

Integrating International Students into Computing Classes: Issues and Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The increasing number of international students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) enrolling into classes in New Zealand tertiary institutions presents new challenges for tutors and students. This paper reports the results of an email survey of tutors, members of the National Advisory Committee on Computing Qualifications (NACCQ), regarding problems encountered with increasing numbers of international students and strategies employed to overcome these problems.

Respondents reported international students present in a variety of computing courses, none of which have restrictions on the number or proportion of international students able to enrol. Only one third of the tutors reported any, usually minimal, training in teaching NESB students and none had English, second or other language (ESOL) specialists present during classes. Despite this, most tutors reported no major problems. Not surprisingly, weak English skills, comprehension and oral and written communications, were the most frequently mentioned issues, with several also mentioning different learning cultures and impacts on the tutor and host country students. A variety of strategies were reported to overcome these problems including self-paced worksheets, forum discussion boards, forced culturally mixed project groups, use of examples from other cultures, and humour. Communication to international students was enhanced through multi-channelling, for example, use of the whiteboard

to explain concepts and discussion boards. Some specialized tutorials and one-to-one tutoring was also employed.

Keywords

International Students, NESB, ESOL, Teaching Strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

Over two million tertiary students worldwide are being educated outside their own country, with the figure expected to reach five million over the next 20 years (Ministry of Education, 2003a). In 2001 this service export had an economic value of \$710m for New Zealand with a goal of \$1 billion by 2004 (Education fast becoming, 2001).

Enrolments of full-fee-paying international students (FFP) are growing in all sectors of the New Zealand education market. In the public tertiary sector they increased from 3,199 in 1994 to 12,649 in 2001, an increase of 295%. They accounted for 4.9% of polytechnic and 6.6% of university enrolments. The majority of FFP students were of Asian citizenship with most coming from China. Business and information technology programmes were the most popular choices. (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Integrating international students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) into the mainstream classroom is becoming a hot topic as tertiary institutes worldwide actively seek alliances with international institutes in an endeavour to attract more students.

The goal is additional funds, but what of the impact in the classroom? The increased numbers of international students integrated into mainstream courses is perceived by tutors as changing the content and process of education (Ward, 2003). These changes can have positive effects but also create problems that require new skills and techniques to resolve.

While considerable research is available on teaching English for speakers of other languages (TESOL) teaching, we found limited published research into issues and impacts of NESB students in content or mainstream classes. Addressing the issue of cross-cultural differences in student behaviours, Ward (2003) observes:

“...there has been little to no direct investigation of how these impact on the international classroom. Evidence suggests that for the most part educators (particularly those at the tertiary level) make few, if any, changes in either the process or content of educational activities.”

In this paper we present the results of a survey of polytechnic tutors, members of the National Advisory Committee Computing Qualifications (NACCQ). By “tutor” we mean the instructor responsible for planning, presenting, and assessing a course of study. In a university, these people might be called lecturers or professors. In the remainder of this paper, we present the problems encountered and the strategies and techniques employed to overcome them.

2. BACKGROUND

Research in New Zealand secondary schools revealed teachers experienced frustrations with NESB students in mixed culture classrooms (Johnston, 1999; Campbell, Campbell, Smithson, & Vickery, 2001; Li, Baker, & Marshall, 2002). Addressing the issues that create this frustration is an organisation or school-wide responsibility, but there are strategies, which can be employed by class tutors. This section reviews relevant literature on issues, strategies, intercultural mixing, and responsibility for NESB students in content classes.

2.1 Issues

Teachers often feel frustrated by NESB students' lack of understanding and their inability to communicate that lack to the teacher. They can also become frustrated with their own inability to communicate with NESB students (Johnston, 1999; Campbell et al., 2001). NESB students can also feel difficulties in communication as Li *et al.*, (2002) found. They quote a New Zealand student:

“We sometimes simply cannot communicate. We do not seem to think the same. There are certainly differences in our thinking processes” (p. 15).

In addition to communication skills, common complaints from educators are that Asian students do not contribute to classroom discussions, that they are very successful in rote memory tasks but display less critical and independent thought and that they do not interact well with their local peers. They want more error correction and believe they should agree with the tutor (Ward, 2003). This can be explained by Hofstede's (1980) individualism-collectivism (IC) and power-distance (PD) cultural dimensions.

