

# Speaking and listening in the multicultural University: A reflective case study

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The growing internationalisation of Australian universities has seen a great deal of attention directed to overseas students' language skills, or lack thereof. This paper describes a project undertaken at a regional campus in New South Wales where some courses now have 50% or more international students, mainly from China. The project is innovative in two ways. First, it focuses not on written language but on spoken communication. Second, it takes a "two-way" approach, working not only with international students, but also with English-speaking lecturers, administrative staff and students.

The project started with an online survey of English-speaking and non-English-speaking background (ESB and NESB) students and staff, to find what aspects of intercultural spoken communication were already working well, and where assistance might usefully be offered. This showed that, despite obvious goodwill on both sides, a degree of mutual misunderstanding between ESB and NESB interlocutors was evident. A series of interviews was conducted to explore some themes from the survey in more depth. The paper discusses the findings, and argues that developing the intercultural speaking and listening skills of local people, as well as being valuable in its own right, can offer a cost-effective way to help improve international students' English.

**Key Words:** internationalisation, spoken communication, English as a second language, intercultural competence

## 1. Introduction

Internationalisation brings many opportunities for Australian universities, but also many challenges, as students, staff and communities negotiate differences in cultural and educational expectations (Baird, 2010). The crucial importance of international students' English language proficiency to their academic and social success is widely recognised (Arkoudis, 2009). Recent discussion has gone beyond expressing concern that entry standards are too low (Birrell, 2006), to emphasising international students' need for ongoing language support as they progress through their candidature (AUQA, 2010), and evidence-based research is helping universities better understand and cater for the broader needs of international students, including, as well as language lessons, study skills, cultural awareness, and social integration (Evans et al., 2009; Rochecouste et al., 2010; Homewood et al., 2010).

Though the importance of spoken communication as the foundation of educational and social success is widely acknowledged in the above-mentioned work, to date most research has focused on written, as opposed to spoken, language. The present paper seeks to join the small but growing body of research taking up the challenge of addressing students' needs in relation to speaking and listening (e.g. Stupans et al., 2008), by describing a small-scale project aiming to offer international students practical assistance specifically with speaking and listening skills

in the general university context. A particular commitment, motivated by long-standing observation that English learners' apparent speaking skills can vary greatly according to the context in which they are speaking (cf. Beebe, 1987), was a view of communication as a two-way process (Chandler, 1994; Liddicoat, 2009). Thus the aim of the project was not just to teach pronunciation and speaking skills to international students, but also to consider the speaking and listening environment in which they operate.

The project was conducted at a regional university in New South Wales, where approximately 600 international students share the campus with nearly 3,000 domestic students, mostly from local regions. Its original intention was not to conduct a formal study but simply to meet the practical needs of the university population, many of whom, anecdotally, found intercultural oral communication to be frustrating and difficult. However, it is felt the results were interesting and useful enough to present in the form of a reflective case study, noting that all findings are provisional and require confirmation through larger scale, more formal investigation.

As a first step in the project, a computer-based survey of local and international staff and students was conducted to find out which aspects of intercultural spoken communication were already working well, and where assistance might usefully be offered. The present paper begins by describing the survey and follow-up interviews and activities, then reflects on the implications for student and staff development programs.

## 2. The survey

### 2.1. Overview

The survey was delivered through Survey Monkey ([surveymonkey.com](http://surveymonkey.com)), between November 2009 and February 2010, targeting six different groups, namely students, academics and general (i.e. administrative) staff of English-speaking background (ESB), and non-English-speaking background (NESB) (the terms "ESB" and "NESB" were chosen as being the most familiar to participants). Participants were recruited via university email lists calling for volunteers and offering optional inclusion in a draw for iTunes vouchers as an incentive. Ethics approval was obtained through University of New England Research Services (Approval No. HE09/189).

### 2.2. Respondents

The survey was completed by 213 volunteers, but numbers were uneven across the six groups, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. The numbers in the various demographic classes do not reflect the university population as a whole, emphasising the caution that this self-selected sample may not be representative, and results must be seen as indicative only.

