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'I want to make friends with different people in different country': creating social opportunities for international students. (0087)

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Previous research has shown the importance of social contact for international students in the process of adapting to their new environment when they arrive in an English-speaking country. However, while the students' academic English may be adequate, their social English may not. Our own research has shown that opportunities for international students to use English socially may be limited. As a result of that study, two interventions were put into place to promote the use of social English among international students at Aston; a peer-pairing programme and an evening social programme. Data were collected to monitor the success of these programmes both in creating opportunities for the students to use English outside the classroom and in helping their adaptation to their new environment. This paper will describe these interventions and look at the outcomes. Suggestions for further interventions will be made.

Summary

Previous research has shown the importance of social contact for international students in the process of adapting to their new environment when they arrive in an English-speaking country (see, for example, Perrucci and Hu, 1995; Yeh and Inose, 2003). However, while the students' academic English may be adequate, their social English may not be (Lewthwaite, 1996). Moreover, the opportunities they have to actually use English in social situations outside the classroom may be limited (Authors, 2008; Volet and Ang (1998). This paper reports on a study into promoting opportunities for social language use for international students.

Inadequate social English has been identified as a key factor in international students' dissatisfaction when studying abroad, particularly in terms of integration into the host culture (see, for example, Lewthwaite, 1996). International students in Authors (2008) also pointed to the importance of this skill in promoting integration and to feelings of enhanced self-confidence. As one student said:

It is understanding of real conversation. if I am outside my class, I can't understand what native speakers talk together, so sometime I feel to be isolated and to not feel confident to use my English.

Perrucci and Hu (1995) also highlight the importance of integration into the host culture to students' successful adaptation, focusing particularly on the the influence that contact with local students has on this adaptation.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult for international students to meet local students. As Volet and Ang (1998:5) say 'one of the most disturbing aspects of the internationalisation of Australian university campuses is the lack of interactions between local and international students from Asian backgrounds.'

The students in Authors' (2008) study reported a similar lack of interaction with home students. However, they did report having opportunities to use English outside the classroom in service encounters with local people and social encounters with other international students. It was social encounters with other international students, however, that represented the most significant opportunity for the students to use English socially. Although some of them complained that, for example 'it was not happy, since we couldn't express our idea in English', others appreciated the possibilities open to them. In one of the interviews, a student reported:

you know I want to make friends with different people in different country yeah because if I made friends with other countries people I can practise English and also is a good chance to know the culture of the other country

The findings of Authors' (ibid.) study are particularly relevant because they showed that it is not only home students who present opportunities for international students to improve their social language skills and their cross-cultural competence. Other international students also provide a resource for language improvement and cultural understanding, particularly as English is now recognised as a lingua franca by large numbers of people in a variety of countries and across a wide range of activities (Graddol, 2006). While one challenge remains the integration of international students with local communities, another has emerged in the form of developing cross-cultural relationships and speaking opportunities within the international student population itself. It is these areas that are addressed in the research presented here.

In order to meet these two challenges, two interventions were planned, implemented and researched. Firstly, a social programme was introduced during the first five weeks of the 2009 15 week pre-session programme, led by a British student, with the aim of giving international students the opportunity to socialise with each other as well as to experience some aspects of British culture. Student reactions to this programme were monitored through a questionnaire and interviews. Secondly, a small-scale peer-pairing programme was introduced and the effects of this investigated through a questionnaire and document analysis.

The peer-pairing programme paired a number of students who participated in Authors' (2008) study, with third year English undergraduates taking a module on the place of English in society. The module was assessed through a learner case study, which required each undergraduate to interview an international student in order to uncover his/her English language learning background, motivations, problems with learning English and attitudes to English as a global lingua franca. It was hoped that the formality of the assessment context would focus the undergraduate students on attending to and empathising with the issues that the international students face. The benefits for the international students included the opportunity to take part in a detailed discussion about his/her learning and motivations and the chance to meet a home student who is genuinely interested in his/her opinions. The assessment provide a framework for the talk between both students, reducing, we hope, reticence to speak, problems with topic choice, and impatience with misunderstandings. It also provided the motivation to talk, a motivation often lacking in social contexts at universities.

Data were collected from students taking part in both initiatives by way of questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, and texts produced for the undergraduate case studies.

The data showed that the social programme met with some success in promoting social English use and intercultural contact amongst international students from a wide range of countries. The programme was also successful in increasing the students' confidence in their use of social English. The peer-pairing programme was successful in increasing the awareness of the home students regarding the difficulties that international students face. This awareness led to an increased respect towards international students and their achievements.

Both programmes have remained integral features of both pre-sessional and third year undergraduate English studies. However there is still some way to go in terms of promoting contact amongst students, especially social contact between international and home students and between international students and the wider host community. Suggestions for further initiatives are currently being reviewed and will take a more university-wide approach.

References

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