

Some experiences of non-EU international students following an Access to Higher Education Diploma course in a general further education college in the North of England

Abstract

This study provides a basis for deepening understandings of approaches which offer effective and enhanced learning experiences for predominantly East Asian international students following provision alongside local students in UK general further education colleges. A mixed methods approach employed a largely quantitative questionnaire to access the views of 25 international students, 22 of whom were Chinese nationals, and to identify four participants (two Chinese, one Japanese and one Maldivian) for subsequent semi-structured interviews. This fieldwork was supported by the collection of college achievement data for the international students and for the local students who had studied directly alongside them. The outcomes indicate that the international students achieved at least as well as the local students in relation to academic outcomes, and that they valued teachers who allowed their cultural experiences to directly contribute to classroom learning. The study also highlights the importance of inter-cultural activities. More prosaically, the outcomes also suggest that important concerns for these international students were that they should receive clarity in answers to their questions as part of the processes of learning, as well as the resolution of ostensibly more peripheral issues such as the quality and type of food available in the college catering outlets.

(abstract 200 words)

Key words: international students; further education; learning experience

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Introduction

In recent years the integration of international students, designated by the United Kingdom (UK) Government as “Tier 4” students, in mixed (with local students) classes in “mainstream” general further education (GFE) provision in England has become more common. This follows changes implemented through the United Kingdom Visas and Immigration (UKVI) division of the Home Office which require international students to undertake a recognised Level 3 course if entering the UK to study for a Foundation Year programme of the type which leads to entry to higher education (HE). Such provision is classified as either a further education (FE) programme or a Year 0 programme at a university.

In the UK the FE and skills sector is sometimes referred to through use of the more conceptual term “the lifelong learning sector”, or as “post-compulsory education and training” (as well as other variants of such nomenclature) and it includes adult community learning, offender learning in prisons and young offender institutions, work-based learning, and provision based in private training organisations. As Hodgson, Bailey and Lucas (2015, 1-2) have suggested, its identity and purpose are “somewhat opaque”. General FE colleges are an important part of this broad and complex sector which also incorporates sixth form and specialist (including land-based) colleges – collectively, according to the Association of Colleges (AoC 2020a), these comprised 244 institutions in 2020, 168 of which were GFEs. FE colleges have, however, been in processes of institutional merger over recent years and there were as many as 219 such colleges as recently as January 2013 (AoC 2013). Sir Andrew Foster’s influential review *Realising the potential* (2005, 48) memorably referred to the FE college as “the neglected ‘middle child’ between universities and schools”. Understandings of that kind usually arise from the role of such colleges as a locus of post-school (mainly but not exclusively) non-

advanced provision, a tendency for FE colleges to be relatively absent from policy debates, and a history of underfunding (Fisher and Simmons 2012).

Most learners in FE are young people aged over 16. During 2019-20 FE colleges made provision for more than 2.2 million students (AoC 2020a). FE colleges may be seen as broadly analogous to community colleges or junior colleges in the USA and, perhaps, more closely to the tertiary and further education (TAFE) colleges in Australia. They usually have a strongly vocational range of courses, including apprenticeships based on employment and part-time study. FE colleges normally offer basic skills courses as well as provision for those with special educational needs, in 2019-20 17 per cent of FE college students had a learning difficulty or disability (AoC 2020a), alongside franchised or validated higher education awards. During 2017-18 137,300 students in colleges were engaged in college based higher education, and approximately one third of English students under 19 entering higher education through the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) did so through study at a college (AoC 2020a). The scale of participation in FE by international students however, compared to HE, remains relatively small (Fisher and Saunders 2017). The UK is attractive to international students, being ranked as the second most popular (by student numbers) "destination" (Lomer 2018). Nevertheless, as Lomer (2018) has persuasively argued, there are ambivalent discourses around and within UK governmental policy. This contradiction between the success of the UK in attracting international students and a seeming antipathy in elements of related policy to their presence has arisen from political and media debates which centre largely on the supposed negative impacts of immigration and an overall consequence of this has been one of "othering" both migrant communities and international students. Indeed, the AoC (2020b, 7) have stated that they would "like some of the Tier 4 policy restrictions placed on FE colleges to be lifted

to allow international student numbers to grow, especially from countries where there is a clear demand for skills education.”.