Applied to the classroom, students from individualist cultures (e.g., New Zealand) are more likely to want to ask questions, give answers and engage in debate. They are often seen as competitive. By contrast, students from collectivist cultures (e.g., many Asian countries) are less likely to contribute orally in classes and are usually unwilling to draw attention to themselves. Collectivism is strongly related to high PD, and students from high PD cultures (e.g. many Asian countries) are also less likely to question and debate as this might be considered rude, causing loss of face to the tutor. Richards, (1998:68) cites Brindley (1984) who observes, to Asian students “learning consists of acquiring a body of knowledge. The teacher has this knowledge and the learner does not. It is the role of the teacher to impart this knowledge”. To question, is to imply the teacher has failed. These differences can lead to misunderstandings when individualist teachers perceive collectivist students to be uninterested (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2001).

Internalising New Zealand learning concepts and role expectations is a major challenge for Asian students who can worry because the learning strategies with which they are familiar are no longer applicable (Li, *et al.*, 2002). Differences include the relative importance of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, preference for cooperative vs. competitive learning, learning styles, and even fundamental conceptions of “intelligence” (Ward, 2003).

Despite the difficulties beneficial effects also accrue as international and domestic students increase their cultural awareness (Eng & Manthei, 1984; Ward 2003).

2.2 Strategies

Many strategies can be found in the literature, particularly for the K-12 classroom and often for ESOL teachers. Ward (2003) observes, however, that much of this reflects the deficit approach to learning and includes a range of patronising recommendations. One

useful classification is that of Preece (1996) who discusses strategies that content tutors implemented to make academic, credit-bearing courses comprehensible for NESB students. These included:

- ◆ *various sheltering techniques* (such as increasing use of gestures; using comprehension checks; controlling syntax, idiom, and vocabulary; adjusting speech volume and speed; increasing visual aids);

- ◆ *general academic skills instruction* (such as lecture-listening, note-taking, reading strategies, and academic writing); and

- ◆ *adapted academic materials* (to make them more comprehensible).

However Preece indicates that the single most effective coping strategy among students was translation.

2.3 Intercultural Mixing

Research suggests that NESB students desire contact with domestic students, and that positive social, psychological, and academic benefits can accrue as a result. However, the amount of intercultural interaction is low as most international students have primary bonds with co-nationals (Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Ward, 2003). This lack of intercultural mixing has been found in New Zealand secondary schools, (Johnston, 1999), and universities (Chen and Chieng, cited in Ward, 2003). Chen and Chieng surveyed 224 Asian students at Canterbury and Lincoln universities and found that 23% of their respondents had no Kiwi friends and were most likely to approach other Asian students if they have problems with study.

To overcome the lack of potentially beneficial intercultural mixing, tutors need to encourage it in class in ways likely to lead to intercultural co-operation and friendship outside the classroom. Techniques might include peer-pairing and cooperative learning. At a higher level, administrators might consider mixed-culture residential programmes (Ward, 2003).

2.4 Responsibility

Content tutors, in contrast to ESOL teachers, generally have little knowledge of how to deal with problems of mixed culture classes. In addition, content tutors often find NESB students require a disparate amount of their time (Campbell *et al.*, 2001). Whose responsibility is

it to educate content teachers in techniques to assist NESB students?

Johnston (1999) surveyed teachers in secondary schools. Her findings highlighted the need for an institution-wide approach to meeting the needs of NESB students and the importance of training. She states:

“The needs of NESB students can be addressed only if the administrators in the school see the needs of NESB students as a whole-school responsibility and ensure that all staff value the skills of the ESOL teacher or teachers. In schools where there are NESB students, the whole staff should receive appropriate professional development, and a climate where cultural diversity is valued should be adopted” (Johnston, 1999, p.23)

Campbell, *et al.* (2001), also found:

“there is a real need for professional development programmes (both in-service and pre-service) that will provide teachers with techniques and strategies to alleviate the problems and frustrations that NESB students can create” (Campbell, *et al.*, 2001, p.120).

In the next section we describe the research method we used to explore the issues and strategies employed by polytechnic tutors in New Zealand

3. METHOD

The goals of this study were to explore tutor perceptions of the problems encountered with NESB students in content classes within New Zealand Polytechnics and to note what training and strategies were being employed to overcome them.

An email-based questionnaire developed specifically for this study was used as a survey instrument.

3.1 The survey

The tool used for data collection was a questionnaire consisting of nine questions, the first of which was a filter question to determine if the respondent had NESB students in at least one of their classes. The remaining eight questions queried the extent of International Student enrolment, training received, perceived problems, and techniques and strategies used to overcome problems. Open-ended questions allowed for the collection of descriptive data, and the respondent's personal perspective on the impact of intercultural socialising and working with NZ students. The base questions were:

◆ Do you have International Students in your classes?

◆ What is the extent of International Enrolment?

◆ Do you have a ceiling on the number of international students in each or any class?

◆ Did you receive any specific tutor training on working with International Students?

