

Affecting affect: making sense of the challenges - Australian non-native English speaker students in Australian universities



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Abstract

Multiple streams of influence, including cultural policy and societal goals, and theories of the mind, have affected the global non-English speaking background (NESB) community over the last couple of decades. The evolution of culture perceptibly influences directly or indirectly the rapid change of higher educational system in Australia. To improve approaches to Australian non-native English speakers (ANNES) students substantially, solutions to current concerns address integrating ANNES into the mainstream of NES. If such solutions can be implemented, the landscape of educational novelty will be very different and much improved at the end of the Australian university education.

Reviewing the past century of ANNES gives rise to some critical questions. Where did the community of ANNES stand at the close of the university admission? Is this a comfortable and useful place? What needs to change and why? Meaningful answers to these questions we tried to find thorough this study. Thus ANNES students can become part of the solution rather than be part of the problem as many appear to believe at the current turbulent time. More than what one thinks, less than what we need.

1. Australia today: Visual truth in digital age

Students are now much more independent, much more outspoken and much more demanding. Higher Education is not a competition, it is not a race. Ensuring that every Australian, no matter how wealthy or poor, aboriginal or indigenous, has a fair chance [to graduate from university] is one of the most important challenges for Australian universities ... Australian's reputation as an egalitarian nation and their future prosperity rests on the outcome ... The task now is to expand access and opportunity to everyone, regardless of the family or community Australian non-native English speakers (ANNES) come from. When considering what needs to be known, changed and developed at the institutional level to improve provision of higher education to ANNES students, or any student "group" layers of incongruent agendas complicate the task. The student population of the modern university is becoming increasingly diverse to the extent that there is often no easily identifiable "mainstream", but rather a number of heterogeneous and overlapping "groups" (Abedi et al. 2003). Non-Native English Speaker (NNEs) students are students who learned another language before they learned English. They often speak their first language at home, while using English in school (DEET, 1990). Australian non-native English speakers learning needs has to be addressed in Australian higher education system and Australian pedagogic philosophy within the context of second language issues and different cultural background.

ANNES students are the missing part of the Australian higher education jigsaw. Universities pay a great deal of attention to international students, and for international students to non-English speaking background (NESB) there is generally recognition that they have particular difficulties. Universities also pay attention to the mythical ‘mainstream’: much of the design, promotion and delivery of curriculum are premised on an Anglo-Celtic mainstream. Australia is an increasingly diverse country, with a robust history of migration which has a strong impact upon Australian values, culture and composition, particularly with respect to the contribution that has been made by of a growing proportion of Australians with NESB ancestry (Australian Policy, 2013). In a world that increasingly reflects the effects of globalization, the need for intercultural education and understanding is critical (DIISRTE, 2011). It's apparent that different people have different notions of what a “non-native English speaker” is. To a linguist, the term generally implies that a speaker has “internalised” the language through “natural acquisition”, rather than through deliberate instruction/learning. A “native English speaker” refers to someone who has learned and used English from early childhood. It does not necessarily mean that it is the speaker's only language, but it means it is and has been the primary means of concept formation and communication. It means having lived in a truly English-speaking culture during one's formative years, so that English has been absorbed effortlessly as by osmosis. But this scenario is totally different for Australia as ‘Indigenous Australians are the original inhabitants of the Australian continent and nearby islands’ (Australian Government, 2000). Indigenous Australians refers to people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, sometimes referred to as the First Australians (Australian Government, our country our people). 670,000 of Aboriginal people whose mother tongue is an Aboriginal language (Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia, 2011) - do we treat them as “native English speaker” or Australian non-native English speaker (ANNES)?

Although Australia's official language is English, there are over 200 languages in Australian communities, including 48 languages of the Indigenous peoples. Australia has a growing multicultural population; 25 per cent of Australians were born overseas and 43 per cent of the national population was either born overseas or have one parent who was born overseas. People who were born overseas make up nearly one quarter of Australia’s population. Today Australia is one of the most cosmopolitan communities in the world, with over six million people from some 200 different countries settling here since 1945. Of the non-English speaking background living in Australia, the leading groups are the Chinese with 393,000, Indians with 295,000, Italians with 185,000, Vietnamese with 185,000 and Filipinos with 171,000 (The Australian, 2012). All these groups speak a language other than English in the home and their ratio is around 16 per cent of the total population (Profiling Australians, 2003). The second generation of these immigrants may treat as ANNES students who should acquire the necessary levels of English communicative competence in order to improve their international academic standing and to take admission in Australian universities (DEET, 1990). The scope of this research is not remedial to fix the problems, rather to find how it’s related to take control of ANNES student’s in Australian higher education system.

