

Enriching career experience of international academics through language training and practicing programs

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Structured abstract

Introduction

There are increasing numbers of academic staff employed at Australian universities immigrated from overseas and English is their second language (ESL). This trend is certainly visible at the Faculty of Engineering & Survey (FOES), The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) to which international academics bring rich personal and professional experience and skills gained through their exposure to other cultural, professional and educational environments. Nonetheless, these international academics are expected to work in environment, climates and classrooms that are culturally very different from their own (Maadad, 2011). They are likely to face a range of socio-cultural and language challenges when they teach at Australian universities among a similarly diverse cohort of local and international students adjusting to Australian styles.

Research and case studies, conducted largely in English speaking countries around the world, highlighted several challenges faced by ESL academics while advancing their learning & teaching career in a foreign environment. These challenges have mainly been due to language, culture and system differences. Language differences can play a crucial role when ESL academics speak with a different accent and/or apply stress & intonation incorrectly (Alberts, 2008; Gahungu, 2011; Maadad, 2011). Language also becomes an issue when they lack English vocabulary and find it difficult in expressing comprehensibly (Alberts, 2008; Neves & Sanyal, 2012). Cultural difference becomes an issue when there is a significant difference in: the order of communication between staff members, the relationship between teacher and student, and student behavior (Alberts, 2008; Luxon & Peel, 2009). System differences such as; pedagogical settings (Luxon & Peelo, 2009), variation in academic standards and grading systems (Alberts, 2008), and students' level of understanding can similarly make it difficult for ESL academics to adjust to a new environment.

In such circumstances, many ESL academics in Australia tend to divert their attention to research. Essentially research participation is a desirable outcome and most Australian universities emphasize research and publications. Research publications also lead to advancements in academic career. Hence, research focus by ESL academics is beneficial on its own right, though their teaching performance may be compromised. On the other hand, the research productivity of ESL academics may have lesser impact in terms of improving their inherent socio-cultural and language problems associated with English language communication and presentation.

Different from research intensive universities in metropolitan area, The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is a regional university with flexible multiple learning and teaching modes. The teaching workload of academics is generally high and often academics teach relative higher number of courses per semester. Academics also have to meet the requirements for the students of different study modes with very diverse social and cultural backgrounds. A comprehensive survey to quantitatively measure the stress level was conducted in Nov 2011 at FOES, USQ. Thirty-nine responses out of 67 academics (response rate 58%) were received. Sixty percent of the participants were those ESL background (this roughly corresponds to the number of ESL academics at the faculty). The level of stress and individual stress factors (stressors) were identified. Along with other survey results (e.g. Engineering academics have a higher level of stress than general public, females engineers

experience more stress than males), it was found that ESL academics were considerably more stressed than their Australian counterparts (GHQ-12 score of 16.2 vs. 13.2) (Goh, Zhou et al. 2012). Adjusting to Australian environment with very different socio-cultural and language background undoubtedly has contributed to the higher stress level of ESL academics.

It is known that increasing work-related stresses have a considerable impact on the quality, productivity and well-being of an academic professional life. Workplace stresses have significant financial cost annually to the economy due to poor decision-making, health issues (such as obesity, cancer, and heart disease) and accidents resulting from that illness (e.g. stroke and heart attack).

The survey conducted in 2011 at USQ improved the awareness of health and well-being of ESL academics and provided a sound basis for hypotheses for potential intervention strategies. The survey also provided a sound rationale for this ESL project. It is shown that a practical support system is very important for ESL academics to overcome the language and cultural hurdles. These observations are echoed by a number of studies which highlighted the importance of institutional support system in their research (e.g. Alberts, 2008; Luxon & Peelo, 2009; Maadad, 2011; Pherali, 2012).

Although institutional support system to help ESL academics in their new learning and teaching environment is critical, there is limited or no support for ESL academics at USQ which is similar to most other universities (Pherali, 2012; Maadad, 2011). ESL academics are often left on their own to overcome the socio-cultural and language barriers. Despite extraordinary personal efforts by these academics for a change, the improvement can be very slow and the outcome may appear to be insignificant.

