Internationalisation: its culture, communities of practice and the importance of English in the classroom

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Abstract
This article discusses three major aspects of internationalisation in higher education: the culture of higher education, the paradigm of communities of practice, and the use and status of English as the language of teaching and learning. It explores some basic assumptions behind internationalisation and looks at these in a Swedish context; the article does not constitute an empirical study. The three aspects of internationalisation discussed here are presented in relation to a 15-credit course in Intercultural Communication offered at Kristianstad University. It is through English that students create and take advantage of the culture of internationalisation as well as the ideas, values and practices that characterise their group. A successful learning context, as Bowden and Marton demonstrate, is based on the principle that “understanding other ways of seeing things is understanding each other and understanding each other is a highly efficient way of assisting each other in understanding things better”. The international classroom is characterised by a variety of social and academic cultures, different levels of motivation and aptitude, a range of expectations, a variety of views of what is appropriate behaviour in the classroom, and different opinions about what constitutes “good” learning and “good” English. An important goal of higher education is to achieve an understanding of what international university experience entails for both students and teachers. A pre-requisite for successful internationalisation is that the intercultural higher education landscape is presented not as a binary on international and home or self and other but as a complex site of struggle, tension and conflict. Far from being problematic – as some might assume, this site is both useful and transformative. The Intercultural Communication course described in this article is a good example of such a site.

Key words: international students, higher education, successful learning, intercultural communication, English language
This article addresses three major aspects of internationalisation in higher education: the culture of higher education, the paradigm of communities of practice, and the use and status of English as the language of teaching and learning. These aspects are discussed in relation to a 15-credit course in Intercultural Communication offered at Kristianstad University. English is the means by which students create and take advantage of the culture of internationalisation and the practices which characterise their group. Approximately one quarter of the world’s population speak and/or write English. Indeed, English is “recognized by more countries as a desirable lingua franca than any other language” (Crystal, 2000, p.6). As I hope to demonstrate, the kind of English spoken at college or university has a profound impact on the process of internationalisation, the quality of learning and the educational results achieved.

R.C. Gardner’s socio-educational model acts as a frame for the following discussion as it takes into consideration the cultural/symbolic elements of different ethno-linguistic communities. While the model specifically addresses the situation of the second language learner, it can equally well be applied to all learning in an international, English-speaking environment. Briefly, the model incorporates four interrelated aspects of second-language learning: the social and cultural environment; individual differences among learners; the setting, and learner outcomes (Ellis, 1994).

Students’ beliefs about language and culture are strongly influenced by their social and cultural environment. According to Gardner, individual learner differences are determined primarily by motivation and language aptitude. Where motivation is encouraged and language proficiency integrated with cultural values, beliefs and attitudes, learning can be increased. The strength of Gardner’s model is that it explains the relationship between setting and proficiency by identifying a number of intervening variables, including attitudes, motivation and self-confidence.

A successful learning context is based on the principle that “[u]nderstanding other ways of seeing things is understanding each other and understanding each other is a highly efficient way of assisting each other in understanding things better” (J. Bowden and F. Marton, 1998, p. 293). International students bring to the classroom a variety of social and academic cultures, different levels of motivation and aptitude, a range of expectations, a variety of views of what is appropriate behaviour in the classroom, and different opinions about what constitutes “good” learning as well as “good” spoken and written English.

It is important to recognise that language is more than a tool by which knowledge is transmitted; it is a creator of knowledge. As Barker and Galasiński demonstrate, language not only reflects an outside reality, it largely “constructs and constitutes” it (Barker and Galasiński, 2001, p. 1). It is the medium through which our perception of both us and our surrounding world is constructed and communicated (Barker, 2003). Knowledge is historically constructed and culturally and socially contextualised in language (Moate, 2010). There is a constant process of negotiation “between what is own and what is foreign, what is part of one’s identity and what is new and challenging” (Sercu, 2000, p. 74), leading to the gradual adoption of an “international identity” (Arnett, 2002; Lamb, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002).