The precise number of international students studying in FE colleges within the UK is not clear from the available statistics, though an estimate of £350 million in fee income for FE Colleges and a £980 million associated total contribution to the economy was posited as long ago as 2013 (HM Government 2013). Both the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC 2018) and AoC (2018, 2020b) have pointed to the problem of a lack of reliable and systematic data with AoC (2020b, 15) bemoaning that “there is still insufficient data about college international activity and no formal mechanism to capture it.”. The total of international non-European Union (non-EU) and international EU student college income in 2016/17 was nearly £57m comprising £52m international non-EU and £4.4m EU student fees (MAC 2018). This FE based activity is less than 10 per cent of international student income in the UK HE sector, but is sufficient to suggest that ensuring that international students in FE enjoy an excellent experience during their studies is an important factor in the continued viability of the FE sector. Current international students in FE also provide a basis for sustaining this work during what, following the United Kingdom’s decision to withdraw from the European Union, are particularly uncertain times for international student recruitment in both the FE and HE sectors. This uncertainty is being compounded by the unknown medium and long-term impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis which emerged in 2020.

During 2017-18 international student recruitment accounted for some 75 per cent of college international activity and income, but the average number of Tier 4 students enrolled in an FE college was just 24, and the average college income from non-EU international activity was £723,280 (AoC 2018). In addition to this, is the continuing commitment of FE colleges to

seeking to ensure that all students enjoy an outstanding learning experience. FE's work with international students has, however, been hampered by policy directions which consistently demonstrate a less open approach that relating to HE (see Fisher and Saunders 2017), as exemplified in the September 2019 announcement from the Department for Education (DfE) of a new two year post-study work visa available to those international students who successfully complete a undergraduate or higher level course. The AoC has made it clear that its member institutions wish to see international students removed from the Government's net migration statistics (MAC 2018).

The study was conducted within a medium sized general FE college in the North of England (henceforth referred to as "Moretrees College"). Moretrees College has a number of programmes for international students where most of the provision is co-taught in "mixed" classes with local students. Wishing to ensure that the experience of international students is equal to that of local students the College has been reviewing its pedagogical approaches to this type of learner. There is, however, comparative to HE, a paucity of evidence around pedagogy for international students in UK FE on which to base such a review. The purpose of this study is to improve understanding of current practices in those classes which include international students at the College and, in so doing, to inform understandings of the experiences of international students following such courses in institutions which sit outside the HE sector in the UK. The long-term intention is to complete a longitudinal study and to develop a flexible pedagogic model that might inform the teaching of international students more broadly, both in UK FE and in similar provision beyond. Moreover, the study focusses specifically on international students in a general FE college, a category of learners who have been relatively invisible in both the academic literature and in policy discourse.

Context of the study

In 2013 the UK's Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) produced a report (DBIS 2013) focussing on the benefits of international students to the FE sector. Whilst these benefits tended to be seen as mainly financial in nature, the Report identified some pedagogical advantages to the presence of international students in colleges. These included the enrichment of the classroom due to the different cultural backgrounds of international students, the addition of diversity to college environments in more mono-cultural areas of the country, and an improvement in UK students' understandings of other cultures which could have advantages in their individual future careers, as well as having broader economic advantages (Fisher and Saunders 2017). The integration of international students into classes with UK students was seen as being,

... important to help UK learners increase the skills they need for future employment by developing skills that can be applied when working in a wider international market. These skills included being able to think about how scenarios may apply in a [sic] different countries, improving their general understanding of other cultures that they may work with in the future, and communicating effectively with individuals with English as a second language. (DBIS 2013, 29)

The benefits of integrating students were made clear in this Report though advantages for the students do not arise solely as a consequence of the mere classroom integration of local and international students, but contingent on institutions working to develop and implement teaching and learning strategies to ensure that internationalisation has a positive effect on all students, on teaching staff and across the wider aspects of institutional life, practices and cultures (Blum, Bentall and Bourn 2010).

Fisher and Saunders (2017) identified six current practices that had evolved to support the learning of students in classes involving international students within Moretrees College. These were:

- a) The integration of international and local students in teaching groups
- b) A whole team approach to language teaching
- c) The development of the language of assessment and grading amongst international students
- d) Providing clear student briefings when setting assignments and tasks
- e) The cross-college enhancement of cultural awareness
- f) Clarity of general communication with individuals and with groups

These practices evolved over several years and without the accumulation of empirical research to confirm their effectiveness. They have continued to develop organically but are currently being informed through engagement with research. The benefits of integrating international and local students have been widely recognised both by government (DBIS 2013) and in the academic literature for example by Guo and Chase (2011), Arkoudis et al. (2013) and Luo (2016). The need for close planning between language and specialist subject teachers has been acknowledged (Arkoudis et al. 2013) but is often seen as problematic and demanding in terms of implementation, pedagogic approaches and professional development (Arkoudis 2005, Love and Arkoudis 2006, Arkoudis et al. 2013). In this context clear communication between teachers and students is seen as crucial (Tran and Le 2017).

