



Centre for **Research** on **Social Inclusion**

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**Everyday Multiculturalism Conference
Proceedings, Macquarie University 28-29
September 2006**

**Edited by Selvaraj Velayutham & Amanda Wise
(2007)**

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ISBN 978-0-9803403-0-3

Title: Proceedings of the Everyday Multiculturalism Conference
of the CRSI - 28-29 Sept. 2006

Date of Publication: February 2007

Format: Online publication

Publisher: Centre for Research on Social Inclusion, Macquarie
University



MACQUARIE
UNIVERSITY ~ SYDNEY

www.crsi.mq.edu.au

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Why is English so dominant and which English?

There is one salient feature that differentiates English from other Asian and European global languages. It is the way in which English has been subject to commodification and characterized as a marketable product (Habermas, 1990). In the context of a post-industrial society, English has assumed an important status as providing access to economic, educational and immigration opportunities (Singh, Kell & Pandian, 2002).

For the first 100 years after Europeans settled in Australia, English was in fact a minority language. The main languages were spoken by the Aboriginal people of the Australian continent and were estimated to be about 250 language groups spoken by an estimated million people. The most common language spoken by non-Aborigines was in fact Gaelic that was the language spoken by the majority of convicts who were prisoners transported to Australia by the British government from 1788 to 1830.

From the mid 1850s the ascendancy of English can be attributed to both the growth of Australian nationalism within the umbrella of the British Empire, the growth of compulsory schooling using English as the medium of instruction and the genocide of Aborigines which saw the numbers of indigenous language speakers drop. The Irish and Gaelic tradition is commonly seen to have strongly influenced the accent, tone and vocabulary of Australian English. Australian English emerged as a local variety and was typified and characterized by a distinctive accent described as high-pitched, nasal, lazy or drawling. Australian English has been depicted as featuring informality, abbreviated expressions, rhyming slang, as well, as descriptive similes. The intonation is also seen as a "questioning intonation" with a rising terminal and has phonetic pattern that is truncated. Thus the word Australia becomes "Ostryan" and the shortening of words means words, such as, football become "footie. This pattern of speech can be seen in the sentence "Do you know where the library is? which in Australian idiom is, "du yu no vear dha laabrari iz?" (Strong, 2005).

Australian English vocabulary is a hybridisation of Gaelic, Welsh, Scots, London Cockney, Northern English dialects, as well, as some Indigenous, Malay and Polynesian words (Angelo, 1994 *et al*; Bowles, 1986). The informal and colloquial nature of Australian English is described by Angela et al as:

"It is said of Australian English that it has a wide range of inventive and colourful slang and colloquialism. It is perhaps truer to say that a range of colloquialism is much the same as in any other language but Australians make

more of it. Indeed they sometimes flaunt it”(Angelo, et al., 1994).

The Australian idiom has been identified as part of the emerging Australian character. The informal and abbreviated nature of Australian English is seen as a form of resistance to the domination of the English colonial masters who attempted to replicate the life and style of the English in language and culture. Nationalist literature in newspapers and journals, such as, *the Bulletin* and the “Bushman’s Bible”, recognized and popularised the Australian vernacular citing its existence as evidence of a national character (Clarke, 1969). These national characteristics were also associated with racism and the formation of the Australian state was based on restrictive immigration that excluded non-whites when Australia was federated in 1901. Language occupied an important part in the processes of selection and inclusion of migrants after 1901 with migrants being required to successfully complete a dictation test in a European language for entry.

In his work on the uses of languages, Bourdieu (Jenkins, 1992: 152) claimed that language could not be understood without close attention to the cultural context in which it was situated. Language and culture are interwoven. Language is firmly embedded in social relationships and language is a part of the struggle over the production of culture with cultural reproduction confirming and legitimising the existing social order. Belying the unity of standard languages is a symbolic domination in which non-standard languages are given less dominance (Hanks 2005: 75).

While formal British English was firmly established as the language of the Australian state in aspects of orthodox Anglo-Saxon political, social and cultural aspects of Australian life, the more informal and idiomatic forms of Australian English were popularised. Australian variations of English were generally marked by class, regional and social divisions and were subject to considerable scrutiny by the state. Attempts by supporters of standard British English to censor and restrict these variations were evident in organizations such as the Australian Broadcasting Commission who introduced rigid style guides for the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary of broadcasters (Singh, Kell & Pandian, 2002). The tensions between notions of appropriate English and Australian English have characterized debates around English in Australia that continue today.