◆ Do you consider mixed culture in classes a problem?

◆ Strategies

◆ Brainstorming (as a strategy)

◆ Multi-channelling (as a strategy)

◆ In general, do International Students socialise and work with NZ students?

The questionnaire was tested for clarity with colleagues prior to being emailed to tutors who were members of NACCQ. A brief explanation accompanied the survey.

3.2 Data Analysis

Most data in this study were qualitative, that is, statements from participants in response to open-ended questions. As a one-off survey, data represent a snapshot of the situation at a single point in time. To analyse this data we extracted statements from the email responses and entered them into a table for analysis. From this table, like responses were grouped together to provide an understanding of the scope and consistency of perceptions.

4 RESULTS

Eleven responses were received from tutors who currently had NESB students in their classes. The respondents were from both large and small institutions in New Zealand, with one respondent from Australia. They taught international students in a range of computing-related classes with percentages of international enrolments ranging from 2% to 85% (Table 1). No respondents reported the existence of a ceiling on the number or proportion of international students in any class.

Most respondents had two or three classes with international students enrolled, but two respondents had four such classes and another had six. The respondent who taught six classes commented, "most international students prefer the more theoretical courses".

4.1 Training for working with International Students

Professional development training for teachers of NESB students has been called for in the literature (Johnston, 1999; Campbell *et al.*, 2001), yet none of the respondents in this study reported receiving institution-provided training to work with NESB students in content classes. One respondent reported self-sourced training whilst teaching NESB students and another felt qualified through experience with mentoring diverse groups - Maori, Polynesian, Asian, and feminists. Only four (35%) had received professional training, being part of teaching or Diploma in Tertiary Teaching qualifications. The most in-depth training had been received by a US-educated respondent who reported taking a graduate class in "Classroom Communication for Cultural Diversity" and completion of a TESOL (Teachers of ESOL) qualification. Only one respondent reported training specific to integrating NESB students into content classes.

4.2 Problems or Issues in mixed culture classes

Most respondents (64%) considered that mixed culture classes presented no problems, with one respondent commenting:

"I consider them an asset as this reflects the world in which students live."

This was reinforced by another who commented:

"If a class has a good mix or a wide variety of cultures then the classroom environment becomes, or at least feels, more dynamic."

The remaining 36% identified some issues and potential problems. We clustered identified problems into three categories consistent with:

◆ weak English language skills (e.g., oral and written communication, and listening and reading comprehension particularly where technical jargon was used

◆ different learning cultures (e.g., reluctance to ask questions in class, and rote learning), and

◆ impact on the tutor and host country students (slower pace of teaching due to the need to re-iterate and explain concepts, and more out-of-class time demands on the lecturer).

We had, in addition, asked for strategies used to encourage:

◆ risk taking and learning from mistakes, and

◆ intercultural mixing

Table 1: International Student enrolments in courses and programmes

Course or Programme Name	Percentage International
Programming Principles and Practice	9
Application Software Techniques	9
Programming operating systems	33
Database Management Systems	85
Multimedia	6
Web Development Tutorial	50
Principles of Communication	20
Business Communication	25
Communication for Information Systems	12
Business Communications for Information Systems	45
Professional Communication - Nursing	2
Organisation and management	30
Information Technology project management	50
IS Training Techniques	10
Diploma Information Communication Technology (Dip ICT) Level 5	30
Dip ICT Level 6 (3 classes)	Not noted
Certificate in Computing (CIC)	40
Certificate Communication and Information Technology (CCIT) 24 (2 streams)	Not noted

Although more than half the respondents reported no problems with mixed culture classes, all respondents recognized the special needs of NESB students as evidenced by their reporting of strategies and techniques used to help students gain understanding. These are summarized in the next section.

4.2 Strategies

A range of strategies were used by respondents to cope with perceived problems. We grouped these into the five problem areas identified. Many strategies address more than one problem, but where possible we classified the strategy under the problem or issue where we felt it had most impact. The results are shown in Table 2.

Most strategies suggested by respondents seemed to address the issue of weak language skills, which could hinder class participation and academic success. Strategies included basic good teaching techniques - self-paced worksheets, repetition, multi-channelling – together with various forms of tutoring.

Strategies to overcome barriers caused by different learning cultures clustered around those designed to educate international students (induction courses and explanations of differences in learning cultures) and

those providing opportunities for students to speak out in non-threatening ways (group work, internet-based forum discussions). Since speaking out is risk-taking in most cultures, strategies to encourage risk-taking generally also apply to overcoming differences in learning cultures.