As a consequence of stress survey findings, a project to provide support programs for ESL academics initiated by the authors was approved by faculty management in 2011. Given many years of teaching experience in Australia and first-hand knowledge of the difficulties at the beginning of the career in Australia experienced by the initiators, the objectives of the project was to develop effective and sustainable support programs for ESL academics, identify socio-cultural problems associated with English language communication, improve their presentation skills in English, and achieve excellence in teaching. The aim was to provide smooth transition for ESL academics to adjust to tertiary teaching environment in Australia.

This paper reports on the progress of the training workshops conducted as part of the above project at USQ during 2011 and 2012. Section 2 and 3, introduces the design and development of the programs including the trial workshops that were carried out. Section 4, evaluates the programs based on the feedbacks received after the workshops and discusses the valuable lessons learnt from the experiences. Finally the paper concludes its finding in Section 5.

The design and development of the effective training programs

As academics have to carry out extensive research and teaching duties, they generally have limited time to participate in the training programs. Therefore the main emphasis in the design of this training program was its flexibility, effectiveness and quality. The program was made flexible enough to suit the experience, learning style and busy schedule of the individual participants and it was based on existing knowledge and practices.

With regards to the existing institutional supporting programs for ESL academics, some literature review on this topic had been carried out. Neves & Sanyal (2012) reviewed several publications and quoted various support programs (e.g. English language training, mentoring, orientation programs, seminars and workshops, recorded audio and video tapes etc) developed by colleges and universities to enhance communication skills and teaching

effectiveness of non-native instructors. However they were unable to source information with regards to effectiveness of such programs in student learning. In their review, Neves and Sanyal (2012) concluded that students (mainly undergraduate) are more concerned about learning and the ability of instructors to teach and less concerned about the instructors' knowledge of material, exposure to research and/or social skills. So, the standard support programs consisting of mainly English language training is not seen to be adequate to fulfill the requirement of ESL academics. On the other hand, Maadad (2011) recommended the host institutions to offer language support and mentoring services to ESL academics. However, Pherali (2012) warned that the provision of standard support system (e.g. English language) may stereotype the problem with international academics and dissuade them from using the service. Similarly, Luxon & Peelo (2012) were critical about the offer of straight language training to ESL academics as the problem is often related to cultural differences. On this regard Pherali (2012) pin-pointed the need of an institutional language and cultural training program that can be seen as an avenue for career development for ESL academics. All in all, the literature is united in the view that the requirement of ESL academics is way beyond the simple English language training. It has more to do with the socio-cultural communication and language presentation issues.

On the other hand, most ESL academics are adult learners with specific learning needs and experiences. Hence, Knowles concept of Andragogy, with regards to adult learners was taken into account in the program. Knowles concept of Andragogy evolved from five assumptions of adult learning that states; adults are self-directed learners, adult learners bring a wealth of experience to the educational setting, adult enter educational settings ready to learn, adult are problem-centred in their learning and adults are best motivated by internal factors (Merriam, 2001).

Recognising above facts and theories together with the experiences and needs of ESL academics a comprehensive set of support programs, consisting of a range of hands-on activities and training programs, were developed. The program included English language workshops, teaching forums, a reading club, and an English buddy facility. Individual academics can either participate in all the programs or only the ones that best suit their time, interests and learning style.

The English language workshops were designed to focus on improving the fundamental English speaking skills, including the correct pronunciation of vowels and consonants, word stress patterns, and intonation, stress and rhythm in normal speech. This program aimed to improve fluency and to reduce those patterns of speech which make listening to lectures difficult to understand for both national and international students.

Complementary to the workshops, a teaching forum was proposed to provide a platform for lecturers to share and discuss the strategies and methods related to teaching. Although the teaching forum was targeted for ESL lecturers, it was designed to address the general teaching skills, teaching performance and all the issues related to student participation in the classroom. Reflection was recognised as a useful tool to promote self evaluation of teaching skills. At the teaching forum, a couple of participants would be asked to present 10-15 minutes segment of their lectures at the start of the session. A panel comprising of English language professionals and participants then would provide comments and feedbacks on participants' presentations. This would then be followed by facilitated general discussions among all the participants. Participants could freely share their experience in engineering education practice and public speaking. The discussions should be focussed on the topics such as "What constitutes a good lecture?", "How do we prepare and deliver a good lecture?", "What should we do to engage students" etc...

