated that they did not find it helpful; however, these students also indicated that they had attended only one class.

Many of the respondents completed the open question which asked them to identify specific parts of the programme that they had found useful (see Appendix Question 19). The session on APA referencing was judged very important and students said they appreciated the opportunity to practise "doing APA exercises". They also were able to see the connection between the APA referencing conventions and plagiarism with one student, commenting, "The programme helped me to understand the consequences of plagiarism and APA referencing". Students also stated that they valued the classes on the academic discourses used in WMS. They liked "help with academic writing", "ways to write essays, eg reports and its [sic] different types. Real examples given too", knowing more about "writing format of English country [sic]", and advice on "how to do group work". The programme appeared to meet the academic acculturation needs of both first year undergraduate and graduate students; it was also judged to be of use by our third year PRC joint-programme undergraduates.

The OAO programme's content

Generally, respondents expressed satisfaction with the programme's content with no one suggesting that any of the material should be omitted. Although 26.67% thought the programme contained too little material, when asked in Question 24 what else they would include in the programme, these respondents tended to ask for topics that had been offered in the second half of the semester, for example, "help with preparing for exams". Thus it would seem there was a correlation between a desire for more content and the number of sessions the students had attended. Respondents had a number of ideas on additional content. There was considerable evidence that the students wanted a chance to speak more English, learn more about "Kiwi culture not just Maoris [sic]", and "get to know the local students" One student, for example, wanted "the development of the skills to interact with group members or students from different culture [sic] (language and culture differences can be the major barriers to communication)". Another student commented "I live in College Hall. Most of my neighbours are from Shanghai as well. I

don't have enough opportunity to speak English". We will return to the importance of spoken English skills later in this paper.

The OAO programme's timing and length

There was no clear consensus on the programme's length, but in terms of its timing, 60% would like it before the beginning of semester, and roughly 29% wanted it in the first week of semester. These responses did, however, seem to conflict with the answers given to Question 23 where respondents were asked to indicate how long the programme should run for overall, as over 70% wanted it to last for either 6 or 12 weeks. Here faulty questionnaire design may have contributed to this contradictory finding as the word "weeks" was used and not "sessions" or "classes". As a result, students may have chosen the number of times they had personally attended the programme, believing that this was the "right" response to make.

Even though the majority of the sample group had not attended all 12 weeks of the OAO programme, 68.89% still thought it should be compulsory for new international students.

As the OAO programme aimed to help the students acculturate quickly to their new academic environment, it was interesting to note their answers to Questions 16 and 17 which asked them to estimate how well prepared they thought they were for study on arrival, and 3 weeks later (see Appendix Questions 16 and 17). None of the new international students felt "very well prepared" initially, but after 3 weeks a small number had revised their estimate upwards. The 40% of students who said they felt "well prepared" in Question 16 dropped to 17.78% in answer to Question 17. The percentage who felt "not well" or "poorly prepared" also rose to 35.56%. Analysis of the responses to Questions 16 and 17 does not, however, indicate a clear pattern, if students revised their first assessment. Some who had opted for "not well prepared" in Question 16 changed their opinion to "very well prepared" in answer to Question 17, while others who had initially thought they were "quite well prepared" decided that they were "poorly prepared" after 3 weeks. These findings suggest that, in addition to using a questionnaire survey, it would also be useful to conduct interviews with students in future research. The interview method could help to determine exactly why students change their opinion on how well prepared they believe they are to study in WMS, and thus provide greater insight into their understanding of the real demands of studying in the School. Overall around 40% of students estimated in answer to both questions that they were "quite well prepared". This modest assessment could, however, be seen as representing the traditional humility of Confucian heritage students such as the young, female PRC students who constituted almost two thirds of this survey sample.

In conclusion, a number of issues which relate to the trial programme's timing, length and content material still need to be resolved. First, OAO was neither compulsory nor credit-bearing; as a result, only the most committed 15.57% followed the full 12 weeks of the programme. Many attended only the "mandatory" first half of semester and so were not acculturated to the specific types of academic discourse dealt with in the second half of the programme; nor did they attend the session which advised them on how to approach examinations in WMS. Secondly, timetabling the programme was problematic as this involved trying to second-guess times when students would be free to come in

sufficient numbers. Given the time pressures of their already crowded schedules, it would be better, in future, to align the timing of the OAO classes more closely with the participants' timetables, even if doing so meant offering more classes and having smaller groups.