**Table 1.** ESB respondents by demographic subgroup.

| Question  | Answer                            | ESB-A (n=35) |     | ESB-G (n=55) |     | ESB-S-ON (n=65) |     | ESB-S-OFF (n=29) |     | Total (n=184) |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------------|-----|--------------|-----|-----------------|-----|------------------|-----|---------------|
|   |                                   | n            | %   | n            | %   | n               | %   | n                | %   |               |
| Are you Male or Female?   | Male                              | 14           | 40% | 18           | 33% | 17              | 31% | 5                | 17% | 54            |
|   | Female                            | 21           | 60% | 37           | 67% | 48              | 87% | 24               | 83% | 130           |
| What age range are you in?  | 18-25 years                       | 1            | 3%  | 3            | 5%  | 43              | 78% | 12               | 41% | 59            |
|   | 26-40 years                       | 8            | 23% | 19           | 35% | 14              | 25% | 10               | 34% | 51            |
|   | Over 40 years                     | 26           | 74% | 33           | 60% | 8               | 15% | 7                | 24% | 74            |
| What English dialect do you speak (e.g. American/Australian/British/New Zealand)? | Australian                        | 20           | 57% | 37           | 67% | 53              | 96% | 21               | 72% | 131           |
|   | Mixed                             | 7            | 20% | 2            | 4%  | 2               | 4%  | 2                | 7%  | 13            |
|   | British                           | 2            | 6%  | 6            | 11% | 0               | 0%  | 2                | 7%  | 10            |
|   | North American                    | 0            | 0%  | 1            | 2%  | 1               | 2%  | 1                | 3%  | 3             |
|   | Other                             | 1            | 0%  | 0            | 0%  | 0               | 0%  | 1                | 3%  | 2             |
|   | Not specified                     | 5            | 14% | 9            | 16% | 9               | 16% | 2                | 7%  | 25            |
| How much experience have you had with intercultural communication?                | A lot - in Australia and overseas | 22           | 63% | 27           | 49% | 27              | 49% | 12               | 41% | 88            |
|   | A lot - in Australia only         | 3            | 9%  | 8            | 15% | 1               | 2%  | 3                | 10% | 15            |
|   | Some                              | 8            | 23% | 14           | 25% | 21              | 38% | 6                | 21% | 49            |
|   | A little                          | 1            | 3%  | 6            | 11% | 13              | 24% | 5                | 17% | 25            |
|   | None                              | 1            | 3%  | 0            | 0%  | 3               | 5%  | 3                | 10% | 7             |
| How many years have you been at UNE?  | Average (years)                   | 10.61        |     | 9.93         |     | 2.6             |     | 4.27             |     |               |

Notes: ESB-A = ESB academics; ESB-G = ESB General staff; ESB-ON = ESB on-campus students; ESB-OFF = ESB off campus students.