The starting point for successfully integrating international students into a classroom containing local students (a transnational classroom) at Moretrees College has been to ensure

that they are treated equally. This is based on a strongly humanistic approach to education. An account by Tran (2013) suggests that such practices require five approaches in the classroom. These are for teachers to, first, engage at a personal level and give individualised support to students; secondly, for teachers to raise their own awareness about the external influences on each student's learning; thirdly, to create a "safe environment" for questions; fourthly, to provide private space for students to avoid "losing face"; and, finally, to develop interpersonal relationships within the group (Tran 2013). Clearly such an approach means that the teacher will need to have a developed awareness of the cultural identity and heritage of the students, including the teaching and learning methods to which they have been accustomed, and to have and to exhibit a high degree of empathy for students who are studying a long way from home and through a foreign language in what is often a markedly different cultural context. Teachers need to reflect upon their pedagogic practices and adapt and develop these to ensure that they create an inclusive environment within the classroom, so that the students feel valued and supported during their studies.

Successful teaching normally requires the creation of a dialogue within the classroom and this is most effective if it involves all those in the room through appropriately inclusive communication processes, including student to student interactions (Alexander 2012). The importance of discourse in the development of student knowledge has become widely accepted since the work of Vygotsky (1978) and that of other social constructivist theorists. Whilst Vygotsky has been influential in thinking about language teaching and associated modes of learning (as well as beyond) in that he highlighted complexities in inter-cultural learning, it is important to acknowledge that the historical context and theoretically "unfinished" nature of his work have led to some trenchant critiques of which Vasileva and Balyasnikova (2019) provide a recent overview.

Tran (2010) posits a view of the heuristic for meaning making in academic writing developed by Lillis (2001) which places classroom dialogue into context. An interpretation of this heuristic is shown in Figure 1 below and is centred on the idea that the student is identifying “Why something needs to be said, what needs to be said, and how it can be said”. If the teacher is to generate dialogic learning (Alexander 2012) they will need to create a situation or environment for the conversation which is described as the “context of situation”. Competent teachers will be able to do this for students who are from their own culture and conversation will be initiated, however, international students may not be able to make sense of the cultural context of the conversation and thus will often not be able to be directly involved. This third area, the “context of culture”, may explain why some teachers find the integration of international students difficult to achieve as it adds an additional level of complexity to the classroom.

[Figure 1 here]

Tran (2011) continues her discussion of Lillis’s heuristic applying it to the positioning theory developed by Van Langenhove and Harre in the 1990s. Tran argues that students within an institution will be in situations of either *self-positioning*, *forced self-positioning* or *positioning of others*. Those who are *self-positioning* are taking a position to express their personal view, those who are in a *forced self-positioning* situation are taking the position they feel their teachers require them to take and, in *positioning of others*, the position taken by the teacher causes the student to take a position which correlates with that of the teacher.

Van Langenhove and Harre (1991) introduced the concept of position as an alternative to role, and Harre and Van Langenhove (1999) expanded this to consider position as stereotyping. Tran (2015) discusses this theory within the classroom. This is of particular interest in a transnational classroom where there are three categories of actor who can take positions – the teacher, the

local students, and the international students. The teacher is able to self-position both as a teacher and as a student. They will, clearly, have the position of teacher with relation to their specialist subject at all times, but the teacher could self-position as student with respect to the culture, experiences and local knowledge of both groups (international and local) of students. If they are willing to take that position, involving a risk to do so, they will have the capacity to create the “safe environment” that is a key element in the humanistic approach adopted at Moretrees College and, in so doing, they potentially provide a role model for local students to emulate. This allows the international students to engage in conversation and, through that, to learn more effectively. If the local students feel a willingness to learn from the international students, and do not feel required to do so by the teacher, the cultural enrichment that was anticipated by DBIS (2013) may take place. International students have the capacity to improve their English from such discussions, as well as to gain a better understanding of the culture of the UK.

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that learning occurs during conversation between a “more knowledgeable other” (MKO) and the learner, providing that the conversation is properly “scaffolded”, that is that the MKO ensures that the learner is provided with the support they need to understand the new material. This links to the position concept of the person who at any point is acting as the MKO. This means that individuals are actively moving their position concept within the classroom depending on whether the subject matter, or an individual’s perspective and experience, is the current focus of discussion.

At Moretrees College, the response to the ideas outlined above has been to start to develop a holistic approach to the teaching of English, including the teaching by specialist Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) staff as well as that undertaken by the subject specialists

and personal tutors. Explicit teaching of English skills, academic skills and the knowledge required to be successful in the UK education system has been incorporated into the provision. Training and development opportunities have been given to all staff in relation to the expectations of the College around the development of intercultural conversations in the classroom.