It is a truism that humans learn from their mistakes and the way they fixed them. But making mistakes and learning from them involves risk. Responses in this study suggest that respondents identified risk taking by international students as offering oral opinions in the classroom or being creative and innovative in written work. Strategies suggested included having students try out their ideas in pairs or small groups before offering them to the tutor or class, and encouraging international students in particular to show their written work to the tutor prior to submission. But risk taking was also encouraged through highly interactive lessons, questioning techniques, and games in the classroom.

Respondents in this study seem to give their students learning top priority. Strategies they

Table 2: Issues and Strategies used to address them

Issue or Problem:	Strategies used
Weak English skills	Self-paced exercises and worksheets Repetition (re-iteration, re-explanation, paraphrasing) Multi-channelling (e.g., talk & whiteboard, face-to-face & intranet) Explain with practical examples, including examples from the NESB students countries and cultures Learn and use topic keywords in NESB students language Have students keep a workbook with translations of key concepts Additional tutorial groups for NESB students (perhaps with ESL teacher or native speaker present) Peer tutoring One-to-one tuition Refer students to language support staff
Different learning cultures	Induction classes (tertiary skills) prior to degree/diploma enrolment Explain the differences between learning and teaching cultures Establish internet-based forum discussion boards where students can more comfortably ask questions
Detrimental impact on tutor/class	Use more self-paced exercises and worksheets One-to-one tuition and extra tutorials helps the class not the (but not the tutor) Refer students to language support staff
Risk-taking	Self-paced worksheets, Working in pairs Peer tutoring Showing work to tutor before submission Questioning techniques
Lack of inter-cultural mixing	Establish mixed-culture work groups, preferably permanent to encourage friendships outside the classroom Use games to reinforce ideas and encourage mixing.

suggested might help international students or domestic students, but often impacted on their own time, for example, preparing self-paced worksheets, holding extra tutorials, giving one-to-one tuition. Only the strategy of referring students to language support staff took pressure off the content classroom tutor.

In addition to asking the broad question, “What strategies do you use to help students gain understanding,” we asked about some specific strategies including multi-channelling (Kay 1990) and involving the ESOL teacher in the classroom.

Multi-channelling examples were raised by respondents in response to the broad question though few identified them by this name. In general, respondents agreed that multi-channelling by way of gesture, whiteboard, rephrasing, and internet-based support materials conveyed meaning better. It seemed almost self-evident with a respondent commenting “I do it all the time - it means that the

learning gets reinforced,” and another “everyone is different and learns and sees things differently.”

The reaction to brainstorming was more varied. About half the respondents agreed that brainstorming was an effective strategy to take into account previous learning experiences and cultural ways of viewing knowledge, with most of the other half refraining from commenting on the technique. Those who agreed did so for differing reasons. Some saw it as a way of checking their own understanding of student knowledge and finding out how to best allocate classroom time. Others saw it as a way to get students involved orally or written. One respondent used flipcharts to gather ideas and had students walk around to discuss the results. However, one respondent considered brainstorming to be ineffective or counter-productive, explaining that “some students have worse speaking than listening ability and it is hard to understand them in this sort of situation.”

Team teaching with ESOL instructors was not found in this study. In one instance an ESOL teacher parallel

taught some of the content with a small group of NESB students.

4.3 Intercultural Mixing

The literature suggests that international students desire contact with domestic students, and that social and academic benefits arise from this, however, the incidence of cross-cultural interaction and friendships is low (Ward, 2003). This study supported this. The majority of respondents believed that intercultural mixing benefited students. With respect to computing classes, a respondent commented “the computing industry is multi-cultural and Kiwi students learned more about intercultural issues and communication by working with international students.” However, respondents noted that it seldom occurred without tutor assistance.

Tactics used to encourage intercultural mixing included formation of academic groups both in class and on projects. It may be that fixed groups provide more benefit than ad hoc groups as one respondent found “fixed groups are effective in building working relationships that spill over into the courtyard.” Language was perceived to be the major deterrent to voluntary interaction and mixed culture group formation. This is consistent with Chamberlain (2002) who reported a student who felt uncomfortable with English and wished to be able to ‘joke and talk’ like Jim does (Jim had a loud voice and used colloquial and colourful language).

5. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

There is considerable published research into ESOL teaching in the US, particularly in the K-12 classroom. However, there is much less research into mixed culture classes at any level. Published research into mixed culture classes in New Zealand appears scant and addresses primarily secondary schools and universities. In this paper, we reported results of a survey of tutors in New Zealand polytechnics.

