

Left in the dark from the word go? International students and Aussie Talk.

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Abstract

As part of our renowned informality, Australians use colloquial language extensively in everyday and academic life. International students, particularly new ones, are frequently left in the dark by our use of slang and idiom. This paper alerts International Student Advisors to the complexity of colloquial Australian English and suggests strategies and activities to empower students through a better understanding of Aussie Talk. Included will be things to be aware of when talking to students, ideas for fun activities that could be used in orientation sessions and suggestions of how students can increase their understanding in this area.

Introduction

A large number of new ISAs have entered the international education field in the last six years. They come from a range of backgrounds, not necessarily ESL ones. As Aussie Talk continues to be an important issue, it was considered a good idea to revisit that topic. This paper is therefore an updated version of 'Aussie Talk – workshop for ISAs' given at the 2000 ISANA Conference.

Despite the difficulties of the English language international students often master it very well. Many students from non-English speaking backgrounds survive, succeed and even excel in their tertiary studies in Australia. The English language skills of these students vary enormously and the writing and reading skills of some can be very good. However the exposure they have had to spoken English is varied: one extreme being the mainland Chinese student who has learnt English from a Chinese teacher and who has never spoken to a native speaker until his/her arrival in Australia, the other, the student from India or Singapore who has had much of his/her schooling in English. Nevertheless the majority of these students have one thing in common – little or no previous exposure to colloquial Australian language.

Some students complete ELICOS courses of from 5 to 40 weeks. Those who do longer courses which include a General English component may learn some colloquial English as part of their formal course and all will have exposure to Australian teachers and varying amounts of incidental tuition in Aussie Talk. Lack of understanding of colloquial Australian English may cause considerable frustration and misunderstanding for many students especially during their first semesters. Difficulty understanding colloquial language has been ranked highly among the problems cited by international students (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000). International students may feel 'disadvantaged by their cultural ignorance and by not knowing Australian idiom...' (Stewart, McAllister, Rose & Chan 1996).

Even students who are very competent in many aspects of English initially find oral communication very difficult in Australia. They may be able to read their textbooks and write essays, but have great difficulty understanding teachers and lecturers and particularly other (Aussie) students. They may find it hard if not impossible to take part in class discussions and casual conversations with classmates and frustrated at their inability to make friends. A common feeling about group work with local students (essential in many courses) is succinctly summed up in the title of a recent journal article (Strauss, 2001) – 'I'd rather vomit up a live hedgehog' - L2 students and group assessment in mainstream university programs! A number of factors contribute to these difficulties including initial unfamiliarity with the Australian accent, differences in teaching and learning styles, 'culture shock' and unfamiliarity with Australian discourse styles and rules of conversation, but the one addressed here is unfamiliarity with Aussie Talk, which can cause ongoing misunderstanding.

Arthur Delbridge (1984 : xi) says, 'a close acquaintance with the colloquialisms of Aussie talk is a necessary part of linguistic competence in Australia'. Unfortunately, this is not often realised by students before they start studying here and even when it hits them they often don't know how to increase their competence in this area. As

a LAS adviser I bring this issue to the attention of international students in orientation sessions and run Aussie Talk workshops at the start of each semester and such sessions may well be available at your institutions, but today my main aim is to alert you to the importance of this aspect of language and make a few suggestions for activities that you might like to use in orientation sessions.

It has been suggested that 'being informal on any and every occasion is perhaps more important in Australia than anywhere else in the world' (Butler 1994: 14). Maybe because Australians tend to be informal, relaxed and egalitarian, (Butler: 2001), even in academic situations like lectures, a great deal of colloquial language is used as well as frequent references to Australian people, places and institutions, (eg BHP, ANZ, Thorpedo, Dame Edna, the MCG). So students who have studied formal, academic English can be quite nonplussed, not only by the slang of their fellow students, but by the language of their lecturers.

A knowledge of slang and idiom is necessary in everyday life but it is also vital in tertiary education, particularly in its receptive aspect. Students will encounter it frequently when listening to lecturers and teachers and other students in discussions and presentations and, more and more commonly these days, when working with other students on group projects. In many disciplines students are required to conduct interviews and surveys and, in the medical sciences, talk to patients and other medical staff in clinical placements. In all these situations they will be at a disadvantage if they cannot understand the colloquial language used. Many courses require students to read texts other than textbooks eg newspaper and journal articles, where colloquialisms are abundant. Even academic texts in areas such as medicine are often written 'with implicit assumptions about the reader's knowledge of informal language' (Barrett & Chur-Hansen 1998:36).

In my Aussie Talk workshops I divide Aussie Talk into four categories; colloquialisms, slang, idiom and Australian words and explain each. (Colloquialisms being informal language, slang, very informal language, idioms, expressions that have specific, non-literal meanings and Australian words, terms for specifically Australian things, people and places.) This short paper concentrates on slang and idiom. Of course not all the examples are exclusive to Australian English.