2. ANNES students and Australian universities: The interface

Australian non-native English speaker (ANNES) students are often not imagined as the mainstream, either in terms of the whole university or at Faculty Level. If this being the case, it is understandable that less attention is paid to their particular learning and academic skills needs, quite apart from their more general intellectual needs. Australian universities will not be able to put the missing piece into place until they have a clear idea of who ANNES students are and map their diversity.

University of Tasmania (UTAS), Australia has introduced a new policy: Application for NESB Students Alternative Exam Arrangements if the student is in his or her first year of study at UTAS. It is clearly said by UTAS that ‘Please note fee-paying International Students may not apply for NESB alternative exam arrangements’ (UTAS, 2013). Who are NESB students here? It indicates clearly by UTAS that they meant Australian native English speaker students. Where and how do one put a line between ANNES and NESB? Is it logical that a university itself make the differentiation?

ANNES students in Australian universities make valuable educational and economic contributions. For these benefits to continue, universities must become more knowledgeable about the adjustment issues these students face and implement appropriate support services. Whilst there is considerable evidence that different language background groups in universities in Australia have very different socioeconomic profiles, there is little data on the comparative performance of these different language groups. Current University Admission Centre forms have since developed the question to include information on citizenship, place of birth, year of arrival and permanent residence, and language spoken at home. Higher education in Australia including undergraduate and graduate programs has experienced an increase in the enrolment of NESB and ANNES students. The proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people aged 15-64 studying in higher education has been increasing since the mid 80's (ABS, 2013).

Formal English is only one aspect of the language as many educated foreign speakers speak better formal English than, say, many Americans or British or Australians. Speaking "like a native" of any language means more than just knowing vocabulary and grammar. Knowing instantly what slang means, what cultural references mean, how to reduce syntax to a bare minimum and still convey precise meaning — all these things, and more, are what constitute native speech. The key concept in the evolving definition of ANNES in the Higher Education context is that of educational disadvantage, as evidenced by proportionally lower rates of access, participation, success and/or retention of the target group. There has been significant criticism of the use of the aggregate category of “ANNES” as a target group, based on evidence that as a group, NESB students are not in fact disadvantaged in access to and participation in Higher Education (Dobson et al 1996). Such evidence appears to have been accepted by the Higher Education Council, Australia:

With the acceptance of the [Martin] definition ... non-native English speaker students now appear to be over-represented higher education ... (Higher Education Council 1996)

Some people see 'non-native English speaker' as a negative term, as it implies that English is the desirable norm from which English speaker's deviate. The term 'NESB' is not fully inclusive as many immigrants to Australia come from countries where English is widely spoken, or is a lingua franca e.g. India, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Fiji or parts of Africa. In common usage the term 'NESB' does not always include Australian-born children from ethnic communities. ANNES students in higher education conforms for these terminology and concepts. As per Statistics says, annual growth rate of the aboriginal population in Australia is 2.2% which is same for non-aboriginal population. In fact, a problem is though how many people identify themselves as Aboriginal, "There are a large number of people who don't answer the Indigenous question in the Census." explains Patrick Corr, Director of Demography with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2013). The effect is indirect but powerful to figure ANNES students in higher education.

ANNES students in historical perspective: Reform, Development, Expansion and Integration. It is perhaps odd to describe Australia as a young society. After all, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures flourished on this continent for at least 40,000 years before the First Fleet arrived (National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, 2013). But Australia - like the USA, Canada and Argentina - is 'modern' in that the vast majority of its native-born population is descended from immigrants who arrived here in the last two hundred years, and it is their cultures also that form the basis of a nation that has existed for less than a century. From the middle of the nineteenth century appreciable numbers of Chinese, Pacific Islanders, Lebanese, Afghans, Indians and Europeans arrived. Nevertheless by the early twentieth century the proportion of Anglo-Celts had risen to around 87%, and stayed at around that level until the Second World War due to a combination of increased British immigration, policies which discriminated against the entry of non-Europeans, and the decline of the Aboriginal population. While the children of immigrants in Australia were seen to be at a disadvantage up until the mid-1970s (Martin, 1978), the gradual introduction of multicultural policies in the classroom from that time may have improved the situation (Cahill, 1996).

