On the language difficulties of the International Student in UK Higher Education

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International students remain a vital part of a multicultural, diverse and open UK University system. The perceived global benefit of a UK higher education focused on developing critical independent learners, remains a valid marketable advantage for UK Higher Institutions, notwithstanding increased instrumental market pressures upon UK universities. However, universities face the tension of both appealing to and recruiting international students in order to meet the demands of generating increased revenue and instrumental aims whilst also sustaining the integrity of the award.

Notwithstanding the increased growth of indigenous Higher Education (HE) provision (in China and the Middle East in particular), a substantial market persists for students willing to travel overseas for their higher education (the Trans National Education (TNE) market). They have chosen a difficult and challenging goal, as they must immerse themselves, perhaps for the first time, in a culture and learning environment they may be totally unfamiliar with. University admissions policies prioritise matriculation requirements rather than *per se*, the learning needs for these students, which can unhappily lead to cohorts of monocultural groups studying in isolation within a Eurocentric teaching and learning environment. An IELTS test, the standard matriculation requirement for language competency for UK HE, is not necessarily an appropriate guide to an international student's academic language abilities.

Thus international students can struggle to both integrate within their new learning environment but also have difficulty in articulating their views and opinions in an appropriate academic manner. Securing a sense of belonging within their new learning environment challenges student identity and arguably the extent to which the individual seeks to integrate. One aspect of the ease of integration could be addressed through a relaxation of the need to write in academic terms, specifically to support the use of the first person (Cadman, 1997). There is also supporting evidence that this may improve the sense of belonging an international student feels and identifies with, in their programme of study (as identified in the i-MAP project by HEFCE as particularly important for all students). In this way, one learning barrier – the difficulties of expression in English – could be partially mitigated. Is this desirable? One concerning thought would be how many gifted international students have not been able to accurately express their thoughts in a manner that would have been valued in UK HE for a lack of accurate academic English?

So, what are the options available to such students who find themselves in a UK HE environment, on a programme of study which demands a level of language competency that is arguably beyond their present articulation? Coping strategies tend to fall into four types:

1) Use of a linguistically competent spokesperson, who becomes both the 'spoken' voice of the student group
2) Reliance upon intra and inter-institutional or programme student connotational networks– to offer academic guidance
3) Reliance upon machine based language translation services to support direct translation between a written text in the student's home language, to their host language
4) Reliance upon other third party translation services which could be commercial, family or friends.

From this cursory overview of the linguistic and learning needs of international students, such learners with limited intersubjectivity to their learning environment, limited awareness of alternative learning styles and being addressed by tutors who may have limited reflection and engagement with instructional strategies that (at least) align with the content of learning materials, will be those that have the most significant learning barriers to overcome. Moreover, those learning barriers may be exacerbated by the learner possessing a normative approach to processing new received information. This can be in direct opposition to the traditional constructivist pedagogy of UK HE as it directly challenges the sense of identity and self of the student, thus further increasing resistance and barriers to learning.

Whilst efforts can and are undertaken to address these concerns within Universities, would it be unreasonable to view the international student as having a particular form of specific learning need and address it, as other students with learning needs, are similarly supported?