Slang

Slang is not 'poor English' but a powerful part of our language 'fresh, and alive, racy and very often ironic and humorous'. (Lambert 1996: vi) Susan Butler (2003) explains 'Slang is sometimes described as language with its shirt sleeves rolled up. IT is relaxed - deliberately so' In Australia this sort of slang is used quite often in formal situations. (Listen carefully to the official welcome made by your VC or other important people to your new international students.) The other type of slang is the specialised cant or jargon of particular sub-groups eg teenagers, computer buffs, surfers, drug users, medicos etc, some of which students will come in contact with. This is the type of slang meant in the witty but anonymous quote 'the chief use of slang is to show that you're one of the gang' (Crystal, 1995: 182). Some of this type of slang, in particular from the sporting world has permeated academia and politics (eg 'sticky wicket', 'on the ropes') (Smith, 2001).

Some Australian slang words and expressions 'have completely different meanings in Australia to the meanings they have in English speaking countries north of the equator (eg crook, barbie, dill, ripper, scrub); some commonly used words have been shortened almost beyond recognition' (Armstrong, 1997) eg bickie, blowie, budgie and brekkie. Others are uniquely Australian eg bogan, chook, Chrissie, chockie chunder Cro-wearer and dag! Slang and idiom also features strongly in newspaper journalism particularly in headlines. Students in many courses are required to read newspaper articles that can present linguistic difficulty due to use of all the four elements of Aussie talk. Consider the mastery of colloquialisms, slang, idiom and Australian words needed to interpret the following - 'Pollies square off on triangle', 'Tardy parents slugged', 'Compo fight victory' and my all time favourite 'Blues' stoush sparks footy brawl!

Idioms

Idioms are 'tricky beasts' (Burke 1995: vii). Because of their special grammatical and semantic characteristics they must be learned. Although my emphasis here is on reception it should be remembered that it is very easy for

non-native speakers of English to get them wrong in speech and writing (eg 'without running around the bush any longer, I should come to the point'). Many commonly used idioms and colloquialisms are also used in British and American English but some appear to be used more frequently and possibly in more formal contexts in Australia. For example an Australian friend who has recently moved to New York reported that Americans (or New Yorkers at least) need translations of expressions like 'I'm flat out', 'don't get carried away' and 'It's gone off' and find them strange and amusing. Some other idioms are particular to Australia eg 'beyond the black stump', 'come the raw prawn', 'mad as a cut snake' etc. ! Idioms are frequently used in business and I.T. journals that students are expected to read (eg 'Don't bank on it', 'Hire firms on fire', 'cotton on to' (*BRW*) or 'in the swim', 'fit the bill', 'gets a guernsey' (*The Age Next* Nov 21 2001). Just to confuse students further, sometimes idioms are altered for dramatic effect in headlines eg 'Any portal in a storm', 'The hard cell', 'In the line of fibre' (*BRW*), 'Nerds of a feather', (*The Age Next*).

Have a go!

Many of us (even language teachers) are not aware of how frequently we use slang and idiom in our interactions with students. They are of course, used in contexts which often give clues to the meaning. However the meaning is not always clear. In an attempt to replicate the experience for you consider whether you immediately understand the following commonly used expressions in American or British colloquial English -

- Get on the stick!
- A Garrison finish
- It's on the fritz
- It's time to eighty-six them
- Don't try to apple polish me
-

Conclusion

So what can you do to help your students cope with our strange language? First of all be aware of your own language. Remember that students may have trouble not only with your strange accent but also with your choice of words. This doesn't mean you have to modify your language (although you might choose to) but be aware of your use of idioms, slang, colloquialisms and Australian words and explain some of them as you go or even hand out a list of the ones you have used. Explain that Aussies use lots of strange words and expressions and encourage students to investigate this aspect of English. Tell them that they will 'get the hang of it eventually' (and explain what that means). Remind students about the importance of familiarising themselves with Australian, people, place and company names (including acronyms). Check that your library and ILC has some good resources such as the ones listed below. Encourage students to ask for explanations of slang and idiom that they don't understand. Suggest they see what the Language & Academic Skills Advisers at your university provide. (Suggest they offer some Aussie Talk workshops if they don't already). Point out that meaning of many Aussie words and expressions will not be found in bilingual dictionaries or even British or American ones. A good Australian dictionary is needed, or in some instances a dictionary of Australian slang. Consider using activities that involve exploring Aussie Talk in orientation sessions.

Good Resources

Australian Word Map www.abc.net.au/wordmap/what_is_slang.htm
Website with great links a joint project of the ABC and Macquarie Dictionary

The Aussie English CD (2000) Smoko Software

Aussie Talk (1988). Curriculum Development Centre. Tape and book of short dialogues.

Boyer, S. (2000). *Understanding Everyday Australian*. Glenbrook :Boyer Educational Resources. Two books with cds and teachers' books. Longer colloquial dialogues with lots of activities.

Chanock, K. & Moar, R. (1986). *Hello Australia*. Belconnen: Dept of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. Workbook, Videotapes & Audiotapes. A TV series for new migrants with explanation of behaviour and language for everyday situations.

Dawson, S. (1999) *Aussie Slang* Penguin Australia . An inexpensive, attractive little book.

Johansen, L. (1996). *The Penguin Book of Australian Slang*. Ringwood: Penguin.

Kirkpatrick, E. & Schwarz, C. (Eds)(1993). *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Idioms*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions

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Ozwords. Newsletter of the Australian National Dictionary Centre subscribe on Ozwords@oup.com.au

Pope, E (2002) *Aussie English for beginners* books 1-3 National Museum of Australia & Australian National Dictionary Centre

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