**Table 2.** NESB respondents by demographic subgroup.

| Question  | Answer                                     | NESB-A (n=16) |     | NESB-G (n=3) |     | NESB-S-ON (6) |     | NESB-S-OFF (n=4) |      | Total (n=29) |
|---|--|---------------|-----|--------------|-----|---------------|-----|------------------|------|--------------|
|   |  | n             | %   | n            | %   | n             | %   | n                | %    |              |
| Are you Male or Female?                               | Male                                       | 8             | 50% | 2            | 67% | 2             | 33% | 2                | 50%  | 14           |
|   | Female                                     | 8             | 50% | 1            | 33% | 4             | 67% | 2                | 50%  | 15           |
| What age range are you in?                            | 18-25 years                                | 0             | 0%  | 0            | 0%  | 2             | 33% | 0                | 0%   | 2            |
|   | 26-40 years                                | 5             | 31% | 1            | 33% | 4             | 67% | 4                | 100% | 14           |
|   | Over 40 years                              | 11            | 69% | 2            | 67% | 0             | 0%  | 0                | 0%   | 13           |
| How proficient are you at spoken English?             | proficient (e.g. IELTS 9+)                 | 11            | 69% | 2            | 67% | 1             | 17% | 0                | 0%   | 14           |
|   | advanced (e.g. IELTS 8-8.5)                | 3             | 19% | 1            | 33% | 1             | 17% | 1                | 25%  | 6            |
|   | upper intermediate (e.g. IELTS 7-7.5)      | 1             | 6%  | 0            | 0%  | 1             | 17% | 2                | 50%  | 4            |
|   | intermediate (e.g. IELTS 6-6.5)            | 1             | 6%  | 0            | 0%  | 3             | 50% | 1                | 25%  | 5            |
|   | pre-intermediate (e.g. IELTS 5.5 or below) | 0             | 0%  | 0            | 0%  | 0             | 0%  | 0                | 0%   | 0            |
| What language do you consider as your first language? | Middle Eastern Languages                   | 0             | 0%  | 0            | 0%  | 1             | 17% | 3                | 75%  | 4            |
|   | East Asian Languages                       | 5             | 31% | 0            | 0%  | 0             | 0%  | 0                | 0%   | 5            |
|   | European Languages                         | 8             | 50% | 2            | 67% | 2             | 33% | 1                | 25%  | 13           |
|   | Other Languages                            | 1             | 6%  | 0            | 0%  | 2             | 33% | 0                | 0%   | 3            |
|   | Not specified                              | 2             | 13% | 1            | 33% | 1             | 17% | 0                | 0%   | 4            |
| How many years have you been at UNE                   | Average (years)                            | 6.63          |     | 5.00         |     | 2.83          |     | 1.13             |      |              |

Notes: NESB-A = NESB academics; NESB-G = NESB General staff; NESB-ON = NESB on-campus students; NESB-OFF = NESB off campus students.

## 2.2 Questions

The survey was deliberately kept short to encourage wide participation. All questions could be answered simply by clicking a Likert scale, but each also solicited open-ended responses from those who wished to provide them.

The first bank of questions elicited demographic data and asked respondents to self-assign to one of the demographic groups, upon which they were automatically redirected to the questions appropriate to that group. For each group, questions were divided into sets, asking respondents to think about their experience of speaking and listening across the ESB/NESB divide, in lectures, tutorials, informal conversations and meetings. Each set consisted of a bank of statements requiring responses on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with a “not applicable” option.

Statements were kept as uniform as possible across the groups, though minor modifications were essential to make them appropriate to their context. The following list shows the form of the statements, with X indicating the relevant target group, and Y a typical speaking and listening situation:

- I often speak and listen to X in Y
- I usually feel I need to adjust the way I speak to X in Y to be sure X can understand what I say
- I usually feel confident that the way I speak to X in Y is easy for X to understand
- I usually find it easy to express myself in Y so that X can understand what I say
- I usually find it easy to understand the way X speaks to me in Y
- I have no problems myself but I think others may

For example, ESB lecturers answered questions about NESB students in lectures and tutorials, and NESB colleagues in meetings and informal conversations; NESB students answered questions about ESB lecturers and about ESB students in tutorials and informal conversations; and so on. A full list of statements is given in Appendix 1, along with a summary of responses.

After each bank of statements, two open-ended questions were asked:

- If you could change anything about speaking and listening to X in Y, what would it be?
- Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening to X in Y?

At the end, a final open-ended question asked for “any other comments”. The full list of open-ended questions and summarised responses are available in Appendix 2.

## 2.3. Responses

Responses to statements were tallied to find the numbers of 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 or “not applicable” responses to each statement from each category of respondents. Detailed statistical analysis was

not attempted, due to the differences in group sizes and the debatable commensurability of the questions, but the mean and mode for each set of numerical responses was calculated, and colour-coded charts were prepared to give a visual impression of the spread of results. Full results are available in PDF format from the author, and a summary is provided in Appendix 1.

Responses to open-ended questions were compiled and subjected to an informal thematic analysis described in the next section. Again, full results are available in PDF format from the author, and a summary is provided in Appendix 2.

## **2.4. Follow-up interviews**

Interviews were conducted with respondents who volunteered for follow-up through the survey, and were semi-structured, to allow further discussion of issues raised in the survey while not curtailing exploration of other topics. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to the level of notes (in the absence of funding for detailed, formal transcription). The next sections raise a few general themes which emerged.