The above formal program can be enhanced by less formal sessions. We proposed to organise smaller learning groups such as a reading club and an English buddy program. At reading club, participants can practice or perform drama, or read aloud articles, books, or lecture notes of their choices. In the English buddy program it was proposed that one or two

international staff(s) would team up with one native English speaker. Each group would meet regularly weekly or fortnightly to discuss technical or non-technical issues based on their own interests and schedule. At the end of each semester a function would be organised with all of the groups to share their experiences and gather recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the programs.

The Training Workshops

Four trial workshops were conducted for ESL academics at the faculty in late 2011. There were 8-12 participants who attended each session. This first series of workshops focussed on fundamentals in English communication. They covered English phonetics, stress patterns in words and sentences, intonation in normal speech and possible problem areas for ESL speakers. The presenter found it difficult to cover all of the information into four two-hour workshops. There were a significant number of skills and examples that were used for each session. The participants found that there was not enough time to absorb and practise the skills. Participants strongly recommended regular workshops over longer period of time (i.e. on semester basis).

With the success and feedback from the first series of workshops, further support was received from the faculty learning and teaching fund. The program was extended to include a further eight one hour workshops over semester 2 in 2012. In 2012, the workshops were delivered by Linguistic lecturers from the English Language Centre at the OAC (Open Access College). The OAC at USQ provides on- campus and distance courses and programs of study to international and domestic students that will equip them with the language and academic skills needed to successfully participate in tertiary study in Australian Institutions. The Centre also provides professional development for its English Language teaching staff.

Learning from the experience of running the first workshops in 2011, the 2nd series of workshops in 2012, which had the same group of academics, took a different approach which would complement what had already been covered in 2011. It was decided to take a hands-on interactive approach which would help participants focus on their individual needs. Therefore, the 2nd series of workshops were more aligned to the teaching forum as in our initial design. The two workshop series in 2011 and 2012 therefore provided a complementary approach to each other. Participants showed a collegial and supportive spirit throughout the delivery of the workshops.

At the beginning of each workshop in 2012, participants were asked in turn to provide a ten minute segment of a lecture that they had given recently. The participants had the choice to record their lectures and play their recordings to the whole group or receive individual feedback from the workshop presenters. Participants all agreed to have their recordings played during the workshop and received feedback from the facilitators and their peers. A table of assessment criteria was designed by OAC lecturers and agreed upon by our participants as being important for the delivery of student lectures. The peer participants individually assessed the presentations based on the evaluation table immediately after each presentation. The strengths and weaknesses of individual presentations were discussed and shared.

Following the presentations, workshop content focussed on selected topics important to teaching. Topics covered included social interaction with students, cultural differences, listening and speaking skills and teaching strategies to engage and enhance communication. All of these topics aimed at developing oral communication and presentation skills to improve teaching performance. For example, a discussion was held on how to engage more interactively with students with teaching techniques such as quizzes, asking students questions, and the use of stimulating media. Students can often be lazy listeners and will switch off during lectures and be distracted. This can be exacerbated if they need to listen to a speaker who may have an accent and they find this difficult. They are quick to blame the lecturer for their poor listening skills and will often evaluate these classes poorly. Participants

were asked to practice one or more strategies that they felt confident to do or brainstorm new strategies to suit their teaching style and environment. Participants reported their experiences during the following workshop. Teaching strategies were important as they provided a way to work with identified strengths and weaknesses to improve communication skills with students. The workshops also discussed the rhythm of a language, the various elements of voice and its importance in speaking and communication.

Raising self-awareness was identified as the important starting point for improvement. The final workshops reviewed what was learned and put into practice by developing everyday strategies that were simple and effective to facilitate change on a daily/weekly basis.

