



The Role of Language Issues in Masking Other Challenges to Intercultural Interaction among University Students

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Outline

- Context
- Language as a Scapegoat
- Language as an Excuse for not Interacting
- Benefits of Overlooking Language Issues
- Questions to Consider

CONTEXT

Context

- “Internationalized” universities
 - Anglophone countries
 - English-medium learning environments
- Interaction between local and foreign students (two predominant circumstances):
 - In-class
 - Establishment of ‘genuine’ friendships

Context, cont.

(at least partially)

- Language issues are often blamed for:
 - Difficulty in group work
 - Difficulty in sharing humor
 - Creating close friendships
- Language is important!

Context, cont.

- Language is important!
- Key Questions:
 - Is language a scapegoat?
 - Are there other issues that are being overlooked by the attention being given to language?
 - What might be gained from ignoring language for a bit?

LANGUAGE AS A SCAPEGOAT

Language as a Scapegoat

- Confusion of terms/variables
 - Perceived language ability
 - Willingness to communicate
 - Communication confidence
 - Communication style
 - Language proficiency
- International students
- Oral language ability

Language as a Scapegoat, cont.

Gareis, Merkin, and Goldman (2011):

- An international student's **willingness to communicate** was not strongly related to either their number of friendships with local [American] students or their satisfaction with those friendships
- **Communicative adaptability** and **perceived English proficiency** played stronger roles.

Language as a Scapegoat

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Language as a Scapegoat, cont.

- “Perceived” language ability:
- Lee and Rice (2007)
 - Faculty also show **impatience** with **foreign accents** or less-than-perfect English (p. 398) and it undermines international students’ confidence
 - “If international students are fluent in English but speak with **a foreign accent**, are they further discriminated against?” (p. 407)

What else?

Language as a Scapegoat, cont.

Other possible factors

1. Appearance

- Colvin, Fozdar & Volet (2015)

“...the implied relationship between appearance and perceived English proficiency” (p. 422) that their participants expressed.
- Cultural capital (Colvin, Fozdar & Volet, 2015; Jon, 2012)

Language as a Scapegoat, cont.

2. Personality

- Peacock & Harrison (2009)
 - Language + personality (introversion/extroversion)
 - Good spoken English = “just like us” (p. 490) and most likely to be socialized with
 - Low English skills = wanting attention and requiring energy, concentration....
 - ...though credit is given for trying (p. 491)
 - Low English skills + do not seek out to initiate interaction = rude, distant, arrogant, quiet (p. 491)

Language as a Scapegoat, cont.

3. Importance of “Talk”

- Students seemed to give “more importance to communication itself than the knowledge being communicated” (Colvin, Fozdar, & Volet, 2015, p. 421)
- ‘Talk’ and the ability to participate verbally have become pivotal to the university classroom (Harrison, 2015; Straus, U-Mackey, & Crothers, 2014).
- As a result, students are judged disproportionately on their oral language ability, on cultural differences in communication (such as silence), and on traits such as appearance that are seen to symbolize their language ability.

Language as a Scapegoat, cont.

Interrelated Factors

Colvin, Fozdar, & Volet (2015)

- Appearance
- Language background
- Educational background
- Knowledge background
- Nationality
- Accent
- Specialized vocabulary
- Personality
- Initiating interaction

International Student Variables

Language as a Scapegoat, cont.

Why focus on language?

“[Local students] are particularly wary of stereotyping and are more likely to attribute behaviours to personality factors that may be considered to transcend culture, for example, introversion or language. Both are **safer ways of talking about difference. Where criticism or comment on a cultural basis could run the gauntlet of being perceived to be politically incorrect, language ability is individual and measurable**” (Peacock & Harrison, 2009, p. 501).

USING LANGUAGE AS AN EXCUSE

Using Language as an Excuse

- Risk/Marks
 - Multicultural groupwork doesn't negatively affect home students' marks (De Vita, 2002)
 - But “this hypothesis remains an important part of the home student perceptions of, and anxiety about, the ‘international classroom’” (Harrison & Peacock, 2010, p. 889).
 - And it is “often related specifically to the standard of English language their international peers possess” (ibid.).

Using Language as an Excuse, cont.

- When activities are *not* marked
 - Students are more likely to recognize the value of diversity
 - Reduces the importance placed on oral communication
- (Colvin, Fozdar, & Volet, 2015)

Using Language as an Excuse, cont.

- “Language skills and intellectual ability are often conflated in people’s minds” (Trahar, 2007, p. 17).
- “Participants were concerned that they didn’t have the specific non-stereotypical cultural knowledge to enable them engage without embarrassment or the fear of causing offence” (Harrison & Peacock, 2010, p 893).
- “A major question is the extent to which communication problems are real or whether they are impeded by a lack of goodwill—from either side—to make an effort to understand each other and to tolerate a degree of broken English” (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 13).

OVERLOOKING LANGUAGE ISSUES: POSSIBLE BENEFITS

Overlooking Language

1. Change locus of responsibility
 - Onto faculty
 - Dispersed among students
2. Skills Shift
3. Breaking down barriers

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Questions to Consider

- What other factors might be conflated with language?
- How might attitudes about language be affecting students' perceptions of each other?
- How might universities tackle issues around interaction without necessarily focusing on improving English language skills?

References

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