Internationalisation, International students and English

This paper focuses on the issues confronting international students in academic and social life in Australia. The internationalisation of the university had included the increased use and reliance on English as the lingua franca of higher education. However, in the current climate while there has been an increased policy focus on English proficiency, this focus has tended to see English as disconnected from culture and has also failed to recognise the hybridity of Englishes that exist in Australia and the connection between international students successful negotiation of these Englishes and their well-being.

A crucial element in the achievement of success for international students is not only their academic adjustment but also their adjustment to the social and cultural

environment. While academic success may heighten a student's confidence, social and cultural adjustment can be important factors that lead to this academic success (Novera 2004: 475). According to Cameron and Meade (2002), there is a tendency to view international students, particularly Asian students as a homogenous group. Thus, while it is important to be aware of the heterogeneity of the international student population, recent research suggests that there are a number of common difficulties which many international students face in terms of their adjustment and well being. These include, homesickness, financial difficulties, language difficulties, problems dealing with university staff and other authorities, loneliness, isolation from other classmates and anxiousness about speaking in the classroom in front of classmates and lecturers (Leder & Forgasz, 2004: 195; Novera, 2004: 476; Roberstson *et al.*, 2000: 94; Scheyvens *et al.*, 2003).

A number of studies suggest that many international students prior to coming to Australia have spent many years learning to speak English and thus enter the country unaware of the extent to which local accents, fast speech and Australian colloquialisms are going to reduce their ability to speak and understand English in Australia (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2003). It is not only English language that prevents students from speaking and mixing with local students but also knowing what to speak about (Novera, 2004: 480).

Global English in the Global University

The research that will be described below was part of a much larger trans-national project funded by the Global Development Network of the World Bank. The research project explored the question of how to enhance the usage and proficiency of English in universities in the Asia Pacific and Australia. There were two nodes of research, one in Malaysia conducted by Ambigapathy Pandian of the University of Sains Malaysia and one in Australia. The research from which this data emerged was part of this study and was conducted by Peter Kell and Gillian Vogl as part of the Australian node. This node was conducted in a highly regarded public university in a regional centre in Eastern Australia and for the purposes of this study is called Beachways University.

The data in this study was obtained through a combination of in-depth interviews and focus groups, with support staff, university management and international students. This paper concentrates essentially on the students' accounts of their own experiences in settling into the Australian university setting and the broader community. Initially, three focus groups were conducted comprising 30 students in total. Two of the students groups contained international students studying at the University English College and the other focus group included various international post-graduate students studying at the University. These focus groups included students from Indonesian, Indian, Taiwanese, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic backgrounds. 12 of these students were female and 18 were male and the majority of the students were in their twenties. On completion of the focus groups, four further one-on-one interviews were carried out with students from the university focus group in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of some of the issues that arose out of these focus groups. The focused groups lasted for approximately two hours and the interviews were approximately an hour.

Issues which were discussed and arose in the focus groups and further interviews included ambiguities over what students saw as 'English', initial difficulties in living and studying with English, experiences in the class room setting with regard to lecturers and peers, and interactions and relationships with domestic students.

Global English in the Global University -Issues about living as a student in Australia

Written academic English

The majority of the students who participated in this research had been studying English since junior high school. This, however, largely involved reading and writing of an academic nature. Students from a number of different countries made comments, such as, "they teach in Japan to focus on grammar, especially writing and reading and they seldom teach us communication", "English is mostly concentrated on grammar and vocabulary (Iran)" and "In my country most people learn to read and write in English but spoken English is not important"(China).

Largely, students in this study stated that they felt the most anxious about listening and speaking in English. One of the major factors that led to many of the students' difficulties in understanding English was the Australian accent. Students mentioned that it was particularly difficult to understand the Australian accent out in the community. One of the students from Indonesia stated that the American and the Australian accent were different and in Indonesia they were used to hearing English spoken with an American accent. To this group Australians tended to mumble and slur words. Others were embarrassed when they spoke to 'Australians' and the Australians didn't understand what they were saying because of their accents. They felt that this was not only embarrassing for them when they were asked to repeat themselves but also embarrassing for the person who did not understand them. Other students stated that it didn't really matter about a person's accent as long as they spoke slowly and clearly.

They also found 'Australians' hard to understand because they shortened words. Australians even shortened University to "uni" which tended to confuse students who were used to a more formal type of English (Angelo *et al.*, 1994).