**Culture, Internationalisation and Communities of Practice**

Culture is “a way of life based on a signifying order . . . that is passed . . . from one generation to the next” (Danesi and Perron, 1999, p. 23). It implies a relationship. As Norton argues, culture is “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (Norton,
In order to function in a culture, one must participate in what Danesi and Perron describe as “the signifying order of the founding or conquering tribe (or tribes)” (Danesi and Perron, 1994, p. 24). The educational system constitutes a special kind of culture in which teachers are the tools of the dominant culture.

Internationalisation is an important aspect of the culture of higher education (Montgomery, 2010). It is a process that has been set in motion by globalisation as national bodies of higher education reach out to other national institutions in order to reflect new commercial and political orders. Internationalisation has implications for all academic disciplines (Trouillot, 2003); it has not only influenced their thinking but also the content and structure of courses and programmes.

The social and cultural context created by the presence of international students has attracted surprisingly little academic investigation and few studies have been conducted on its nature and implications (Montgomery, 2010). The function of English in the international classroom is an extremely important part of this context. Indeed, without a lingua franca, there can be no internationalisation.

Views of what is incorporated in the term “internationalisation” vary considerably (Knight, 1997; Gunn, 2005; Fok, 2007). Stone, for example, observes that defining internationalisation is an invitation to “seduction into a quagmire of potentially unsatisfying responses” (Stone, 334). There are few recommended overarching approaches that aim to promote international perspectives among staff and students (Montgomery, 2010). In addition, there seems to be little connection between policy and practice. The United Kingdom, where there is a long tradition of internationalisation, is a case in point. Here, there is only a doubtful link between institutional internationalisation of the curriculum rhetoric and its impact on actual practice due largely to the lack of knowledge about how to implement internationalisation. There are, in fact, few foundations for “valid, recognisable categories of good practice” (Spiro and Henderson, in C. Montgomery, 2010, p. 132).

The concept of “communities of practice” makes an important contribution to good practice in higher education. As social groups that share values and activities, these communities exist in academia as well as in society as a whole. Defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p. 4), they function as an alternative to culture because they do not rely on the factor of nationality. The international student group form communities of practice “as they develop a particular group identity that evolves over time as students learn about each other, and share goals and values” (Montgomery, 2010, p. 18). Montgomery suggests that the notion of community of practice is a first step towards gaining a new perspective on positive academic and social interaction at university (Montgomery, 2010) as it helps develop positive peer support, a very important feature of student learning. As Montgomery demonstrates, the process of social and academic exchange between students of varying backgrounds and cultures is an essential element of a positive and profound learning experience (Montgomery, 2010). International students should be viewed as small diverse groupings rather than as large cultural groups as they are not attached to wide, stereotypical labels and characteristics (Montgomery, 2010).

Learning is effectively promoted through participation in the social and cultural practices of a community (Lave and Wenger, 1991); students must move from “legitimate peripheral participation” to full participation in the social and cultural practices of the community, including – indeed, even subsuming – the learning of knowledgeable skills (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 29). It is from others that students learn how to be successful learners. This is particularly effective when students interact with those who have been members of the group for a longer time since
the latter are able to share a variety of experiences with younger and less experienced members. Communities of practice create a form of social capital, that is to say, knowledge and experience based on common values and ideas that are created, promoted and reinforced by co-operation (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 2000). In academia, this form of knowledge and expertise can replace the social capital that the international student may have enjoyed in his/her home country and can indeed have a very positive influence on the learning experience. The practical and academic aspects of support that communities of practice provide enable international students to function effectively in their new environment (Montgomery, 2010). Students thus continue to accumulate social capital through the activities of their social network (Milroy and Gordon, 2003). So much so in fact that, contrary to popular belief, international students do not necessarily lose out if they do not collaborate with home students because they enjoy the advantages of a tight and supportive network of their own (Montgomery, 2010).

**Teaching in the International Classroom**

Carroll and Ryan’s *Teaching International Students. Improving Learning for All* (2005) is a highly regarded handbook for teachers of international students. It explores the challenges presented to both students and teachers by the multicultural classroom and discusses in detail the function and implications of using English as the lingua franca. It combines practical advice with pedagogic theory, and includes such topics as the experience of the international student, the nature of learning and teacher-student relationships, the development of teaching skills, multicultural group work, and postgraduate supervision. Course participants are encouraged to reflect on how culture (social as well as academic) affects motivation and learner outcomes and how English as the language of instruction influences teaching and learning in the formal context of the classroom.

