Inclusive approaches to effective communication and active participation in the multicultural classroom

An international business management context

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ABSTRACT This article reports on the author's experiences of, and reflections on, theory-based practices with respect to communication and participation in the multicultural classroom in the context of business management education. Key issues concerning the learning experience of international students are identified and examined, and suggestions on the implementation of inclusive approaches to effective communication and active participation in a culturally diverse class of international business management are provided.

KEYWORDS: *active participation, culture, effective communication, international students, multicultural classroom*

Introduction

Models for developing the quality of teaching and learning, as well as teaching tips on 'something that works', abound in the education for business literature. A much lower degree of attention, however, has been devoted to exploring issues pertaining to the challenges of the added dimension of

cultural diversity that now, more than ever, characterizes the cohorts of British business schools, which like those in Australia and the USA, have become increasingly multicultural in their student populations (Scott, 1998). Even more rare in the literature, is the perspective of international individuals who have been on both sides of the desk, first, as international students, and then, as non-English speaking background (NESB) lecturers.[1]

Drawing from the reflections and experiences of the author, this article offers such a perspective with respect to communication, participation and cultural diversity-related issues in the context of an international management course. The first section examines contextual aspects of intercultural communication. These include stereotypes, pronunciation, rate of speech, the use of metaphors, international models of literacy and academic conventions on bibliographic referencing and plagiarism. Issues germane to participation in the multicultural classroom are then explored in the following section, which focuses on practices such as brainstorming, class and small group discussions, and cross-cultural work groups.

Cultural diversity and communication

The difficulties of communicating across cultures have already been investigated extensively in the international management literature,[2] and, of the identified barriers to effective intercultural communication (culture-specific non-verbal cues, faulty attributions, perceptual biases, etc.), stereotyping is undoubtedly the one which, in the educational context, holds the most destructive connotations.

Stereotypes are about categorizing a group of people on the basis of false preconceptions that are developed to degrade others as a way of strengthening our own self-image (Wei, 1999). Because interactions with people from the stereotyped groups are processed through the mental categories that make up the stereotype, stereotypes cause major distortions in the way we communicate and interact with others, inhibit the development of trust and cultivate divisions. In exploring the intercultural experience of Korean students studying in Australian universities, for example, Choi (1997) found that Korean students' difficulties in relationships with Australian peers (and with teachers) were attributed to discrimination and lack of mutual cultural knowledge. Other reasons accounting for such difficulties related to the stereotypical perceptions Koreans had about their Australian peers. Cited were self-centredness, excessive competitiveness and ineffective help.

But how to deal with stereotypes? Especially in a culturally diverse class of international business management (where cross-cultural communication is also a central part of the syllabus), stereotypes should not be avoided but challenged, and we should start from ourselves because we are

169

all, to different degrees, and perhaps subconsciously or unintentionally, burdened with stereotypical beliefs.

In my international management course (where over 50% of the students enrolled are international students and as many as 15 different nationalities are represented), I ask students to give examples of stereotypical images of their culture of origin and subject such portraits to evaluation and factual verification. What students and I have learnt from this exercise is invaluable and goes beyond the discovery that 'not all young Brits are lager louts' or that 'Italians have learned how to queue', we have all become more conscious of our own susceptibility to stereotypical beliefs and, as a result, more eager to learn the actual differences in 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another', which is how Hofstede (1984: 21) defines culture.

Language-related factors

In examining intercultural communication taking place in the classroom, language, of course, cannot be ignored because it is the most prominent feature of culture and still the main medium for instruction. However, it is precisely because of its central importance that language-related factors, especially verbal, can be a major source of misunderstandings in communicating with international students.

Pronunciation, for example, can seriously inhibit effective communication. Being a non-native speaker of English, I am obviously particularly keen to make sure that my accent does not prevent student understanding. It is for this reason that I always put much effort into trying to achieve absolute clarity in oral exposition. I also tell students to feel free to interrupt me at any time if they are unclear about meaning, I frequently ask questions of students to check their understanding and, at the risk of sounding repetitive, I usually re-explain key concepts in different ways making use of appropriate synonyms to clarify language.