An issue that arose from the focus group discussion was what the participants viewed as "English" in the first place. They differentiated between American and British English and then again between 'proper English' and the English they heard in Australia. As one student explained,

When I came to Australia, I'm thinking what is going on and they put every word together and it's very different, it's not like English but it's English.

Some of the support staff who were interviewed said that they explained to students that "English is an evolving language and that there are many different versions of it around the world" and that Australia is a multicultural country and so there is no

correct or incorrect way to speak English as long as “you make yourself understood. That is all that matters”.

Students lacked confidence in speaking to local students and found it difficult to understand what locals were saying but really wanted the experience of speaking conversational English and getting to know what they saw as Anglo-Australians.

In the focus groups, students who had been more successful in starting and sustaining conversations with ‘Australians’ spoke about the importance of establishing common ground. One of the students talked about the importance of watching popular television shows like “*Home and Away*” so that she could join in on discussions about these shows that took place at her workplace and in her seminars. Another participant talked about learning some Australian colloquialisms. He said that going up to people and saying “how is it going mate?” was a good conversation starter.

One of the students was very relieved when she discovered the importance of discussing the weather in Australia. She stated that:

That is another thing that I have picked up here, the conversation about how the day is and whether it is going to rain, that nice things to talk about. In India there is so much like electricity is off so you are trying to catch hold of the electrician or water has stopped coming so you are running around for the plumber. There is so many things going on, and the traffic jams, nobody really has time to stop and talk about the weather. Someone will start talking about, how is your son, how is your daughter and I have this problem, the fridge isn’t working and my daughter is seeing a guy that I don’t approve of. So that is another reason that sometimes I used to be very quiet. I am on the fifth floor and I am going down and on the fourth floor somebody else comes and it is just a nod and a smile as then I didn’t know that I could talk about the weather.

Some of the international students believed that it was not that local students were unfriendly but rather that they also did not know how to initiate conversations with International students. A student mentioned that once the “ice was broken” then it had more to do with a student’s personality than their culture as to whether or not a relationship developed. Other students found it hard as they felt that Australian students knew very little about their culture and countries of origin. As one of the students from our focus group stated:

I recognised one lady, myself I come from Indonesia and I asked her do you know about Indonesia and she said “I don’t know Indonesia”. And I asked her again about Bali and she said “I have been there six times”. But she did not know about Indonesia.

Another student commented that ‘Australians’ who had been out of the country were much easier to approach and were “a lot more friendly” than those who had never left the country.

Learning the culture

Some of the students took a while to get used to what they referred to as the 'informalness' or informality of Australians in terms of both the way they dressed and behaved. One student stated that;

And nobody even dreams of wearing thongs to university (laughs) that is unimaginable, I mean if my mum got to know that I wear slippers and come to the college, she would freak out.

Some students stated that it was hard to meet Australians because of the pub and club culture of many Australians. One of the students explained that there are two groups of International students, those who cannot go to pubs and drink because they cannot afford to and those who cannot drink alcohol for cultural and religious reasons.

Many of the Students found it difficult to follow what both their lecturers and classmates were saying due to both the speed with which they spoke and because of their use of Australian colloquialisms. One of the students said that she was once the only "Asian" in a group and that she did not understand a word of what was being said because everyone in her group talked in slang.

Some of the students perceived only their "Anglo" lecturers to be real Australians. However others recognised that Australia was as a multi-cultural country and that the notion of being an Australian was more complex than a simple connection with being white Anglo Celtic. A few students felt that their lecturers from non-English speaking backgrounds were less helpful, while others perceived them to be more helpful as they felt like these lecturers were more empathetic with their language issues. According to one of the support staff, most of the students were very happy with non-Anglo lecturers if they were good teachers. If they were not, however, this was then attributed to their ethnicity.

Getting on with "Aussies"; Parallel worlds?

When students from the focus group were asked if 'Australians' wanted to get to know them most of the students felt that 'Australians' did not want to know them. Yet these participants were interested in getting to know 'Australians' and curious about their lives. Some of the reasons which students provided for their difficulties in forming relationships with 'Australians' were; they did not feel confident talking to 'Australians' or they felt that 'Australians' may not want to form relationships with them because of their own temporariness. Some felt that Australian students couldn't be bothered and that Australians were too busy due to work, family and study commitments.

On the surface it appeared that international students associated and socialised with students from their own backgrounds or exclusively with international students. However, when questioned in greater depth to review associations and connections in their day-to-day experiences, the picture was slightly different. It was not as though the students didn't spend a lot of time with others from their own background but further interviews suggested that they seemed to interact more with domestic students than they themselves initially recognised and recalled.