## **3. Survey results**

### **3.1. Responses to statements**

A mode of 4 or 5 for most statements indicated that respondents in all demographic groups usually find it easy to understand and express themselves in most intercultural situations. While this is an encouraging result, it is somewhat belied by the responses to open-ended questions and interviews (discussed in Section 3.2 below). Perhaps “good but with room to improve” is the best summary.

The most prominent exception was tutorial participation, with ESB and NESB lecturers and students all indicating some degree of disagreement with the statement “All students participate equally in tutorials” (cf. Clarke et al., 2011).

### **3.2. ESB responses to open-ended questions**

Analysis revealed several themes running through ESB participants’ responses to open-ended questions. The three main themes can be summarised as follows:

- NESB students and staff should have better English and/or cultural awareness;
- more time and resources are needed to accommodate the needs created by accepting NESB students;
- ESB staff and students should adapt better to the speaking/listening needs of NESB students.

Numbers of responses falling into each category are shown in Appendix 2. In the sub-sections below, some of the main findings are summarised.

#### *3.2.1. ESB Lecturer comments*

Lecturers’ comments made it clear they find the presence of significant numbers of NESB students in their classes very challenging. Of the total of 58 comments in the sections on lectures and tutorials, 19 (33%) indicated a belief that many international students’ English language skills were not sufficient for their studies, while 25 (43%) expressed a need for more time and resources to respond to the additional demands created by these students. Nine comments (16%) suggested a need for lecturers (including themselves) to remember to speak more slowly and take other steps to ensure NESB students understood clearly. A notable sub-theme in comments from ESB lecturers was frustration that NESB students often say they understand when they don’t, and the need to check their understanding frequently and carefully.

Of the 13 comments by ESB staff about interacting with NESB staff, in meetings or informal conversation, only 1 (8%) suggested inadequate levels of English proficiency, while 8 (62%) indicated a need for ESB staff to better adapt their speech to the needs of NESB listeners.

### 3.2.2. ESB General staff comments

General (i.e. administrative) staff responded in greater numbers and at greater length (though on a smaller number of questions) than academic staff, with many showing considerable interest in, and awareness of, issues in intercultural spoken communication, and almost all indicating a desire to help NESB students even more than they already do, and willingness to learn how to better meet their needs.

Of a total of 72 comments, relatively few (17%) commented on poor English skills of international students – and many of these were less about linguistic proficiency than cultural appropriacy (e.g. complaining of rudeness from international students). By contrast, a large proportion of all comments (43% overall, and 50% in response to the “what would you change” question) called for greater patience and consideration from ESB interlocutors, for example, in reducing speed of speech and use of colloquial expressions. As with the lecturers, many comments from general staff reflected frustration that NESB students say they understand when they clearly don’t.

### 3.2.3. ESB student comments

Comments from external and internal students are considered together here, since the division between these two groups is quite blurred, with many externals either living locally or coming to campus for residential schools or other visits. A major difference between the groups is that a greater proportion of internals have recently left school, while externals tend to be more mature.

Of a total of 69 student comments about NESB lecturers, 24 (35%) wished they had better English, or would slow down the speed of their speech to facilitate understanding. A further 18 comments (26%) wished for more resources to aid comprehension of NESB lecturers, with many of these suggesting provision of podcasts or written notes. Eight comments (12%) suggested ESB students should be more patient or pay more attention, rather than criticising NESB lecturers’ English. This number increases dramatically if we add 12 explicitly positive comments (17%) about NESB lecturers, e.g.

- “I find that sometimes having a NESB lecturer is better, in that I need to concentrate and really listen to the lecture so I don't miss anything and it makes a greater impact on what I'm learning about.”;
- “sometimes the way they inflect words can be enjoyable to listen to”;
- “I think it is a real positive [the University] is able to attract international academic staff. We live in such a multicultural world now that this cross-cultural communication, particularly in education is a wonderful asset to our university.”

In relation to tutorials, many ESB students’ comments reflected the overall view that NESB students do not participate equally in class. While around 6 (16%) of a total of 38 comments attributed this lack of participation to poor English skills, many more (11, 29%) wished NESB students had greater confidence, and around 18 called for greater patience from ESB students, or better facilitation skills from tutors (e.g. to take time to repeat information so all could understand).