Carroll and Ryan (2005) argue that teachers have much to learn from international students, the latter functioning as “canaries in the coalmine” (an expression dating from the time when miners carried canaries with them when working underground. The canaries were extremely sensitive to poor air quality). International students point to aspects of our teaching that all students, domestic as well as international, may regard as a challenge. In so doing, we have an opportunity to change conditions in the classroom, thereby benefiting all students in higher education.

Caroll and Ryan also draw attention to the importance of self-esteem. The culture shock that so many students experience when beginning a programme or course in a foreign environment causes dips in confidence: students tend initially to underestimate the difficulty of adapting to a new environment, of being taught in a kind of English which may differ from that to which they are used in the homeland, and of acclimatising themselves to an academic context that adopts unfamiliar rules and places different and unanticipated expectations on them. They may generally overrate their level of English. Later, however, they may go to the other extreme, resulting in a crisis in confidence that may seriously inhibit adaptation and learning.

An additional problem is that traditional language tests such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) do not test students’ knowledge of academic language. This is particularly crucial, of course, in the area of academic writing. It is important for all students, international as well as home, to discuss the nature and conventions of this language and how to master its rules. Academic writing is particularly challenging for the international student due to differences in culture and tradition. Carroll and Ryan argue that teachers must consider carefully “the role of writing in their classrooms and the resources student writers bring to the tasks they are set” (Carroll and Ryan, 2005, p. 63). They point to a widely-held belief that there is a clear definition of “good writing”. This is a highly complex problem. Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Passeron and Monique de Saint, for example,
argue that “academic language ... is no one’s mother tongue” (Bourdieu, Passeron and de Saint, 1994, p. 8) as it is a specialised form of academic discourse belonging to a community which in itself incorporates a number of sub-communities. Each such community has its own special form of discourse or language – and this is something that must be consciously learned rather than merely absorbed through osmosis.

**Kristianstad University and Intercultural Communication (15 ECTS)**

Three fundamental questions need to be asked in relation to the discourse at Kristianstad University: What form of discourse prevails? How and what ways does this vary from discipline to discipline? How do we cope with the challenges of teaching in English when English is not the native language of the students? I shall discuss these questions in relation to the 15-credit Intercultural Communication course offered twice a year at Kristianstad University, focusing primarily on my own contributions, which takes the form of a comparison of the British, American, Canadian and Australian cultures in terms of values and beliefs (seminar 1), and the writing of Curricula Vitae from an international perspective (seminar 2). The Intercultural Communication course is taught in English and attracts students from a wide variety of countries, including Bulgaria, Canada, China, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Holland, Korea, Latvia, Poland and Spain. Swedish students also attend though they are in the minority. The students come from different disciplines: the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and business economics.

**Intercultural communication MW2113. Europe meets Asia**

The first 7.5-credit module comprises three parts: three individual written assignments (1.5 credits), which are discussed in a seminar; individual/small group theory assignments for each participating lecturer (5 credits), and a discussion of the theory assignments in a seminar (1 credit). According to the official syllabus, students are expected to acquire the basic perspectives and concepts of intercultural communication, explore cultural, socio-cultural and psycho-cultural influences on intercultural communication, identify and interpret intercultural behaviour and styles in terms of values, social identities, group membership, stereotypes, expectations and attitudes, and understand intercultural communication in Sweden as well as between Swedes and people with other cultural and ethnic backgrounds. They should also be able to interpret verbal and non-verbal messages in an English-speaking environment.