A series of studies based on Census data suggests that the second generation (especially those of European, Indian and Chinese origin) have achieved substantial educational mobility in terms of staying on at school, compared to those from British, German, Dutch and Australian origin (Birrell and Khoo, 1995; Khoo, 1995). As a consequence, higher percentages of children from NESB achieve university qualifications compared to those from Native English speaker (Birrell and Khoo, 1995; Dobson et al., 1996). Here, the second generation would treat as ANNES as their first language is not English. There is a need to identify ANNES students in Australian universities to face both existing and future challenges in current turbulent time. The way ahead for universities is likely to become more difficult the ways they are governed and managed. It's time to map the potential impact to shape the appropriateness of ANNES students approaches in the context of university sector.

Approximately one in every four Australians is from a non-native English speaking background (National Ethnic Disability Alliance, 2013). The Australian Bureau of Statistics General Social Survey 2006 finds that across Australia over half a million (513,026) over 18 years of age are born in a country where English is not the main language, and have a core activity, schooling or employment restriction. This group represents 3.4% of the total population over 18 years of age (or around 1 in 30 people). We should note that this does not include people born in Australia in a non-English Speaking Household. Often these households will face similar barriers – for example access to information and services. Studies have found that it is more likely that students from Vietnamese, Chinese, Eastern European and Korean backgrounds are in higher education than students from native English speakers. Whereas those whose language group was Arabic, Khmer and Turkish were half as likely to be in higher education than those from native English speakers (Dobson et al., 1996; Cahill, 1996; see also Marks et al., 2000). Higher educational institutions have a responsibility to provide support to these students as they negotiate their new academic environment. If, in fact, the use of local wisdom, recognition of culture, and active involvement are mainstays in the established standards of educational practice in Australian higher education, why is this understanding not applied to the realm of university admission? The unfortunate outcome of the “Education for all” may well be that educators of native English speaker students move further away from culturally congruent curriculum, instruction, and assessment rather than increasing their use—despite all the evidence of their value. Insights gained from experiences with ANNES students in Australian universities have broader implications for intercultural education; specifically, the need to understand cultural adjustment and implement measures to insure that the full benefits of diversity are recognized.

Students from indigenous non- native English speaker backgrounds are underrepresented in higher education (Chapman, 2004; Coates & Kraus, 2005; James, 2007; DEET & NBEET, 1990; DEEWR, 2008). Several higher education reforms in Australia have tried to redress this issue. In 1990, student equity became a national priority alongside the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS).

To that extent Australia is very different from most long-established European and Asian societies? It has a culture which, while already distinctive, continues to develop. Since 1788 diverse waves of immigrants have interacted with each other and with the first Australians. Out of that process has emerged a society of enormous and rare cultural variety. Since the middle of the twentieth century, with a progressive liberalisation of Australia’s immigration program, there has been a dramatic shift in the ethnic composition of Australian society. The immigration of large numbers of people from Northern Europe and the Baltic nations was followed by settlers from Southern Europe and, more recently, from the Middle East, Asia and South America (National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia, 2013). Today, Australia is regarded as the most linguistically diverse country on earth (HREOC Inquiry into Employment with Disability, 2005).

3. Justification the issue: Nexus of tomorrow's ANNES students

Also of interest are boarder social issues and effects related to the spread and usage of ANNES term. A country like Australia for example is a developed nation, in fact in some aspects a world leader in technological advances. However, some of its population lives in some of the most isolated places on earth. Historically, most of the aboriginal people lives in these isolated places. This people still require the quality of higher education attention and ANNES differentiation with which those of us in the large city dwellings are accustomed. Most first-generation migrants are in urban areas (84%), particularly in the lowest socioeconomic areas (33%). By comparison, second-generation migrants are more evenly spread across the country: 72% are found in urban areas compared with 63% of the population. Fewer second generation migrants are in the lowest socioeconomic urban areas (21%), which suggests that many of them are more upwardly mobile than their parents (Profiling Australians, 2003). This is evident by the fact that every year the federal government allocates larger budget for improving the infrastructure in rural parts of Australia. Hence the government recognizes the value of having rural dwellers having quality access to information that leads to higher education innovation. Classifying an ANNES student or discovering whether a student is a language minority student, is the first step in identifying the student's problems and recommending resources for remediation. The process is simple: ask the student for background information so that appropriate resources and support can be recommended. Sample questions that might be asked include the following:

- Is English your second (or third or fourth) language?
- What is your first language?
- Did you graduate from a school where the medium of instruction was English?