Regarding informal conversations with NESB students, only one of a total of 35 ESB student comments cited poor English language skills as a factor, though several mentioned international students’ perceived “cliquey-ness” or preference to stay in their own groups and speak their own language. By contrast, around 29% wished for more patience from ESB speakers, and a further 29% for more opportunities to mix with international students and learn about their cultures.

## 3.3. NESB responses to open-ended questions

As indicated in Table 2 above, there were far fewer NESB respondents, and a far smaller proportion wrote answers to open-ended questions. However, those responses were more homogeneous. Across all demographic groups, written answers noted the following concerns:

- calls for ESB speakers to be patient/understanding, speak slowly, be aware of slang or colloquialisms;

- need for NESB students to be courageous, not intimidated.

## 4. Follow-up interviews

### 4.1. Interviews with ESB students and academic staff

Interviews with ESB students and academic staff confirmed the sense of goodwill and willingness to help seen in the survey, but strongly amplified the opinion that the level of English proficiency among many NESB students, and in some cases, staff, was too low. They also conveyed a sense of frustration when their (ESB) attempts to help were unsuccessful, of not knowing what else they were supposed to do, and of awkwardness and embarrassment around interaction with people who had difficulty with speaking and listening.

ESB lecturers' comments included:

- international students are often quiet and unresponsive, even when lecturers try to lighten things up with jokes or humour;
- reluctance to "put them on the spot" by calling on international students in class;
- frustration that NESB students often operate in groups with one spokesperson or "ringleader" who interprets for others, especially when this involves whispering during lectures;
- a sense of being overwhelmed with the additional work caused by international students' needs, and concerned about the difficulty of giving them the time they need, especially when it is also necessary to cater for local students in the same class;
- frustration with the university's policy of taking on students with inadequate language skills, and its failure to provide preparation and assistance for lecturers before assigning them large NESB student cohorts.

ESB students' comments included:

- frustration at the extreme "shyness" of international students and their preference to "stick to themselves" and operate in groups;
- willingness to help out in practical ways, and interest in getting to know some international students, but wariness of being stuck in boring or embarrassing situations.

### 4.2. Interviews with NESB students and academic staff

To make up for the small numbers of NESB survey responses, interviews were conducted with four NESB staff (some of whom were able to reflect on previous experience as NESB students in Australia), and four NESB students. As well, focus groups were held with NESB students as part of the Speaking Skills workshops described below.

These confirmed and amplified the few comments received via the survey. While most participants acknowledged and appreciated friendliness on the part of ESB people, all emphasised problems for NESB students and newly-arrived staff of:

- shyness and lack of confidence, especially if ESB interlocutors were perceived as impatient or annoyed;
- difficulty in understanding fast speech, colloquialisms, humour;
- difficulty in understanding how the university system works, and its expectations or requirements of them;
- particular difficulty with speaking and listening in the public sphere, e.g. in meetings, spoken presentations, tutorials, etc.;
- difficulty of making ESB friends, isolation and loneliness;
- frustration at a lack of response to their (NESB) efforts at communication, or well-meaning but inappropriate help received from ESB people;
- frustration at being given assistance with English grammar (often covering material already very familiar to them) rather than specific help in understanding the complex language of their course materials.

## **5. Workshops and other activities**

A strong impression gained from the survey, and especially from the interviews, was of a situation where, despite goodwill, each “side” harbours considerable misunderstanding of the needs, motivations and intentions of the other. A series of workshops was organised with the intention of feeding back the views of each side to the other.

### **5.1. Workshops for NESB students**

The most structured series of workshops targeted Chinese business students taking a course in Corporations Law. These workshops, in which volunteer students were taken in small groups for several sessions on “speaking skills”, were undertaken on request of the lecturer, in conjunction with other work by Teaching and Learning Centre staff on unit development and student support (Clarke et al., 2011). The sessions were documented only informally, but a few themes are summarised here.