Respondents' English skills and daily language usage

The questionnaire survey's second purpose was to gather data on the extent to which respondents were engaging with their New Zealand English-speaking environment on a daily basis; our findings are presented and discussed below.

While 53.33% of the students judged their reading skills in English as "very good" or "excellent" (4.44%), 42.22% rated them as "quite poor". Similarly, 53.33% described their writing skills as "very good", with the remaining 46.67% opting for "quite poor". In response to Question 8, 53.33% judged their spoken English as "good", 11.11% thought it "very good", and 2.22% ticked "excellent". Nevertheless, the answers to Question 11 show 53.33% of the sample use English "1 hour or less" a day, with 13.33% claiming to use no English. This result corresponds further with the findings for Questions 7, 12, 13 and 14 which indicate that most of the students live with, and spend most of their time with, people from the same or a similar culture. In addition, 28.89% use their native language 12 hours a day, with a further 28.87% using their own language for 8 hours a day. The picture that emerges from the results of Questions 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 is a worrying one because it indicates that the respondents have not yet really integrated into their New Zealand English speaking environment. Although they are studying in English, and generally feel competent in their reading and writing skills, many speak little or no English each day, and a third spend no extra time on developing their English skills. These findings may also go some way to explaining why a number of students asked for the inclusion of speaking skills in the OAO programme in answer to Question 24.

Our sample group had also expressed a desire for practice in spoken English in their mid-term appraisal of the A semester programme. As a result, in B semester we offered a weekly conversation class in Cultural Hour (Wednesday 1-2 p.m., a time when no classes are scheduled so that students can engage in "cultural activities" around the campus.) Although, this conversation class was not part of OAO, it proved popular and successful in meeting the needs of those wishing to practise and improve their speaking and listening skills. Consequently, next year we will run additional conversation sessions, some of which will pair international students with students taking WMS' fourth year intercultural communication paper or with students in a proposed international student mentoring system.

Satisfaction with one-to-one L&L Development tutorials

The final function of the questionnaire survey was to determine how many students had also used our one-to-one tutorials. We were interested in this data because we had allocated resources from these tutorials to the OAO on a trial basis. Twenty of the 45 respondents had also come for individual help and they all said they had found that help useful.

Conclusions

Despite the need to make some modifications, we are convinced the OAO programme was helpful to most of those who took part in the A semester trial. Both graduate and undergraduate students found the trial programme of use. However, in future it might be more appropriate to provide the one-year graduate diploma students with a shorter, more intensive version of OAO, because lecturers expect these students to be skilled in the academic discourses at third and fourth year level, even though they may have had insufficient acculturation in western academic writing styles.

We are also convinced that an ongoing programme, rather than a one-off academic orientation, is of value to new international students because it provides the opportunity to adapt to the New Zealand tertiary academic environment using a cultural skill building approach. As Pickering (2002) notes, “What is not necessarily well recognised is how long students may take to learn these skills and at what point they are “indoctrinated” into the institutional . . . paradigm” (p. 107), and that “this indoctrination is more difficult than is usually realised, especially for international students, because it requires a paradigm shift in thinking for many of these students as well as learning specific skills” (p. 107). In addition, we believe it is worth putting rather more of our limited resources into the OAO group teaching, even though that will mean a reduction in the resources allocated to our traditional one-to-one support.

The questionnaire findings show that those OAO students who had one-to-one L&L tutorials clearly valued these and so the OAO programme may act as a useful bridge for introducing new students, at an early stage, to the L&L tutors and to the types of support we offer.

Disturbing though they were, the survey results regarding the new international students’ daily use of English and their engagement with other English speakers appear to support Ward’s (2001) finding that although “international students expect and desire contact with their domestic peers . . . the amount of interaction between international and domestic students is low” (.1). An OAO programme can, to a limited extent, help to acculturate international students to their new academic environment. However, finding mechanisms to encourage more intercultural contact with domestic students is also desirable if international students are to achieve the wider and important social acculturation and integration highlighted by Kernebone-Tobin (2002), and to develop the oral skills they require for effective group work and tutorial participation. As a result, we believe we can augment our academic acculturation programme with the provision of intercultural conversation classes. In this way, we would be responding to the suggestions made in answer to Question 25 by one student who wanted “conversations like culture hours; fun games, offer more opportunities for new students to talk about their lives.”

In conclusion, we were sufficiently heartened by the survey results and by comments such as “I really think this programme is very useful for a new student who haven’t study in the university programme before [sic]” to believe that it is important to offer an in-depth academic acculturation programme to newly arrived international students as part of our WMS Language and Learning Development services.

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