If the answer to the last question is no, the student is most likely an international student. If the answer is yes, the student is probably a language minority student like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Answers to such questions will differ according to students' prior experiences. Acquiring English will be easier for resident English-as-a-second language learners who are fluent and literate in their first languages than for students who are semiliterate or illiterate in their first language. Finally, students who have attended higher education for a significant period of time but whose formal 'English as a Second Language' (ESL) education has been spotty are often doubly disadvantaged. Hedley Beare (2001), an Australian researcher, identified the following three categories of futures for ANNES students:

- Possible futures—things that could happen, although many of them are unlikely
- Probable futures—things that probably will happen, unless something is done to turn events around
- Preferred futures—things that one prefer to have happen and/or that one would like to happen

Peterson et al. (1999) comment, 'Intercultural learning could be a beacon, illuminating a world of cultural differences and a common global humanity, building blocks for a just and peaceful world.' To encourage intercultural learning, the interaction of ANNES and NESB students in educational activities is necessary to address. Higher education institutions cannot simply admit ANNES, NESB or international students and expect them to adjust to life in a new educational system without appropriate support and programming. ANNES students face a range of difficulties (Socio-cultural background, ethnicity, learning beliefs, linguistics, confidence, anxiety, learning strategies etc.) and challenges studying in Australian universities as universities are too much driven by student scores. What the ANNES students can do, and can be seen to do, in relation to the tasks required of them, are paramount. NESB and ANNES are often used interchangeably and somewhat inconsistently. The majority of universities do not appropriately modify assessments in order to accommodate students from unique cultural backgrounds (JISC InfoNet). Appropriate information, services, and programs are critical to helping NESB students have positive experiences and fulfil their educational goals. (Carr et al., 1999; Lee and Wesche, 2000). Regarding social adjustment, the evidence suggests that, ANNES students experience greater difficulty than native English speaker students. Both negative and positive learning incidents helped adjustment, but overall, ANNES students exhibited more stress and anxiety like NESB students and needed to expand greater effort to overcome their challenges than did English speaking students. Although it is difficult to address every group needs, it is important to meet as many needs as possible. To accomplish this, the university should assess NESB and ANNES learners' needs and issues at the time of admission. There are more sophisticated assessment tools as the transition from local university to global standardization for ANNES students is crucial in near future.

4. Summary: The challenges for ANNES students

This research argued that there is a need for exploring link in between non-English speaking background (NESB) and Australian non-native English speaker (ANNES) students at Australian universities to face both existing and future challenges. Affecting ANNES students' adjustment in Australian universities can be divided into two areas: those that identify factors influencing adjustment and those that link these factors to academic attainment. Universities Australia-wide that host NESB students or prepare students for study ANNES experiences should consider the adjustment issues in order to enhance the mutually rewarding practice. The way ahead for universities is likely to become more difficult and their pedagogy structure changes and strategic policy must consider this. As the research is framed within a socio-cultural perspective addressing the ways in which university admission practices are structured, three fundamental evolutionary mechanisms are identified: innovation, imitation and improvement of existing procedures. Australian universities were more likely to affect ANNES students studies and they were more likely to consider dropping out, thereby indicating that ANNES students' attachment to university studies is more precarious than that of NESB students.

5. Research opportunity: ANNES students in changing times

With ANNES student populations' drastically growing, low academic success will result in students who are unprepared for higher education, unprepared for career training and ultimately undereducated to be productive in the workforce. The future study will explore the nature of ANNES student's leaning behaviour and academic performance when managing for turbulence in the Australian university sector. This critical prospective will be then used to challenge the traditional views, as critical approach assumes everybody in the higher education may have something to contribute to the discussion on learning practices.

6. Appendix: Crossing the distance

It is not always easy to distinguish non-native English speakers (NNES) from native speakers. We usually assume that a non-native speaker of English will have an accent, but a student who started learning English at a young age may not have one. Native-like fluency in spoken English doesn't necessarily mean the student is a native speaker. However, the student's writing might still show signs of interference from another language. It's even harder to identify ANNES students. Analysing and promoting ANNES students in the university sector can benefit from subjective judgments on a collective basis.

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