The initial expectation was that students would need help with pronunciation (cf. Fraser, 2001) and/or cultural pragmatics (Yates, 2007), and indeed guidance in these areas was offered when needed. However, a striking observation was how much the demeanour of the international students changed in the workshops. During preliminary observations of their self-introductions in the lecture, they had been hesitant and very hard to understand, but in the informal, supportive environment of the workshops they blossomed from closed, downward-looking awkwardness into friendly, engaged and articulate young people. Of course, they still had strong accents and made many grammatical errors, but there was an almost immediate improvement in their comprehensibility, that is, the subjective experience of how easy it was to communicate with them, as opposed to their degree of accentedness, or the objective intelligibility of their speech (Derwing & Munro, 2009).

It soon became apparent that the students’ most pressing need was not for knowledge but for confidence and self-efficacy (Habel, 2009). From the second session, the focus fell almost entirely on increasing their personal confidence, and coaching them in how to elicit a positive reaction from ESB people, for example by smiling, asking questions, and conveying, despite shyness, “willingness to communicate” (Macintyre, 2007). In part, this involved boosting students’ confidence to “speak from their hearts” about matters of genuine interest to themselves. Prior to this, their constant request was for “topics” suitable for talking to local people. Exploring this suggested not just that they had mainly practised English through classroom dialogues on topics such as “family”, “hobbies”, or “movies”, but also that they had been warned about specific topics to avoid, such as personal relationships, age, or salary, and were fearful of inadvertently causing offence. These concerns were addressed through assurance that Australians are generally happy to talk about their language or culture, including discussing what topics local people find appropriate, and encouragement to converse by asking questions or making observations related to the immediate context.

Practice was given to build students’ confidence in their ability to negotiate the inevitable pauses and misunderstandings that occur in any conversation. Some of the ESB responses gathered from the survey and interviews were (gently) passed on to them, especially the ESB belief commonly expressed in the survey that Chinese students do not like talking English, and prefer to stick together. The students vigorously confirmed that in fact they were extremely keen to get to know local people, but found it difficult to express this openly due to shyness. As they came to understand that local people often mistook their shyness for disinterest or even dislike, they were keen to learn how to show their “willingness to communicate” (Macintyre, 2007) by smiling, looking at people’s faces, asking questions, and tolerating short pauses rather than walking away at the first sense of awkwardness. This practice had a good effect, with several students reporting rewarding experiences of prolonged communication with ESB people.

Another ESB reaction passed on was the feeling that NESB students speak too fast. This was extremely surprising to the Chinese students, who believed it was good to speak quickly in order to appear fluent. Very good results were gained from workshoping their own experience of struggling to keep up with English speakers, and encouraging them to speak for their ESB

interlocutors as they would wish to be spoken to, that is, pausing frequently, monitoring facial expressions to be sure of understanding, and allowing space for questions and clarification. It was also noted that pausing was not just good for the listener, but allowed the NESB student time to prepare the next phrase, resulting in lowered stress all round.

The feedback on these workshops was very good, not just from students, many of whom gave unsolicited reports of rewarding communicative experiences, but also from teaching staff.

## 5.2. Workshops for ESB students and staff

Working with the NESB students further deepened the conviction from which this project started: that in intercultural communication, native-speaker speaking and listening skills play a role as important as that of learner proficiency. It was felt that if local people had better intercultural speaking and listening skills, they might be able more frequently provide an environment similar to the focus groups, which would help Chinese students understand better and speak more freely and confidently. For example, one benefit of the sessions with Chinese students was the opportunity to offer feedback to a particular lecturer about their difficulty in following his fast-paced, broad-accented Australian English. Both lecturer and students reported improvement from his speaking more slowly, and making more effective use of written notes on PowerPoint® slides.

For this reason, a number of workshops were run for ESB general and teaching staff, and ESB students. These were necessarily *ad hoc* in nature, and not fully documented in terms of content or outcomes. However, a brief indication of some of their aims can be given here.

One aim was to build empathy for international students through reflection on how difficult speaking and listening in a second language in a foreign country actually is. Generally, few attendees had first-hand experience of being in this situation, especially in countries with language and culture differences commensurate with those faced by many NESB students in Australian universities. However, those who had were usefully forthcoming about how exhausting and intimidating it can be, and how much one appreciates any patience and kindness shown by local people.