In the second part of the course, the students write an intercultural project report based on an empirical investigation (5.5 credits). Active participation in seminars and the planning and execution of formal critique of a fellow student’s article account for the remaining 2 credits of the course. On completion of the course, students are expected to have acquired an elementary knowledge of perspectives, theories, concepts and empirical research results in intercultural communication, be able to identify and analyse intercultural problems and propose solutions, have developed their consciousness and understanding of intercultural patterns and processes, and be able to reflect critically with the aid of intercultural concepts. They should demonstrate the capacity to apply a chosen theory or concept in an empirical investigation and write an article that follows conventional scientific rules and that complies with the criteria of “good” academic English. The students are expected to demonstrate an ability to discuss critically other course participants’ articles as well as assess and improve their own both in terms of content and language.

In both parts of the course it will be seen that language skills are critical in terms of both oral interaction and written communication. For the learning experience to be productive, it is essential that instructions are clear, expressed in “good” English and are understood by students.
sufficiently well that they are able to carry out their assignments to the required standard. In this way, the expected results will be achieved in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding. It is essential that international students meet the required standards so that they can transfer their grades to their home university. This results not only in student and teacher satisfaction but is a pre-requisite for continued collaboration with the foreign partner university.

The discourse in higher education must be academic and promote the students’ ability to discuss, compare, analyse and present results in a persuasive and efficient manner. While the students come from different disciplines with different traditions and varying levels and types of English, they must quickly adapt to the demands of the Intercultural Communication course. The situation is extra challenging as the majority of the teachers on the course are non-native speakers of English and represent different traditions within their various disciplines. It is essential that the teachers are in agreement on the type of oral and written assignments to be produced, their organisation and presentation, and last but not least, the standard of English expected, oral as well as written.

As a native speaker, I have a special responsibility to give guidance in how to structure, discuss and critique texts. The earlier mentioned comparison of British, American, Canadian and Australian culture included in Part 1 of the Intercultural Communication course provides an excellent opportunity to practise discussing and writing in English using an academic style and tone. The students are given guidance in how to construct a comparative argument, introduced to phrases of persuasion and provided with guidelines on the special features and qualities of academic English. Detailed guidelines are also given on style and register (these take the form of printed handouts). Students discuss the conventions taught in their own country and the degree of attention paid to the quality and level of the language of formal assignments, written as well as oral. They are encouraged to work with at least one peer, who should ideally be from a different country in order to enrich the learning experience. It is the task of the peer to support his/her partner at all stages, including the choice of material, organisation and structure of the essay, and the language and style of the finished product. Students follow a formal set of guidelines that suggest areas of focus and questions to ask.

**Writing and different cultures**

The formal written article is graded in terms of both content and language. Formal feedback is provided by the writer. It is clear that many students encounter problems in constructing and expressing a comparative argument, irrespective of the discipline from which they come. Part of the problem lies in the traditions and training in the home country. Czech, German and Latvian students, for example, often have fewer problems. Asian students, on the other hand, have greater difficulty as their patterns of discourse and writing traditions are very different to those of the West. China (the main Asian country from which our students are drawn), for example, is a so-called “high context” culture in which inference and implicitness are the source of meaning; it is the reader’s and not, as in the Western “low-context” culture, the writer’s responsibility to interpret meaning. In a high-context culture, meaning may be unspoken. Asian writing may be seen by Westerners to be ambiguous; the message is behind rather than in the language itself. This contrasts clearly with the West, where meaning is explicit, cause is discussed before effect, and argument is linear (see, for example, Foucault, 1973; Kaplan, 1996).

Asian students adopt a holistic view when analysing and tend to perceive on the basis of an overall pattern uniting objects or ideas. Opposites may be part of a larger truth. They tend to think in terms of both/and rather than the either/or alternative favoured by Western-style binary thinking. In Europe, a more analytical, separatist view is adopted in which objects or ideas
are decomposed into parts and common attributes identified (See Bond, 1996). For Chinese students, the main aim of communication is to create harmonious relationships rather than to share information. Inductive patterns of communication are used in which the background comes first, the main point later, and reasons before results. Proof can come from analogy, examples or indications. In Europe, on the other hand, there is a general consensus that the main point is stated first, results come before reasons, and proof is provided by explicit sequential links. In Asia, communication defers to tradition and authority; originality and spontaneity, are of less significance.