Problems with pronunciation, however, are not unique to tutors or instructors who are non-native speakers of English. International exchanges of lecturing staff between universities are more and more frequent and have made university classrooms a microcosm of the regional differences in pronunciation that exist between the many English-speaking parts of the world, not to mention the local accents within English-speaking countries, which can equally create noise in the communication process, especially with an international audience. This is why all lecturers should be careful about pronunciation in order to ensure effective decoding by international students.

It is also important to pay attention to the pace of delivery; a rate of speech that is too slow can lead to boredom and cause attention to fall, while too fast a delivery can cause frustration and disengage students

(Hollman and Kleiner, 1997). We should never forget that in order to listen, process the messages caught and take notes, time is needed, especially for students for whom English is their second or third language.

In addition, regardless of the format of delivery (lecture or workshop), 'teaching' or 'a one way presentation of arguments' should be limited to 'short bursts' and articulated around student-centred activities such as learn-by-doing exercises (Jenkins, 1992). This is not only an element of good practice aimed at introducing active learning and at dealing with the problem of limited concentration spans, in second-language speaking environments it is also a key tool to combat language fatigue (for both second language speakers and listeners).

Another language-related factor concerns the use of colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions, which are often foreign even to other cultures using the English language. Although many commentators have argued that any colloquialisms or idioms should be avoided in the multicultural classroom (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997), since expressions such as 'red tape', 'paying through the nose' or 'budgeting on a shoe string' have become part of the business vocabulary, I would argue that in business and management education, just like the case of uncommon or technical words, idiomatic expressions can be used but, when used, an explanation of their meaning should be provided to students.

Analogies and metaphors too can sometimes inhibit effective intercultural communication. For example, when talking about performance benchmarks, it is risky to compare star brands and market leaders to, say, Manchester United, if in your class a large proportion of students is non-British, especially if from overseas. The analogy here may well defeat the purpose since, for at least some of the international students, it will be anything but illuminating.

The need to draw from global meanings, or, alternatively, to qualify and define what it is we are actually saying, is not only germane to the terms of reference of metaphors and analogies. Even known local brand names can, just after the international student arrival, end up as yet another item in his or her already long list of vocabulary searches. One should be careful, therefore, not to assume that this type of information is already in the knowledge-domain of international students. This caution should avoid the embarrassment that the infamous Dr X had to suffer when, at the end of a great lecture on the application of Porter's five forces on the UK supermarket industry, he was approached by a Chinese student who timidly asked what a 'tesco' was.

Discourse style

Another issue that we face when working with international students is that

of confronting the varied ways in which the logic of students' own culture and language influences the structure and style of their written work. As noted by Zaharna (1996: 80) 'different cultures have distinctive preferences for means of constructing logical arguments and persuasive messages'. Indeed, not all languages follow the linear structure of English, a structure which in essay writing is characterized by an introduction (where in no more than a couple of paragraphs we expect students to tell us what they are going to tell us), a statement of the thesis (where students are expected to present their argument and add additional information to substantiate it) and a conclusion (where students are expected to tell us, succinctly, what they have told us). Some languages follow a circular structure, some adopt a culture-specific rhetorical style, while others allow and even encourage repetition (Bliss, 1999). This means that what may appear to be an unstructured, disorganized, off the point, or repetitive piece of work, may in fact be written in accordance to the discourse style and logical patterns of the home language.

In the Italian essay writing style, for example, a long and general introduction which illustrates the genesis of the issue to be examined and provides a retrospective analysis or historical overview of the topic is a must, regardless of the wording of the question. A British reader, however, as the author learned at his expense during the early stages of his undergraduate study in England, would see this as lack of 'convergence' to the point, or even 'waffling', and it might not be until the second page of the essay that concepts expressed are regarded as being really pertinent, and aimed at answering the question.