Another aim was to direct attention to the fact that any spoken communication, even between familiar native speakers, involves negotiation of meaning through constant monitoring and repair of misunderstanding (Liddicoat, 2009). The aim was to instil confidence in attendees regarding their own ability to communicate with NESB people (cf. Derwing & Rossiter, 2002), and to reduce the awkwardness many felt around natural communicative events, such as asking “What did you say?”, noting that such awkwardness was often perceived (though usually incorrectly) by international students as impatience or annoyance.

A further aim was to give local people insight into how much second language learners’ speech – like any newly-acquired skill – can improve in less threatening situations. This led into encouragement to ESB students and staff to take the initiative to start and prolong friendly, relaxed conversations, even in the face of perceived shyness. An observation to emerge from the interviews was that there was relatively little mingling of local and international students in informal settings conducive to their getting to know each other as friends (as opposed to excursions and other one-off events), and encouragement was given to ESB students to take the initiative in inviting NESB to appropriate activities.

## 6. Discussion

Of course, international students do need an adequate grounding in the English language to have any chance of success in studying at an Australian university, and it is certainly essential to continue research to establish the appropriate level of English proficiency for university admission (e.g. Bayliss & Ingram, 2006; Feast, 2002; Yen & Kuzma, 2009).

Proficiency, however, is not a monolithic construct (McNamara, 2009), but depends partly on the environment in which it is judged. While ESB participants in the present project may have been accurate in their observation that some international students’ English is simply not



adequate for tertiary study, at least some of the students encountered had far better language skills than they were being given the opportunity to display, and far greater potential to learn and contribute than they were getting the opportunity to realise. It is worth considering briefly where responsibility for this situation lies.

There seemed to be a sense among some local people that it is up to international students to gain sufficient proficiency to cope with any communicative context prior to embarking on their studies. However, this may be an unrealistic expectation. As is generally well appreciated by English speakers who have studied at overseas universities, language is not a body of knowledge that can be fully acquired in a classroom before being used in real life. Rather it is a set of skills that require, as well as classroom learning, a period of apprenticeship in real life contexts. This is especially true in university contexts which involve specialised disciplinary discourses (Clarke et al., 2011). Part of the reason international students want to study at Australian universities is to undergo the apprenticeship that will give them proficiency in a wide range of communicative contexts. In accepting international students, Australian universities are agreeing, implicitly or explicitly, to provide that kind of apprenticeship. This means not just offering “remedial” lessons, revising basic English already covered in their home countries, but providing students with an environment conducive to using their English in a wide range of real contexts (AUQA, 2010).

While being an international student in a new linguistic and cultural environment is always going to be challenging, surely it should not require facing, unaided, situations any normal person would find intimidating. For example, considering that many ESB students find speaking up in class difficult, it is entirely natural that NESB students should require careful encouragement to perform at their best in such a context. The goodwill of local people must go beyond mere tolerance and patience, to active understanding of, and accommodation to, the linguistic needs of the other (e.g. to respond in a way that is perceived as encouraging by the recipient, not merely intended as such by the speaker).

This involves developing the speaking and listening skills of local people to co-create the positive and encouraging experiences that build learners’ confidence to take on new speaking and listening challenges. The literature on second language learning discusses the need for learners to develop “willingness to communicate” (Macintyre, 2007), but the willingness of local people to communicate with learners is an equally important factor (Kang, 2008). As is the case for second language learners, developing this involves more than knowing facts about other languages and cultures, but requires skill and courage. It is interesting that many ESB participants in the current research wished international students to be more confident and speak up more. However, at the same time, many described themselves as embarrassed to communicate with international students for fear of mispronouncing their names, or having to ask them to repeat themselves.