Methodology

The then current British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA 2011) were followed to ensure that appropriate ethical standards were in place. After ethical approval had been obtained from the College Principal, and appropriate informed consent had been provided by the participants, a mixed methods study was completed using two instruments. Ethical approval was also obtained from the university where one of the authors was based. The notion of informed consent is problematic. In this instance, where most of the participants were young people at or around the age of majority (18 in the UK) who were studying overseas in societal and educational cultures markedly different to those that they had previously experienced, there were particular considerations around notions of potential “vulnerability”. This was in addition to the usual power relations inherent in the positioning of the participants as students, though we are not arguing that such students are intrinsically vulnerable. Our thinking in relation to this issue was influenced by the work of Fisher (2012, 12) who argues that “...participation in qualitative research of those labelled vulnerable may contribute to their visibility in the public sphere...”. The importance of “student voice”, now an important feature in the management of student quality assurance processes, is also a vital component of facilitating and enacting institutional citizenship and democratic processes. We were concerned that the participating students should feel no element of compulsion, more positively we were keen that they should be empowered by the element of recognition inherent in our approach in clearly valuing not

only their views but also their national cultures and the knowledge and skills which they brought to the college community. We were also mindful of not adding to the work pressures of the students by placing what might be significant demands on their time and this influenced our adoption of a relatively conservative methodological approach (questionnaire and interviews). With more mature learners, studying over a period longer than the single academic year followed by these young people, a longitudinal approach involving the participants more fully in the ways associated with co-production would offer many advantages. Not least of these would be the epistemological power of such approaches in relation to knowing marginalised communities, which is not an inappropriate way to characterise international students given the many challenges which they face including, in the case of many, their adjustment to studying in the context of western epistemologies where they do not participate in the generation of social meanings on an equal basis (Fricker 2013).

All 32 international students who were studying on the International Foundation Programme at Moretrees College during 2016-17 were approached as potential participants. This programme consists of a Level 3 Access to HE Diploma, studied in mixed classes with local students, supplemented with additional British Culture and English Language classes studied as a separate cohort by international students only. 25 of the international students gave their informed consent, two declined to consent, and the remaining five were under 18 and their parents/carers did not respond to requests which were made to them for the appropriate consent. Of the 25 students who participated, 22 were Chinese nationals, one was Columbian, one was Japanese and one was Maldivian. The language level in the informed consent form may have contributed to the level of consent achieved as the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test, designed to assess the readability of a passage of text, showed this to be 11.9; the form was subsequently

revised and produced the improved score of 8.5 (indicating that it should be readable to a fourteen year old in the context of the US school system).

A questionnaire was used to collect demographic information and responses to 21 questions relating to the experiences of international students. 18 of the questions used a 4-part Likert scale with a 1-4 numerical response possible for each question to identify students' levels of agreement/disagreement with statements. To enhance reliability, standardised questionnaires and interview questions were developed by a process of triangulation with a group of three peers and between the researchers. The way in which a Likert scale can capture the intensity of response and the simplicity of its use for second language users were a substantial part of its appeal to us – a four part scale was employed in order to avoid the centralising tendency which can be a feature of a five point scale and we were mindful of the possible negative implications of this approach in terms of a potential lack of nuance. The questionnaire, like the consent form, was subjected to a Flesch-Kincaid readability assessment to seek to ensure that the language was at an appropriate level for the expected respondents. The international students' responses to the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics, and content analysis of the qualitative responses, to identify a number of the students to be subsequently interviewed. The responses were also analysed to identify any correlations between questions which might improve the questionnaire for potential further use in subsequent years or different contexts. Additional information was gathered from College records to investigate the comparative performance of international students and local students with the aim of identifying whether or not the responses to the instruments were correlated to success in gaining the qualification.

The interviews were semi-structured and based around six questions, and they were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in light of the caution from Melles (2004, 220)

that “Western interview conventions are culturally specific and need to be considered when working with students of a different culture”. The aim was for the interaction to be conducted in a broadly conversational form in order to, as far as possible, dissolve the power dynamics that might influence responses. Important factors to be considered in relation to the findings arise from the relatively small sample size, the limited range of countries from which the participants originated, the positionality of the college-based researcher who conducted the interviews, and the single college context of the study. As Manohar et al. (2017) have stated, the issue of positionality is amplified where researchers do not share the cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds of the research participants.

Findings

Questionnaire results: Some effect from the trialling of what was a newly developed questionnaire was anticipated, and this proved to be the case. The resulting transcripts were analysed using content analysis and were triangulated. The overall mean was 3.0 +/- 0.2. Table 1 shows the questions where responses indicated significant differences from the mean. These responses can be considered as being those which require further investigation. Responses to all other questions were consistent across the cohort.