Unlike in Europe, the preferred method of thinking in Asia is deductive and not inductive as in the West. This is an important difference that has profound implications for how to teach essay and report writing in the Intercultural Communication course. Deduction involves beginning with first principles that are taken for granted. It uses a logic that reasons downwards in order to derive propositions; because these contain no inferences or new information, they must, by definition, be true. Induction, on the other hand, has as its starting point empirically verifiable facts and/or statistics. It uses these to reason upwards in order to produce conclusions or theories which are regarded as tentative since more facts may become available (See Wenzhong and Grove, 1991).

Also, the heavy emphasis on rote learning in Asia, and in China in particular, takes the focus off penetrating below the surface to discover deeper meanings, broader themes, underlying assumptions and different argumentative directions (Chan, 1996). Asian students thus require additional guidance in writing assignments. In terms of oral presentations and class discussions, they also need extra help as this is not a feature of their educational system and is often regarded as particularly terrifying by Asian students. They can learn from European students, who have a valuable function in boosting confidence.

Two Assignments

The first part of the writer’s contribution to the Intercultural Communication course comprises the above mentioned discussion of values and beliefs in Britain, the USA, Canada and Australia (part 1). The printed handouts, drawn from journals, the internet and the series known as “The Xenophobe’s Guide to . . .” (I use the guides to the Americans (Faul, 1999), Aussies (Hunt, 1999), Canadians (Roster, 2002), English (Miall, 1999), Irish (McNally, 2006), Scottish (Ross, 1999) and Welsh (Winterson, 1999)) provide insights – humorous as well as serious – into each of the country’s/continent’s systems of values and beliefs. The students read the handouts before attending my first session. During the latter, we discuss the differences and similarities in the various systems of values and beliefs. I try to encourage comparisons as a preparation for the written assignment. While many students find it easy to identify specific values and beliefs, they find it more difficult to analyse and compare these. We discuss alternative structures for the written article. We also consider style and register. It is clear, however, when the written articles are submitted that not all students have fully understood the task. Detailed feedback to each student is given in written form, pointing to both the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s article and suggesting alternative structures and points. Detailed comments are also made on language, style and register with a view to helping students to improve their command of academic English in preparation for their main project report in the second part of the course.

The second part of the writer’s contribution to the Intercultural Communication course comprises a short introduction to writing Curricula Vitae in English (part 1). This is given at the end of the session on values and beliefs. Students are presented with a British model, which is briefly discussed in class. They are then invited to use features of the presented model or to find an alternative one on which to base their own Curriculum Vitae. The latter is brought to class and
discussed in the second session in small, multinational groups. These discussions highlight the various traditions in the different countries, providing a forum in which to discuss the implications of such differences in terms of applying for jobs and presenting oneself in an appropriate way in different countries. Each group gives a short report to the class in which differences in content, structure and language in the various Curricula Vitae are highlighted. Each student submits a revised copy of his/her Curriculum Vitae for assessment. I give detailed feedback as regards content, structure and language.

In the two assignments discussed above, it will be seen that language, style and register play a key role. The quality and accuracy of the language of the instructor, who not only gives instructions but also provides feedback, and of the students, who must be clear and accurate when providing guidance to their peer(s), are crucial for the outcome of the learning process. Each teacher on the Intercultural Communication course contributes to a clearer understanding of the nature of “good” academic English, and to the production of a stronger, more persuasive and accurate final paper in the second part of the course.

Some pedagogical implications drawn from the Intercultural Communication course

In all courses where English is the second language of both teachers and students, the former must consider certain fundamental issues: whether or not, for example, they know what their assumptions and limitations (epistemological as well as linguistic) are in relation to the special task of teaching in English in the international classroom; teachers must know about the culture from which their students come; they must ascertain the students’ knowledge on their arrival (Laurillard, 2002); they must test if students can interpret correctly the complex discourse of words, symbols and diagrams, each of which bears a specific meaning that must be interpreted accurately if the student is to learn what is intended (Laurillard, 2002); teachers must test if students can make sense of the theoretical in terms of the practical, and vice versa; and they must highlight the special role of feedback in the international classroom. Each of these issues must be considered by each individual teacher in the light of his/her knowledge and command of the English language, the background of the students being taught, and the requirements of the particular course.