How should we then deal with this cross-cultural awareness gap? First, it helps if we become more aware of the nature of these problems. This does not mean, of course, that we should expect lecturers to become familiar with, let alone learn, all the different writing discourse styles and organizational structures of the myriad of languages that are likely to underpin international students' written work (Pfunder, 1999). What the above analysis should make us recognize, is that the adopted 'rules' of what constitutes a well-structured and logically organized essay do have cultural boundaries, and if we want students to apply these rules, then it must be our responsibility to help international students develop essay-writing skills by teaching the local conventions for presenting and structuring material.[3]

Explaining the rules: plagiarism and referencing

The need for clear instructions is not limited to developing understanding of the expectations that we have of discourse style and organizational structure. The rules on bibliographic referencing and plagiarism-related issues must also be made clear to students. The importance of this cannot

be overstated since, just like many home students, international students may be confused as to what plagiarism really means, and unaware of the extent to which it can undermine assessment (Biggs, 1999). Many international students come from countries with markedly different standards concerning ownership attributors, citation and referencing rules (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991). In some Asian countries for example, as reported by Knight (1999: 98) 'the convention of indicating through citations the source of an idea or quote is a relatively new importation, and only a weakly developed one'. In these cases, therefore, plagiarism may be merely the result of a cultural misunderstanding.

The other problem of course is that the concept of plagiarism itself is not at all clear since, on the continuum between authenticity and straight copying from unacknowledged sources, practices such as 'cut-and-paste' and 'plagiphrasing' have ambiguous boundaries, and confusion still reigns among academics over the acceptability of such practices. The widespread use of the World Wide Web has complicated matters even further by creating new grey areas on issues such as authenticity and referencing of World Wide Web sources.

Because plagiarism is ultimately a matter of degree rather than kind, the best course of action here is to start by being clear ourselves with what are the rules to be adopted, and where we intend to draw the line, and then proceed by making sure that our rules on bibliographic and World Wide Web referencing, on what constitutes plagiarism and on what is and is not allowed are clearly spelt out to students so as to avoid any misunderstandings. The same applies to rules concerning syndication and cheating, terms which are even more cryptic in defining the licit–illicit boundaries of 'getting help'. As argued by Ladd and Ruby Jr. (1999: 367) 'the classroom is not the place of "let's see if the students can figure these rules out"'. To avoid any doubts, these rules should be written down in the course guide, with a clear indication of the associated penalties that are to be imposed during the marking process with respect to, say, copying from unacknowledged sources, lack of a bibliography, and inconsistent or improper referencing throughout the text.

Cultural diversity and participation

The benefits stemming from class participation are numerous. First, participation through class discussion forces students 'to think'. In formulating arguments about the topic in question, students inevitably go through a valuable cognitive process; they crystallize ideas, subject such ideas to their own scrutiny and finally articulate these thoughts.

173

Second, participation through discussion helps students to become better listeners, and it is through listening that students are exposed to the many different ways in which the topic of the day can be analysed and applied.

Third, discussions, by providing space for the exchange and examination of ideas, offer the opportunity to give and receive constructive criticism and feedback, activities which help students to develop skills of the Bloom's higher order type, i.e. analysis and evaluation.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, discussions taking place in the multicultural classroom can truly provide the best lessons in cultural diversity and how to recognize, respect and turn the 'cultural baggage' that each student brings to the classroom into a positive experience for all (including the tutor). An opportunity, therefore, to learn from our differences, achieve cultural synergies and celebrate everyone.

For all the above-cited reasons, active participation through class discussion cannot be seen as anything but a central element of students' learning.