[Table 1 here]

It is clear that students felt that the teaching staff were often not aware of the nature of the education system of the students’ home countries, or of the ways these students were used to learning, but they generally felt that their teachers encouraged interaction with local students and that they taught the specialist subject language (English) effectively. The issue that homestay providers (households that provide accommodation for the students) were perceived

to show relatively little interest in the students' home cultures does not normally impact directly on classroom based learning in the short-term, but this may well significantly affect the development of language during the nine months that they are studying on the Diploma course. In addition, experiences outside the classroom can have a significant impact on general well-being and morale which clearly has implications for an individual's capacity to learn.

The four questionnaire respondents who had the widest variance from the mean were those selected for interview [see Table 2]. Two of the four selected participants were Chinese nationals, one was Japanese, and the other was Maldivian. It is notable that the two lowest scores were from two of the three non-Chinese participants, which may reflect on issues of informal intra-group learning mechanisms.

[Table 2 here]

Responses to the qualitative questions that formed part of the questionnaire provided limited information in a number of areas. After content analysis the comments made were classified into six categories and the insights gained were used to formulate the questions to be used in the interviews, though it was decided that these should focus on both the teaching-related and non-teaching related categories on the basis that the latter would impact on learning. Indicative data is shown in Table 3 below.

[Table 3 here]

Franklin (personal communication, 2016) identified significant correlations between some of the items in the questionnaire and it is recognised this will require some adaption prior to future

use. Franklin advised that question 19 (Q19), where participants were asked to rank a range of assessment methods, had been responded to in two different ways which reduced the validity of the related data. He also indicated that questions 4 and 6 were highly correlated with each other, as were 1, 2 and 7. In light of this responses to Q19 are not analysed here. Franklin also identified a negative correlation between Q17 and Q1, 2 and 7 which suggested that “... the more it matters to the student that their culture is included in class, the less they feel that their work is assessed in a way that makes it clear what they need to do to improve.” (Franklin personal communication, 2016). This is clearly an observation of interest. The interviews with student participants aimed to explore this issue and future work will be needed to identify the root of this conundrum.

In summary, analysis of the questionnaire results indicated that the main issues identified by the students relating directly to teaching and learning were as follows:

- a) Teaching staff often had limited knowledge of the education systems within the home countries of the international students and of the ways in which these students had learned before joining Moretrees College;
- b) Teaching staff were encouraging and facilitating international students’ interaction with local students;
- c) The key words in the students’ specialist subjects were made clear by teachers and were generally understood by the students;

The responses indicated that the students were generally satisfied with the course, and with their learning experiences at Moretrees College. All but one of the students’ responses fell within two SDs of the mean, suggesting that the cohort had a level of agreement beyond that which could be expected randomly. Non-Chinese participants appeared to be significantly less

satisfied with their experience than the Chinese students were. The responses made in relation to the social, cultural and non-teaching aspects of the course/college experience were generally positive, excepting that those relating to food available at the College and the ease of contact with staff outside the classroom were comparatively negative. It can be speculated that the latter view may have arisen partly from expectations grounded in the differences between the predominantly East Asian collectivist culture of the students and the Western individualist tradition which underpins UK educational practices.

Interviews: Following the interviews responses were subject to content analysis and divided into 4 categories. The names of interviewees used below have been anonymised and, for the Chinese students, we have followed their usual practice of anglicisation. The first interview questions related to student perceptions regarding how their own culture/country had been used within their course and responses included the following:

For example, that teacher asked me about the Japanese political system, or about Japanese social issues or something like that. **Riku [Japanese male, age 19]**

...the teacher will make the PowerPoint and they will take some famous people in China or some interesting topic for us. **Henry [Chinese male, age 18]**

It's relevant [to] something like the economy system and [to] like some management method, and my experience in China is very useful for my course in English.

Sophie [Chinese, female age 19]

The students interviewed were generally clear that there was frequent use by teachers of relevant examples from their home nations in the teaching materials used. This, however, was not the case in relation to Abbass, a Maldivian who was studying Biology and Chemistry and, in this specific case it had been felt there was no real opportunity, or need, to do so in light of the scientific base of those fields.

The second set of questions related to the way in which the course had been taught and assessed, and the ways in which this was different from what the students had been used to in their home countries:

When I was in high school, my high school was a bit like international school and there was a variety of English classes and lots of the teachers were English or American and all the classes were taught in English. So, I think, that's the reason I could accept that English way of teaching. **Riku [Japanese male, age 19]**

Very different, and the experience in the UK, I think the style is very...[pause]...is freedom and I can have more opportunities to do the exercise in the class, and with a different group with maybe the foreign people to improve our [word/work] skills, most useful skills. But in China we can't do it, we only have a workload.