Results suggest there are advantages and disadvantages to mixed culture content classes. The main advantage is intercultural exposure and the main disadvantage impact on the class and the tutor. Classes are impacted when tutors slow the pace of teaching to accommodate weak language skills or differing learning cultures. Tutors are impacted when extra out-of-class time is needed to prepare materials or hold additional group and one-to-one tutorials. These impacts on classes and tutors is consistent with the findings of Campbell, *et al.* (2001).

Weak English Language skills were reported in poor oral and written communication including difficulties in listening and reading comprehension. Comprehension and use of technology specific language was often most problematic. Students sometimes seem surprised by the difficulties they encountered. Two respondents remarked that international students often had an overstated opinion of their English skills. This supports the findings of Baker, (2002) who observed that some Asian students achieve very good results for English in their own country and consequently have an unrealistic view of their English language ability when coming to New Zealand to study.

Differing learning cultures impacted student-teacher relationships and classroom participation. This was evidenced in statements about NESB student rote learning and reluctance to ask questions in class. The findings are consistent with Hofstede’s (1980) individualism-collectivism and power-distance cultural differences. The majority of international students in New Zealand are of Asian citizenship. Asian cultures are typified as high on collectivism and power distance. This contrasts to their host countries individualism and low power distance. The problem is best summed by one of our respondents who stated, “International students do not have learning difficulties but do have adjustment issues to Western classroom expectations”. In this respect the findings of the current study are consistent with Li *et al.*’s (2002) finding that the biggest challenge for Asian students was the adoption of New Zealand learning concepts and role expectations.

However, while English language skills and different learning cultures create difficulties for many NESB students, one respondent noted that some students would not have done well in their home country’s education system. This view is consistent with a comment made to Li *et al.* (2002:14), where a student respondent observed “...[The teachers] might have realised that not all Chinese students are working hard or are very good students at all.” Furthermore, one of our respondents commented that not all international students come to New Zealand to extend their learning. This is constant with anecdotal evidence provided to one of the authors by an Australian head of department, that some students appear less interested in study and more interested in gaining permanent resident status.

Li *et al.* (2002:17) observe that “Both teachers and students need training to develop a cultural awareness that will help them to bridge their cultural differences”. Johnston (1999) and Campbell *et al.* (2001) also call for professional development for teachers and see this

as an organisation-wide responsibility. However, no respondents in this study reported institution-provided training and only four reported any formal training.

Still, our respondents showed an awareness of the issues and were able to provide a useful set of strategies to meet the needs of NESB students. Most of the strategies could help both international and domestic students since they represent good teaching practice in general. Perhaps it is because polytechnic tutors consistently employ good teaching practice that Ward (2003) found that “for the most part educators, particularly those at the tertiary level, make few, if any, changes in either the process or content of educational activity [to accommodate international students].” Perhaps they do not need to. Good teaching of mixed culture classes is simply applying good teaching practice. Biggs, comments, “Active methods are the basis of good teaching with any students”. (1999:139).

5.1 Limitations

This study was exploratory comprising a survey of a sample of New Zealand Polytechnic tutors. The small sample size restricts our ability to make generalisations. A further limitation of the study was its focus on international students in general, without distinction between nationalities. Responses indicate that respondents were considering NESB students primarily from Asian cultures, this was not specified.

The limitations of the study, provide opportunities for further study. Future research may explore the perceptions not only of content tutors, but also of ESOL tutors and international and domestic students in the classroom. We expect these surveys would involve larger sample sizes and include analysis of differences in perceptions across subject areas and across selected nationalities or cultures of NESB students.

5.2 Conclusion

In this paper we presented the results of a survey of tutors from the NACCQ. Most respondents did not consider the enrolment of international students a problem, but all recognized special needs of NESB students. Issues identified clustered into three areas relating to: weak English language skills, differences in learning cultures, and the impact on the instructor and domestic students. Only a small proportion of instructors had formal training in coping with NESB students in content classes, and none reported training within their institutions.

In light of reported research on the benefits of intercultural mixing and the desire of NESB students to mix with domestic students, the reported lack of student-initiated intercultural mixing could be

disturbing. However, tutors seemed aware of the benefits and encouraged mixing by way of mixed-culture class and project groups, games, and peer-to-peer mentoring. Socialising with domestic students forms an important part of the overseas education experience, which will affect students' impressions as much as the quality of education they receive. When students return home, their propensity to recommend New Zealand as a place to study will depend on their experience whilst studying in this country. The impact may go beyond education to more broadly impact international relations and general exports.

This caveat aside, the drive of institutions for a share of the export education dollar coupled with the desire of NESB students to gain an English-language degree will surely ensure that there continue to be many international students in our classes in the future. It is up to polytechnics and university administrators to accept responsibility for providing training and creating a culture that encourages positive experiences for these students.

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