Unfortunately, however, especially in the multicultural classroom, students do not always welcome student-centred learning, initially. Chinese students, for example, feel uncomfortable, at least at first, with participatory classroom activities (Pun, 1990). For some international students, interactive lectures, participatory-based classes and group-work may represent a totally new way of learning as previous education experiences in their home country may have featured only the traditional, lecture-based, tutor-centred approach. Other students may be reluctant to participate actively due to shyness or because, in their cultures, reticence and the avoidance of contention are considered virtues. Chalmers and Volet (1997), for example, report that Southeast Asian students hold different beliefs from many Western students about the appropriateness of speaking out in class. 'Many are not willing to draw attention to themselves by asking what they perceive to be an unnecessary question in front of the whole group. This is because they do not wish to waste the teacher's or the other students' time with one query' (p. 91). Most commonly, however, what prevents most international students from participating in class discussions, is the fear of not being understood and, in the extreme case, of becoming subject to ridicule (Burns, 1991; Mullins et al., 1995; Samuelowicz, 1987).

Encouraging participation

In order to stimulate involvement in class discussions some lecturers employ formal mechanisms for grading participation (see, for example, Maznevski, 1996). These involve developing 'behavioural indicators' of quantity and quality of involvement, with high or low scores being then allocated to excellent, good, average, poor or lack of contributions to class

discussion. Notwithstanding the good intent, I am somewhat sceptical towards these formal and mechanistic approaches for grading participation as students for whom English is not their first language may feel even more intimidated to speak in the plenary knowing that they are constantly being assessed. Grading the quality of participation may, therefore, prove to be a disincentive for the potential contribution by less confident international students. If extrinsic rewards are to be adopted in an attempt to motivate students towards a greater level of participation, then, in this context, 'marks for effort' are definitely preferable to 'marks for quality of performance'.

In my classes, I tend to introduce students to participation by initially letting them work in small groups. Unlike plenary sessions, small group discussion offers students for whom English is their second or third language an opportunity to practise English in a more relaxed, less intimidating, and yet focused, academic setting. I also explain to students the value of engaging in a brainstorming phase as a stepping stone towards class discussion; brainstorming is about thinking aloud, exploring thought by conversation and articulating raw ideas since, at that stage, all ideas will be of value. The emphasis here, therefore, is on getting students out of their shells rather than grading the quality of their contributions. Of course, at the start of the courses that I lead, I do explain to students that a genuine effort to participate actively must be made on their part. As an incentive, I inform students that active class participation may positively affect their overall grade for the course since it will be used to determine whether borderline cases should be awarded the next higher grade.

Because, as claimed by Chong and Farago (1999), visual images are ideal catalysts for discussion in the multicultural classroom (and hence a key element in the transformation process toward inclusive instruction), I also make an effort to search for relevant video-clips to be shown during my workshops, tools which I found very powerful in triggering class debates.

It is important to note at this point that, in the multicultural classroom, no successful pedagogy based on student participation can take place unless at the start of the course the tutor sends an unambiguous message of equality to students, a message that promotes an environment which embraces cultural diversity and within which all students feel they have something significant to contribute. Involving students in cross-cultural work groups is, especially in the business management curriculum,[4] the best way of doing this, as it makes a clear statement that students can and will work effectively with people from different cultures.[5] Only in such a class can cultural diversity be more than a topic to be talked about, and translate into a meaningful and mutually supportive experience which is an essential part of the learning process. As concluded by Volet and Ang (1998) in their study of students' own views on the issue of cultural mix:

175

> The presence of international students on university campus provides a unique social forum for enhancing all students' understanding and appreciation of the richness of other cultures. . . . Since opportunities for inter-cultural learning are seldom taken spontaneously, tertiary institutions have a social responsibility to design learning environments which foster students' development of inter-cultural adaptability . . . (p. 21)

It is for the above reasons that in my international management course, group-work involving mandatory multicultural student membership is introduced as an assessed learning outcome. The shared goals of group members help to promote a common sense of identity which, in turn, provides an opportunity for both international and home students to value the chance of working with such a variety of people, and experience positive intercultural interactions.[6]

As one of my students wrote in the course evaluation questionnaire:

> There is no better way to learn about multiculturalism than first hand

While others commented:

> If you are able to accept other cultures and are willing to open your mind, you will enjoy this module

> Being 'forced' to work with students from such different cultural backgrounds allowed me to discover so much about my own culture, values and beliefs

> It is the first time I do teamwork with English students. In contrast to my expectations, they were willing to help and curious to find out about my country and background. A nice experience!

