

## Getting past the language in the assessment of the International Student in UK HE?

We can imagine some of the difficulties an international student might experience when immersed for the first time into the UK Higher Education (HE) learning environment by recognising that learning is now delivered without an appropriate prior cultural or inter-subjective context. As Bruner (2012) succinctly illustrates, whilst it might be possible to define and translate every English word into the language of the international student, it is impossible to translate any cultural context that is giving or taking meaning to/from those words. We lack a universal 'contexticon'. The task would be analogous to asking the HE tutor, to present an interpretation of the history of the Shandong province of China using Tai Chi! We simply lack both the tools, a priori schemata and understanding to achieve this aim.

It is perhaps then no surprise that originality of thought, criticality of engagement with problems, literature and methodologies become primary areas of difficulty for evidencing cognitive and skill competence in the UK HE learning environment for the international student. Indeed, the concept of 'critical thinking' itself is contested, particularly for the modern student living in an information rich world. Why do the critical thinking yourself when it is likely someone else has already done it for you? ...and that you can easily find that answer through modern search engines and databases? (Wallace, 2014). Wallace (2014) further argues that with students opting for this as a *form* of critical thinking, their own rational abilities are diminished and there can be an increased use of "...irrational, emotional, or non-sequitur responses because that is what their current ability and motivation levels promote." What can then be done with the international student in particular to address this?

Wallace (2014) suggests increasing the ability for critical thought as a skill development in the identification and evaluation of determined evidence, although this will vary with student to student competence. Achievement in this area should also be transparently evaluated (i.e. explored in a constructivist manner with the international student). That is likely to be resource intensive. Secondly, developing skills in identifying who to ask and what to ask about, would also ensure the development of critical thinking skills in the individual concerned.

With this problem and its resolution, also however comes difficulties with presenting acceptable forms of expression of those critical competences through use of an academic register and academic referencing conventions. Yet, the risk is that an international student's ability to articulate a response to a set assessment task in a manner in which that discipline accepts can be deemed more important (and achieve a higher grade as a result) than the actual originality of arguments encompassed in that response (the very criticality we are seeking to evidence).

For example, in a recent review of a module in Entrepreneurship (where the author was an external examiner) and which encompassed both home and international students in their final year of study, the assessment criteria focused upon many aspects of the 'quality' of the work –for example, the financial forecasts in the business plan, the marketing research and data underpinning the idea, operational resource management needs, human resource management needs for example – all of which are appropriate for evidencing the learning outcomes associated with this type of studied topic. However, there was no criteria for judging the *originality* of the idea for the business. In other words, the functional and to a certain extent, the mechanistic performance of the proposed nascent organisation was prioritized in assessment achievement, over the idea for the business. This is not to say that those functional activities of a new organisation are not important, but in reality they can be addressed, learned, taught (or even hired) from the marketplace in practice. Possessing a distinctive vision of the nascent organisation though adds value to the venture and arguably, will underpin longevity and engagement in the resultant organisation. So why was it missing in the original assessment structure of the assessment?

Cadman (1997) proposes a similar argument in her reflections of working with international postgraduate students for example that HE tutors often present to international students barriers to learning that focus upon the mechanistic achievements over the (preferred) aim of criticality and originality in assessed work. Thus, the form of linguistic expression is prioritized and assessed as evidence of achievement of the learning outcomes.

There is the risk therefore that language competence becomes, at least partially, a proxy for wider critical thinking international student achievements. Should a submission that is high in terms of originality and concept, receive a low grade because of poor language presentation? Or be restricted from achieving a first-class grade (>70%) because of spelling or grammatical errors? Although the research of Crisp (2008) is not derived from marking in a HEI context, it does offer the interesting insight that markers in that research paper did – to an extent- try to reconstruct the intended meaning of a submission for assessment and saw that as an important part of the assessment process. Another smaller study by Pownall (2017) suggested markers in HE did seek to reflect upon intended meaning in determining grading assessments. However, it was also observed that not all markers in both of those research papers undertook that reconstruction with the same breadth or thoroughness.

Arguably, the extent of accommodation of variations in language competence within assessed work is at risk of being dependent upon the marker and the discourse (knowledge base) they belong to.

## References

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