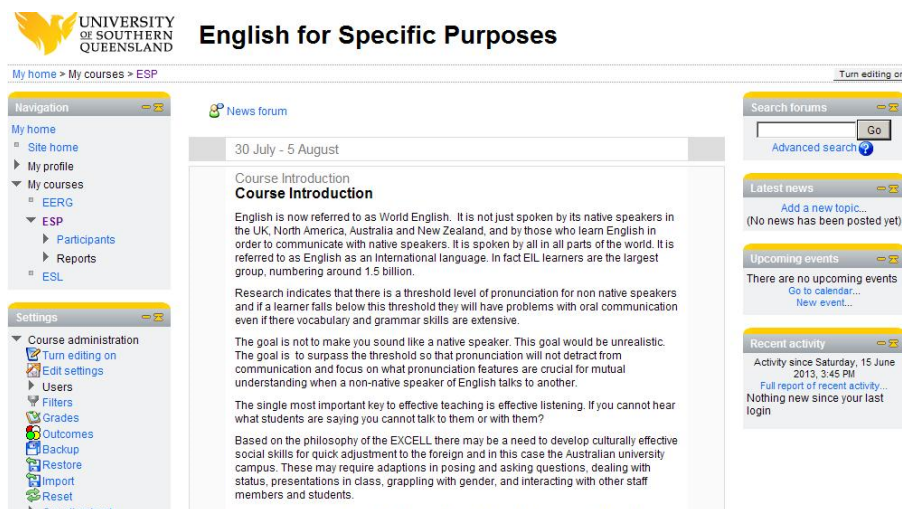


Figure 1. Course Home Page for ESL program at USQ

In addition to the face to face workshops in 2012, a course page has been set up by lectures from OAC. Workshop contents, activities and other relevant resources were posted on the course homepage prior to and after individual workshops. Many useful online materials regarding culture and English language are available on the homepage for the participants to reference at any time. Figure 1 shows the part of our course webpage.

Project Evaluation and Discussions

Two series of workshops were run in 2011 and 2012 successfully. Surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops were conducted after each series of workshops. The survey results showed that all the participants were satisfied with the workshops and recommended to allocate more time for practice and discussion during the workshops and run more regular workshops over a longer period of time.

Due to limited time and resources, not all the programs initially planned were implemented. Peer and self- evaluation showed improvements in delivery of lectures by participants. Of particular interest was the confidence that lecturers displayed during the second evaluation process. It is expected that this confidence will continue to develop with improved outcomes for lecture delivery. It was evident from those who participated in this program that they already were reflective in their practice and this type of workshop was a positive way to facilitate communication and teaching strategies to become a more effective teacher. To make a comparison lecturers again volunteered to record their lectures at the end of the workshops and evaluations made using the same criteria. Some improvements were observed.

During the workshop period in 2012, most lecturers tried different strategies in their classes and enjoyed the improved outcomes. As a result, participants became more confident in

teaching and delivering effective lectures/tutorials. One of the participants commented that he has had the best lecture ever at the USQ thus far at the workshop.

Despite the positive outcomes, we must be realistic that developing excellent teaching and communication skills is a long term journey. The training raised the self-awareness of the importance of cultural and language issues and paved the foundation for participants to build good habits to constantly improve lectures and communication skills.

Conclusions

There are some challenges in improving English speech and presentation skills for ESL academics at tertiary environment. The workshops we organised received very positive feedback from all participants. All of the participating academics believe that it was necessary for the faculty or university to provide English support programs and the workshops that can effectively help to improve their teaching performance and professional communication skills. These training programs recognise and acknowledge the skills and experience that ESL academics already have but assist in providing help to adapt and use these skills to successfully function in a different culture. The training programs provided a smooth transition for international academics to adjust to Australian tertiary teaching environment and help them develop much needed skills in achieving excellent teaching outcomes. The programs also provided a forum for lecturers to share and discuss experiences in a safe and positive environment where it was possible to learn from each other. It was agreed that these types of workshops are not only beneficial for ESL staff but would be of benefit to all faculty teaching staff. Reviewing and reflecting on communication and teaching strategies is a necessary process for all teaching practice. It is evident that these professional trainings are important and are appreciated by ESL academics in their career development. Consistent long term support and encouragement from the faculty and the university management are needed.

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