Views which, being reported after the experience of culturally mixed groups, can be regarded as highly encouraging findings.

Establishing a good rapport

High-quality interaction and active participation, however, cannot be achieved through good intentions, or mere administrative decree, alone. Good relationships among students and a good rapport between the students and the tutor are a *conditio sine qua non* to creating an environment of comfort, trust and mutual respect, in which open discussion, exchange and examination of ideas, as well as active participation are not inhibited by fear (Billingsley, 1999).

As observed by Tompson and Tompson (1996), this idea that without trusting relationships learning is stunted finds theoretical support in Maslow's model of 'hierarchy of needs', according to which individuals are unlikely to engage in self-actualization activities, such as challenging intellectual debates and discussions, unless security, social and esteem needs have already been satisfied.

Tompson and Tompson (1996) suggest a number of strategies aimed at facilitating international students' adjustment and social integration and hence at fostering trusting relationships across differences. These include the use of ice-breaking activities that allow students to get to know each other, learning students' names during the initial lessons and using their names when speaking to them, the clear communication of classroom expectations, and the creation of an open and non-threatening atmosphere.

In order to establish a stronger rapport with my students I also tell them that they can address me by my first name. I frequently remind them not to be afraid of asking questions and, to reassure them, I say to them that if they are unsure about aspects of the topic, it is likely that other students will share the same doubts. Like Muuka (1998), I also tell them that in my teaching experience I have yet to come across a student question that I consider irrelevant or annoying. I encourage all students to express their views, and tell non-native English speakers not to feel intimidated by the prospect of speaking English in front of the whole class. I make them feel important by showing genuine interest when listening to their contributions; learning about their perspectives, experiences and cultural backgrounds is of enormous value to me! And I tell them this, emphasizing my appreciation, and the relevance of their arguments, by referring to their ideas and insights during debriefs. I feel that my conduct too plays a role; a sincere smile, a relaxed open stance and the use of humour where appropriate are behaviours that do contribute to fostering a sense of friendship with my students. Finally, I offer students my full availability to discuss problems, issues or any concerns they may have in relation to the course (and their academic life more generally) through an 'open door' office policy.

Conclusion

Given the considerable presence of international students in British classrooms, there is a need to assess whether the way we currently teach can effectively cater for the learning needs of both home and international students, whether additional barriers stemming from diversity-related issues must be overcome, and whether special skills in teaching across cultures need to be developed.

In this article several barriers to effective communication and active participation in the multicultural classroom have been identified and examined, and suggestions for inclusive approaches to aid the facilitation of learning have been put forward. Of course, although these suggestions can certainly make a difference, there is no guarantee of one hundred percent success. As the case reported by Muuka (1998) demonstrates, student failure to 'make the grade' will always be a fact of academic life; but one

177

which stems from lack of effort, low student ability or disregard for clear instructions, regardless of the student ethnicity and cultural background, rather than from poor teaching.

Indeed, it is important to recognize that by modifying the way we teach so as to improve international students' learning, we offer better teaching to all. And there need never be an excuse for not doing so, since, as argued by Ramsden (1992: 3) 'every teacher can learn how to do better'.

Notes
1. Defined as individuals for whom English is not their first language or culture.
2. See, for example, the literature review provided by Mendenhall et al. (1995).
3. For students whose English skills are minimal, parallel language training courses should also be provided.
4. Within the academic field of international business management the use of group-work involving multicultural student membership is not only a pedagogic preference but an injunction to better prepare students for their later careers in the real world of business (De Vita, 1999).
5. For an examination of the mechanisms that, in the capacity of facilitators, we could adopt to develop high-performing cross-cultural groups see De Vita (1999).
6. For this to work, however, it is vital that the group assignment task cannot be completed by independent individual work. The task should explicitly require input from all the members and cultures represented within the group.

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