Sophie [Chinese female, age 19]

Students interviewed were firmly of the view that the 'English way of teaching' was different from that which they had encountered at home though Riku, the Japanese student who had previous experience in an international school, found the differences were less pronounced but did comment that the assessment methods were very different from what he had been used to...

Yes, especially in Japan, we just remember everything. Such as, if it's History, we just remember dates and persons' names and events. When did it occur? Who was in charge? Or something like that, but, since I came here, I've already, I've only [previously] taken essays or written exam? Yes, exams.

Riku [Japanese male, age 19]

This student was reflecting that fact that the course at Moretrees College had required students to complete both course work and examinations, which was different from what was usual in Japan.

The next area discussed in the interviews explored the way in which the course was felt to have developed the participants' English language skills. Responses to this included the following:

...sociology, when the teacher mentions some particular British terms or some events which occurred in Britain, he always taught us what is it.

Riku [Japanese male, age 19]

Actually, not really, because there are two different areas and in the Business course the teacher prefer to teach some knowledge about the business, and I think sometimes it will also improve your speaking abilities, and listening, but in the, in some knowledge areas, I don't think the business course will help the international student improve [their English]... **Henry [Chinese male, age 18]**

Yes, the reading course, the assignment we need to reference, and so we need to go to the library and we need to find the book which is useful for our...to support our research project or assignment. And sometimes we need to [include the] reference and to [provide] the bibliography and so I need to read a lot. **Sophie [Chinese female, 19]**

Definitely yes, in terms of scientific technicality and all that. I think it's made a difference in terms of my understanding and I really like the assignments which were given to us in terms of, which really helped me, what would say critical writing and creative writing in terms of that. That really helped my English out.

Abbas [Maldivian male, age 24]

Students found that subject specialist teachers were explicit in the teaching of English but there was some dichotomy between the teams teaching the academic subjects and the team-teaching English as a Foreign Language [TEFL] (see Henry above). It is clear that for these international students learning their specialist subject through the medium of English was having a positive effect on their language skills. This was despite the lack of clear links between the TEFL teachers and the subject specialist teachers

In response to questions relating to the way in which they worked with local students participants responded as follows:

Yes, I have 'proved this' because teacher encourage to team work and more speaking, more speak to native speakers, local students...and most courses have more Chinese students and we prefer to use Chinese to communicate, but the teacher will tell me that I need to use English to communicate with others. **Henry [Chinese male, age 18]**

So, I think...do the assignment or do the other work by yourself, and after that if you have some problem you can do the group work and you can share the ideas, share your problem. **[Sophie, Chinese female, age 19]**

In terms of when we get feedback, we ask each other where we are struggling and we try and see how we can help each other in terms of making it better or if somebody got

it wrong, try explaining it to each other. I had, yes, I worked with a bunch of them [local students], and they real helped me with my assignment and vice versa, so it really helped...And just in my experience, for our group work, the local people they can give more ideas and more useful ideas, after that I can write down and remember it.

Abbas [Maldivian male, age 24]

These international students had found that working with local students had had a positive effect on both their English and on their understanding of their academic subject. This had not always been as a result of tutor action but had often happened organically, which suggests that some positive interpersonal relationships between international and local students had been established within the groups. It is likely to be significant that the most positive comment in relation to working with locals came from Abbas, the only Maldivian amongst the participants who, unlike, his Chinese peers was unable to engage in ‘in-group’ own language communication.

Achievement data: On completion of the course, the College’s data was reviewed to identify how the international students had performed in relation to the local students they were studying alongside. The achievement data is shown in Table 4 below.

[Table 4 here]

Moretrees College achievement data for this cohort indicated that international students were significantly more likely to complete the course than local students (98 per cent international to 84 per cent local), and were as likely to obtain a high grade as local students were (79 per

cent international to 77 per cent local). This may reflect the relatively high level of financial and emotional investment made by the international students, as well as their (very likely) high levels of commitment in choosing to study overseas. As might be anticipated, those subjects in which there is greater mathematical content appear significantly easier for international students to obtain high grades in than those which are more language based.

