

Supporting Learners who are Studying or Training Using a Second Language: Preventing Problems and Maximising Potential

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Abstract

Introduction: This paper looks at the barriers to effective postgraduate study potentially experienced by learners in the United Kingdom if their first language is not English. As part of the internationalisation of higher education, we are seeing a welcome increase in students leaving their home country to study. This brings benefits to both home and visiting students as they learn more about each other and come to understand differences and build on aspects they have in common. However it also brings specific challenges of linguistic capability, differences in cultural expectations of the role of learners and teachers and in the understanding of the nature of postgraduate study. English medium higher education institutions worldwide are increasingly engaged in development of courses on English for academic purposes, or for academic writing. There is even a *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, with co-editors from Hong Kong and the UK. Previous research has tended to concentrate on teacher-centred issues such as maintaining the integrity of assessments (including a focus on inadvertent plagiarism), practical aspects such as familiarity and expertise with information technology and more recently an understanding that acculturation has a part to play in maximising the success of students moving from one country's academic model to another. **Materials and Methods:** This was a qualitative project during which students whose first language was not English were interviewed. Thirteen postgraduate students on a masters award in medical education were engaged in semi structured interviews to elicit their experiences, views and suggestions. **Results:** Three themes emerged as important to the students in this study: understanding and being understood is not just due to the words we use; the nature of postgraduate study is not universal; and the need to maintain personal identity.

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“Doctors from overseas who come here [to the UK] are usually top of their classes, and can succeed in postgraduate studies – though they have to work harder than the native doctors, not just because of the language but because of the competition and they have to accept it. The Internet nowadays plays a major role for knowledge but you need to live in UK to get “the true” language. Clinical attachment is the best thing I had: to learn the life language, the culture and the art of communication with colleagues and patients”

GP from Alexandria University, Egypt,
in the UK for 20 years.

Background

Travel and immigration are vibrant aspects of the international medical and educational field. Patients are

increasingly mobile and finding healthcare professionals in a foreign country who can bring additional insights to help address their cultural and language needs can only benefit their care. Healthcare students have always studied and worked abroad and up to one-third of the UK doctors in training grades are international medical graduates.

Recent changes in immigration regulations in the UK means that we are seeing changing patterns in the place of origin of our learners. Where once graduates from the Indian subcontinent, who studied and trained in English, were a major part of the workforce, we are now seeing many more students from Eastern Europe who are much less likely to have studied in English.

This project aimed to look at the experiences of international students studying for higher degrees in the

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United Kingdom to help inform the creation of appropriate support resources.¹⁻³

There is an entrance requirement for English for all non-EU students and healthcare professionals entering the UK to practice. This is usually set at a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) score of 610 or an IELTS (International English Level Testing System) score of 7.0. EU nationals do not have an assessment of how effective is their understanding and communication in English.

However, even when they are fluent enough for practice, these colleagues often tell us they are struggling and need additional support to perform well academically when they go on to postgraduate studies. This is partly an issue of linguistic ability but also reflects the fact that communication involves more than vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and also extends to how meaning is constructed and understood. In addition, overseas students entering the UK for higher education have a variety of different educational experiences and study skills training.

Methods

Past students on the Staffordshire University masters in medical education programme were invited to participate in a research project to look at the experiences of learners whose first language was not English. This particular group of learners clearly had an interest and insight into healthcare education and included international and UK graduates. The recruitment phase only started once students had completed their studies and any perceived allegiance to the university or tutor had ended. A data collection proforma was used for students to identify themselves as UK or international graduates (defined by place of study of first degree) and whether they considered English to be their first language.

The work reported here is the outcome of semi-structured interviews with 13 international graduates whose first language was not English.

The interviews were carried out and extensive contemporaneous field notes taken. Interviews continued alongside initial analysis of the results. This enabled emerging themes to be tested in subsequent interviews. Interviews continued until data saturation had been reached, after which it was clear that no new ideas were forthcoming. Replies were thematically coded by hand. A second search of the interview data was carried out after the analysis, particularly to look for negative instances that might test the themes. Three themes accounted for all of the data captured.

Results

The 3 themes derived from these interviews were labelled:

1. Language is more than just words

2. The nature of postgraduate study

3. Identity

Language is More than Just Words

“I think you could probably come from Australia and still not understand the English they speak here [in the UK]. Its more than the spoken language its about the secret language. The reference that they make to cultural things, TV programme and famous people. That takes longer to learn.”

Egyptian GP, in the UK for 7 years

“The barrier is not the language, it’s the culture part. It’s the feeling of isolation. I had to cope with a new society but also the problems from back home. I had to cope with all the hard work, studying, working, exams; in the meantime, I went through 8 years Iran/Iraq war, first and second Gulf war and 30 years of internal fighting. I still had to meet deadlines, do on-calls and without any support from an extended family simply because we didn’t have any.”

Consultant Paediatrician, Iraqi, in the UK for 20 years

One English graduate who responded to the initial questionnaire commented:

“Its important to be able to carefully read and understand handbooks, and to be able to construct sentences in the English vernacular with correct use of prepositions and pronouns, since the barriers seem to me a failure to really understand the nuances of the language that are important in assimilating masters level instructions, and in irritating the markers of the assignments (however unfair this may seem) by constant repetition of the same mistakes in syntax”

GP Tutor, English

The Nature of Postgraduate Study

“In Iraq the teaching system depended much on memorisation of information given by the teacher or from text books. We were never asked our opinion or analyse information. So when I started here I was able to memorise facts, but not give an opinion or analyse in a critical way.”