A useful strategy in early assignments is to allow the students to complete these undisturbed and then ask them to give a retrospective account of how they experienced them in order to assess their knowledge, assumptions, fears and expectations (Laurillard, 2002). Close attention should be paid to the language of assignments in order to identify problems in understanding and expressing oneself. Is it, for example, necessary to provide some extra sessions in grammar, punctuation and paragraph construction? Answers to early assignments where students are given a free rein will also indicate problems with organisation of material and referencing.

Teachers must become acquainted with the content of the student’s learning experience, including conceptions of the topic, representational skills and epistemological development. This is particularly crucial with international students from different disciplines because traditions vary enormously. Mathemagenic activities should be provided that enable students to apprehend the structure of academic discourse, interpret forms of representation, act on descriptions of the world, use feedback and reflect on the goal-action-feedback cycle (Laurillard, 2002; the philosophy behind and examples of mathemagenic activities can be found at http://www.aect.org/edtech/ed1/30/30-01.html).

Teachers need to check their knowledge of English by attending courses in teaching in English (a 7.5-credit course in “Teaching in English” is offered regularly at Kristianstad University, for
example). It is necessary to practise English outside the classroom, and, where possible, with a native speaker. Practice in giving instructions in English is useful, enabling colleagues to take on the role of students and assess the clarity and effectiveness of their instructions.

It is also important to discuss how, when and in what detail one should correct students’ English, oral as well as written. When, for example, does consistent correction become an obstacle rather than an aid to learning? Basic technical aids such as the Boilerplate (Mattisson & Schamperjere, 2012) for example, are available and can be adapted to the particular characteristics and needs of the actual discipline.

Where possible, teachers need to read extensively in English and particularly within their field, noting specialist terminology as well as the style and register adopted in various forms of publications. Students, particularly at the higher levels, should be encouraged to do the same, taking note of standard and/or useful phrases/expressions. These can usefully be brought to class and shared with the other students. This has the additional benefit of providing extra practice in oral English. Teachers should also read articles or chapters in books on internationalisation and its consequences (see, for example, Airey (2003), Carlsson (2009), Engelke (2008), Nilsson (2003) and Wihlborg (2009)) as a basis for continued reflection on their own practices and expectations.

Conclusion
The culture of higher education, the paradigm of communities of practice, and the use and status of English as the language of teaching and learning in the international classroom are crucial factors in today’s increasingly international system of higher education. English is not merely a tool but a creator and supporter of knowledge. Only now are we beginning to consider the impact of international students in our university classrooms and the role of English as the language of teaching and learning. As Catherine Montgomery notes, “while there is a developing awareness of the approaches that might promote intercultural skills and competences, this idea is still associated solely with themes of internationalization and there has been little or no attempt to link current and innovative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in general across universities with the principles inherent in moves to internationalize the curriculum” (Montgomery, 2010, p. 132).

How we internationalise our universities requires careful planning and the investment of considerable resources in both teacher training and expertise and in student interaction. As N. Harrison demonstrates, “internationalized university experiences cannot be easily met by simply increasing casual exposure between home and international students” (Harrison, 2007). Montgomery adds that “tasks and activities that require students to engage in intercultural interaction should have meaning and authenticity in the students’ personal and academic contexts” (Montgomery, 2010, p. 132).

If we are to move towards an understanding of what an international university experience entails for both students and teachers, the intercultural Higher Education landscape should be presented not as a binary on international and home or self and other but as a complex site of struggle, tension and conflict (Pierce, 2003). This site should not be seen as problematic but as useful and transformative (Savin-Baden, 2008). The Intercultural Communication course described above is one such site; there are many others. It is a successful learning context based on the earlier quoted principle established by Bowden and Marton, i.e. if we understand other ways of seeing things, we understand each other; in this way, we can help to understand one another better (J. Bowden and F. Marton, 1998). Differences in traditions and experience should be seen as positive; they are not only the basis of new educational and cultural insights but a catalyst for mutual understanding between nations.


