

Speak Up: A program to help international students find their academic 'voices' in Australian university tutorials

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A major challenge for international students in adjusting to the learning environment of Australian and New Zealand universities is learning to contribute to tutorial discussions and in gaining the necessary self-confidence to make effective oral presentations. This can be difficult for native speakers of English who are making the transition between high school and university, but it is more difficult for ESL students from cultures where passive learning is often the norm and their own opinions are not valued in the classroom. Thus, they are reluctant to challenge the authority of their texts, or their lecturers and tutors. Their task is made more exacting by their unfamiliarity with the Australian (or New Zealand) accent, idioms, and discourse patterns. Frequently, the international students' own accent and discourse patterns hinder their ability to communicate effectively, leading to a further decline in their self-confidence. The Academic Skills Program (ASP), at the University of Canberra, runs a weekly program for international students to help them build confidence, become active learners, make effective presentations, and to find their academic 'voices'. This paper surveys the literature on international student participation in tutorials, outlines the activities of the 'Speak Up' program, and suggests some practical learning and teaching strategies to help foster the self-confidence and tutorial skills of international students.