Iraqi, worked in France and the UK over the past 30 years

“Its hard for me when the essay requires us to reflect on practice. My internal world is in Spanish, and often my experiences happened to me in Spain, in Spanish. But when I am at work or here [the university], I am thinking in English. So when I have to think back over these experiences I have to translate. And some ideas and feelings don’t translate well. So I end up doing a superficial piece of work.”

Spanish graduate, Foundation Doctor year two
(Two years postgraduation)

Identity

“I was born in Sri Lanka so my language is Singalese. Then I went to Moscow to study medicine and had to learn Russian.

Advice for teachers of international students
<p>Induction</p> <p>A thoughtful induction programme will allow time for students to adapt to the new environment. This might include buddying with home students, mentoring and social events.</p> <p>Lectures, Seminars, Small Group Work</p> <p>Remember that these are not native-speakers. Learners might be engaging with a language that is not even their second language. Participation might take time to establish. Grammar and lexical mistakes will occur. Be patient. Look beyond the words and try to establish the message the learner is attempting to convey. Question them in order to establish meaning. Avoid simple comments such as ‘I don’t understand’. Instead explain why you don’t understand and what you think the learner may be trying to convey.</p> <p>Assessments</p> <p>Students will vary in whether their background makes written or oral work harder for them. Consider the balance of types of assessed work – written, oral, work-place based. Teachers should pay attention to aligning assessments with the learning outcomes and the desired outcome behaviours. An authentic assessment is likely to be embedded in the workplace, will judge actual behaviours rather than proxy markers and success will predict success professionally. Consider whether the type of assessments you set are valid and reliable and then whether success can be achieved by all learners with the appropriate skills or whether there are cultural or linguistic barriers.</p> <p>Academic Writing</p> <p>Practice and feedback can improve the written work of all students struggling with assignments and dissertations. For those whose first language is not English, one important area that is often a trap for the unwary is inadvertent plagiarism. The internet is now a very accessible source of literature and the temptation to cut and paste work when you are struggling to find the words yourself, can be high for all learners.</p> <p>All Institutions should establish a policy on plagiarism and make this clear from the start of postgraduate studies.</p> <p>The idea of ownership of ideas is not universal to all cultures and academic conventions differ. In many cultures, ‘good writing’ entails demonstrating knowledge of the ideas of others, not writing about one’s own ideas. Students may be unaccustomed to acknowledging the source for ideas that they consider far more important than their own.</p> <p>We cite our sources to respect and give credit to the original author. Learners can be guided to avoid plagiarism if teachers provide model texts that use the preferred referencing system.</p> <p>Ask to see multiple drafts of a paper so that you can address a plagiarism problem before the final paper is turned in. Be explicit in your feedback if you spot plagiarism. Vague feedback such as ‘remember to cite your sources’, might not be fully understood. If you do see a case of plagiarism, it is vital to bring it to the student’s attention immediately and to point out the penalties involved.</p>

Fig. 1. Adapted from personal communication with Clark R. Language Tutor English Language Unit, Keele University Medical School[†]

After some postgraduate work back home, I came to the UK and had to brush up on English which I had not spoken since I was a child. I think it makes me a better doctor. I know what patients mean when they say they feel like a stranger and you have to try and fit in. But I have to hold on to my language or the “me” will disappear. So I don’t want to become too English.”

Specialist Registrar, Anaesthetics

Discussion

We can see that simple testing of language skills might not enable us to respond to the specific needs of international students to enable them to fulfill their potential in the field of postgraduate study. Further targeted study skills support might need to be provided. This also might need to include a period of cultural adjustment, that goes beyond the mechanics of how the National Health Service works, for example.

Most undergraduate and postgraduate University

courses are supported by study skills and language units. In January 2007, a web-based survey of resources identified through the UK Council of Deans, (For Schools of Health) and Universities UK (for Medical Schools) showed that there is a wealth of information available for those students who realise they need help and know where to look for it.

The postgraduate Deaneries, the organisations in the UK that support postgraduate medical and dental training, have a more varied approach. Out of 20 Deaneries, 12 replied to an email survey in November 2007 asking about language and study skills support. Most rely on the selection process that allows entry into specialist training to ensure students have sufficient proficiency for clinical practice. Three respondents including Wales reported specific courses for refugee and asylum seekers. Some have remedial support for those noted to be struggling; in Scotland, this is a one-to-one informal programme of support.

Better signposting to these resources for all students should be in place as currently they will only be accessed after students, or their tutors, have identified that students are struggling and extra support might be needed.

Figure 1 lists some advice and recommendations for teachers of international students in the UK based on support for students developed at Keele University, UK.

Conclusion

Existing language courses and training tend not to cover the nature of postgraduate study. Those involved in leading courses of postgraduate study often find that the move to academic work is challenging even for practising clinicians who are fluent enough for practice and expert in their clinical fields. This small scale study demonstrates how much harder this is for those who are practising in a second language.

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