The interview data show that international students had found that teachers had generally actively used examples from the students' home countries, and had encouraged/allowed them to contribute from the perspective of their own culture in class and in assessments. The teaching methods they encountered were substantially different from what they had been used to in their home countries, except in the case of Riku (the lone Japanese student) who had had international school experience before studying in England. The course had been successful in helping the international students to improve their English, though there had been a lack of clarity in some cases about the way in which, and the extent to which, subject specific and TEFL tutors worked together. The international and home students had been encouraged to work with each other and this had been useful in terms of academic and English development. On occasion such intercultural work occurred spontaneously. The Chinese students felt that tutors had a good understanding of Chinese culture and of their previous learning, but those few international students from other nations had felt that this had not been the case. This reflects the way in which the tutors had built expertise based on their prior experience of working with international students which had been largely with Chinese nationals.

Conclusions

Yu and Moskal (2018), in a study of Chinese students in a UK university, found that they experienced particular difficulties in establishing intercultural contact, a factor which could

limit their cross-cultural learning and which can lead to their use of Mandarin in classroom sub-group interactions (translanguaging). Given that universities tend to have a greater commitment to and potential for internationalisation than is found in the smaller FE institutions their findings suggest cause for concern, and it was therefore particularly pleasing that such difficulties, notwithstanding the presence of some classroom translanguaging activity, did not become evident as a feature of the present study. It can be speculated that the relatively small size of Moretrees College (fewer than 4,000 full-time students) may facilitate student interaction in ways that would not be possible in far larger institutions. Tarp's (2017) case study of intercultural learning in the Danish context confronted challenges inherent in student classroom communication, suggesting that students could initiate intercultural communication whilst teachers might take the role of mediating across the cultures. There was some evidence of spontaneous initiation of communication by international students and of informal mediation by staff at Moretrees College.

Considering the international student experience at Moretrees College, the positioning theory expounded within social constructivism (Van Langenhove and Harré 1999) appears to hold some explanatory purchase in thinking about the rationale which underpins the curriculum and its implementation. To some extent, all teachers are attempting to position their students into acceptance of a new learning culture which they can occupy as an active "practitioner". The teachers generally intend to inculcate the norms of the subject in terms of both methodology and practice in their students, as well as teaching the technical subject matter. With international students in particular there is a danger that teachers may force students into a cultural "norm" which does not allow them to express, or positively use, their own cultural experience as an integral part of the learning process.

The learning and learning related experiences of international students who participated in this study generally met their expectations, and they were satisfied with the vast majority of the teaching and the ways in which their culture had been integrated into their learning. Teachers were actively seeking to ensure that there was transnational interaction within the classroom, and this was enriching the experience and learning of the international students (as well as of local students). International students were achieving academic outcomes as least equal to those of local students and sometimes outperforming them despite working in a second language, and were significantly more likely to complete their course. The particular aim of the students participating in this study was to gain access to UK higher education, and this was undoubtedly a motivating factor in their performance which was in the context of their financial and emotional investment in studying overseas.

Participating students did not report communication breakdowns or a lack of cultural awareness within the institution, as had sometimes been the case in the past (Fisher and Saunders 2017), excepting that one of their main concerns now related to the quality and types of food available in the College catering outlets, and to the availability of teachers outside class time (except via email). This latter point may reflect the predominance of Chinese students amongst the participants, as there is a significant difference in practice between the English and Chinese education systems with respect to the time staff typically spend with students on an individual basis as well as the differing cultural traditions which we have noted above. The substantial predominance of a single nationality (Chinese) within the cohort may have been a factor in explaining why the single Columbian, Japanese and Maldivian individuals indicated a lower level of satisfaction with their programme than did their Chinese peers. This was an unanticipated finding, but aside from the potential feelings of isolation that may arise from being a “lone national”, this may suggest that teachers find it difficult to develop

understandings of multiple cultures/experiences, and it is possible that they sometimes have a tendency to treat international students as a homogenous group. This requires further investigation, as do the importance of factors such as food provided in college as part of the wider experience of international students and the potential implications for their well-being and learning. The culture and processes of communication between staff and international students present a particularly complex area for future research. The ways in which the College organised social/travel programmes also clearly impact on international students. The willingness and ability of teachers to respond to international students' country specific backgrounds are likely to have considerable potential to further improve learning outcomes, though this would have substantial implications for staff development across throughout further education colleges.