Some of the examples that students provided were attending barbecues with Australians and going out to the pub with work friends. One of the students who had hurt his back spoke about the very friendly interactions he had with his physiotherapist and also other hospital staff. His wife had also made friends with some Australians at the 'mothers group' that she attended. Indeed some recognised their associations through participation in work, sports and house sharing, all of which were not mentioned initially. This was partly due to the perception among international student that only Anglo students were real Australians.

Who are Aussies anyway?

While some of the participants believed that Australia was an ethnically diverse nation, many of the students appeared to view only Anglo Australians as 'real Australians'. These students talked about the typical Australian as a person who was "casually dressed, with a beer and a rucksack wearing thongs". As people who are "friendly and always smiling". "People who are casual, spend a lot of time at the Gym, like to be outside and not stay home and also who have more freedom".

Productive futures: Thinking of new ways of working with English - What they said works

Students found that there were a number of factors that helped with both their proficiency in speaking and listening to English and also with their confidence with regard to speaking in English. Some suggested finding Australian roommates, another said that he read out aloud to himself to get his pronunciation right, others watched movies with English subtitles. Developing relationships, watching a few popular Australian TV shows and learning a few Australian colloquialisms all seemed to be identified as factors that helped.

In the community landlords were seen by some of the students as important in terms of both the friendship that they offered and for information about 'Australian culture'. Voluntary and paid work also provided a very good way for students to improve their English and develop bonds with others. One of the students stated that the call centre she had worked at had helped her enormously both with confidence in talking English and with an opportunity meeting other English speakers.

Many of the students spoke about how much easier it was to speak to children and old people. They felt that children spoke "pure English", old people spoke clearly and

slowly and mostly they were friendly and had time for conversations. They were generally seen as very helpful and understanding of the needs of international students.

Conclusion

A theme emerging from this research suggests that there is an interconnection between English language proficiency and social interaction. The current policy settings interpret language as a disconnected “requirement to be met” but in reality the attainment of competence and proficiency is, from the perspective of those interviewed, dependent and related to the capacities of students to display social and cultural adaptation and interaction. This interaction is very often outside the academy and is often in language contexts that are very different from that which features in the academy. The possession of an understanding and ability to use colloquial and non-formal English is a key to initiating and maintaining social interactions within and outside the academy. It needs to be recognised in policy terms that the needs of students are often as much to do with developing social, cultural and lifestyle connections and networks that enable access to this colloquial Australian English as they are to do with academic preparation. While within the academy, a more formal type of English may have symbolic dominance, clearly the possession of a basic working knowledge of informal Australian English is important in reducing alienation, loneliness and homesickness and from the experience of informants is linked to the connection they make with the broader Australian community.

International students, or more particularly Asian students, have a willingness to make connections with Australian society but often express disappointment that this is hard to achieve because of a combination of lack of proficiency in colloquial English as well as unfamiliarity with the social norms and conventions of Australian life. In contradiction to the image of a friendly and “laid back” country, to some, Australians can appear ambivalent, distant and disinterested in international students and foreigners in general. This is attributed to “busy lifestyles”

International student’s impression of a parallel world and disconnection from Australia and Australians was also exacerbated by confusion about who Australians are. There was on the part of some students a failure to recognise Australia as an ethnically diverse nation and that many Australians were in fact of Asian background. In reality many students had the impression that only White Anglo-Celtic Australians were genuine Australians. Images of the bushman and “Crocodile Dundee” stereotypes have tended to dominate the impression of who Australians are. Some students in the research challenged these narrow views and recognised that Australia was a multicultural, multiracial and multi religious community.

The research suggested that there are some complexities about the presence of international students and more particularly Asian students that need to be unpacked for policies to respond to some of the issues described in this research. The neo-liberal market based approach welcomes an influx of international students to be involved in an Australian experience. This exposure to the Australian experience is something that international students find difficult to negotiate with limited Australian English and

knowledge of social norms. Anxieties are triggered by an impression that Asian students “don’t mix in” and “stick together” yet opportunities for such interaction are often left to random chance. In many cases students manage, often with great difficulty. This image of the “ghettoisation” of the campus and the parallel worlds is mistakenly shared by those who are most adept and effective at mixing with Australians and know about the diversity of who Australians are.

From the data that we gathered in this project, there is a complex pattern of intercultural negotiation through the medium of English inside and outside the academy that influences the life of international students. Simply addressing issues of standard and English proficiency in the academy disconnected from social and cultural aspects of student life will not adequately address the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

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