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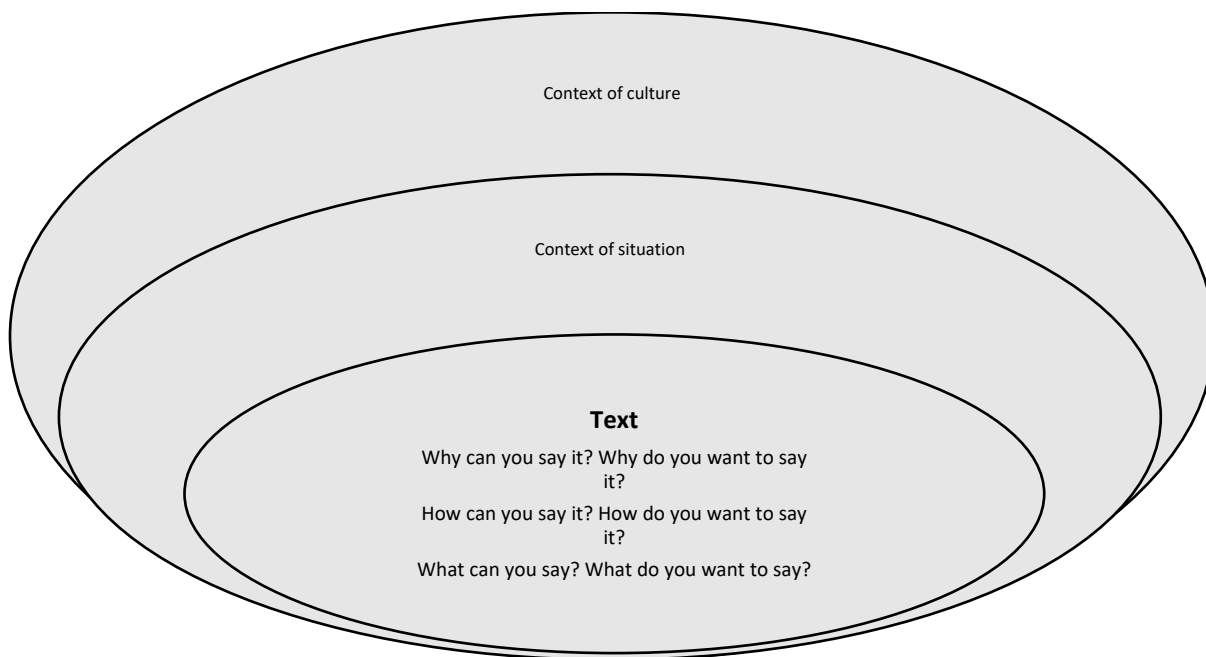


Figure 1: Lillis' Heuristic for exploring student meaning making [after Tran 2010, 161]

Tables

Table 1: questionnaire items where responses indicated significant differences from the mean

No	Question	Mean	SD
3	My homestay provider shows interest in the culture of my home country	2.6	1.1
8	Teaching staff are aware of the education system in my country	2.3	0.8
9	Teaching staff are aware of the methods I have used to learn before	2.4	0.6
14	Teachers encourage me to interact with the local students in their classes	3.4	0.5
15	Teachers are careful to teach me the English language terms relevant to their subject	3.4	0.5

Table 2: Participants whose mean score was more than 1 SD from the mean

Participant No.	Score	Nation of Origin
2	3.3	China
9	3.3	China
13	3.3	China
16	2.6	Japan
18	2.4	Maldives
22	3.3	China
24	2.7	China

Table 3: Indicative qualitative data from questionnaires

Category	Exemplar Comments - Positive	Exemplar Comments - Negative
Social	<p>“[The College] organised a social programme so that we can know more about the UK”</p> <p>“[The College] Offer[s] some travel to make sure we can understand and adapt the culture of England”</p>	Nil
Cultural	<p>“School [the College is] prepare [preparing] to celebrate the Chinese New Year. That is fantastic”</p>	Nil
Food related	Nil	<p>“Please provide more health food with reasonable price.”</p> <p>“The food in the canteen is awful and unhealthy.”</p>
Teaching related	<p>“My professional teacher help[ed] me to correct my English language in the assignment.”</p> <p>“Teachers provide many handout[s] for lesson. It’s very useful.”</p>	<p>“Sometimes when I ask something, they will answer me but not very clearly and just talk not do somethings practically.”</p>
Non-Teaching related	<p>“English Language courses. International Office and the accommodating [accommodation] staffs. Appropriate environment for international students, communications and social contacts.”</p>	
Environment	Nil	<p>“[I am] Hoping e-mail is not the only way to connect with staffs.”</p>

Table 4: Comparative achievement data for international students and local students studying in the same class

Subject	International Qualification Success Rate %	Local Qualification Success Rate %	International High Grades [A/B] %	Local High Grades [A/B] %
Business (Accounts and Finance)	100	NA	93	NA
Business (Human Resources)	86	60	100	67
Computing	100	100	0	70
Education	100	86	0	75
Humanities	100	82	50	43
Science (Biology/Chemistry)	100	40	100	75
Science (Physics and Maths)	100	67	100	100
Social Science	100	71	60	60
Overall	98	84	79	77