It may be worth recognising that for native speakers to learn skills that greatly improve intercultural speaking and listening is relatively easy compared to learning a second language – even the short workshops conducted during this project were considered usefully eye-opening by ESB participants. As described above, these native-speaker workshops focused on presenting intercultural communication not as a brand new set of skills, but as an extension of skills already present to a high level in all native speakers. For example, adapting to the linguistic competence of an international student is not more difficult than adapting to the linguistic competence of a child, something most adults do with immense but barely-noticed skill and sensitivity (Berko Gleason, 2005). Of course, this is not to suggest international students are like children, but to build confidence in native speakers that they have the ability to easily take on a greater share of the “burden of communication” when conversing with second-language speakers (Lindeman, 2002).

## **7. Conclusion**

This paper has reflected on an informal project focusing on speaking and listening in the multicultural university. The project started with a commitment to a “two-way” approach,

paying attention to the speaking and listening skills not just of international students but of local people. Its results suggest that developing the intercultural competence of native speakers may not only be cheaper and easier than providing ongoing English lessons but, at least in some cases, may be more effective in improving international students' English language competence. In the process, it can achieve the not inconsequential side-effect of improved intercultural competence among Australians, surely a desirable goal in our age of globalisation. We look forward to the opportunity to develop this work into a more formal demonstration of the return on investment from a two-way approach to improving speaking and listening skills in the multicultural university.

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## Appendix 1. Responses to survey statements

**Table 3.** (a-h) Survey statements and responses from the eight demographic groups. Note: "Mean" and "Mode" provide mean and mode of numerical responses to statements, where 5 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree (please see text for further description).

(a) ESB academics (n = 35)

| Statement  | Mean | Mode |
|--|------|------|
| I usually adjust the way I speak as a lecturer to be sure that NESB students can understand what I say | 4.1  | 4    |
| I usually feel confident that the way I speak as a lecturer is easy for NESB students to understand    | 3.6  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB students speak to me in my role as a lecturer        | 3.6  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.3  | 4    |
| I usually feel ESB and NESB students find it easy to understand each other in tutorials                | 2.7  | 3    |
| I usually find it easy to ensure that ESB and NESB students participate equally in tutorials           | 2.8  | 2    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.0  | 3    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB staff members speak in meetings                      | 3.4  | 4    |
| I usually feel I need to modify the way I speak in meetings for NESB staff members to understand me    | 2.5  | 2    |
| I usually feel confident the way I speak in meetings is easy for NESB staff members to understand      | 3.7  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.2  | 3    |
| I often have friendly, informal conversations with NESB staff members                                  | 4.0  | 4    |

Table 3(a) cont'd

| Statement  | Mean | Mode |
|--|------|------|
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 4.0  | 4    |
| I usually understand the way NESB staff members speak in informal conversations                                    | 4.0  | 4    |
| I usually feel I need to modify the way I speak in informal conversations so that NESB staff members understand me | 2.9  | 2    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that NESB staff members understand me in informal conversations        | 3.8  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.3  | 3    |

(b) ESB general staff (n = 55)

| Statement  | Mean | Mode |
|--|------|------|
| I often have to speak or listen to NESB students in my role at UNE               | 3.9  | 5    |
| I usually feel confident the way I speak is easy for NESB students to understand | 4.1  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB students speak                 | 3.8  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may                                | 3.7  | 3    |

(c) ESB on-campus students (n = 65)

| Statement   | Mean | Mode |
|---|------|------|
| I regularly listen to lectures by NESB lecturers  | 3.2  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB lecturers speak                               | 3.1  | 4    |
| I usually feel I need to modify the way I speak for NESB lecturers to understand me             | 2.7  | 2    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that NESB lecturers understand me                   | 3.4  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 3.7  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB students speak in tutorials                   | 3.0  | 2    |
| I usually feel I need to modify the way I speak for NESB students to understand me in tutorials | 3.4  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that NESB students understand me in tutorials       | 3.3  | 4    |
| I usually find that ESB and NESB students participate equally in tutorials                      | 2.5  | 2    |

Table 3(c) cont'd.

| Statement  | Mean | Mode |
|--|------|------|
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.5  | 4    |
| I often have friendly, informal conversations with NESB students   | 3.6  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB students speak in informal conversations                   | 3.5  | 4    |
| I usually feel I need to modify the way I speak for NESB students to understand me in informal conversations | 3.2  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that NESB students understand me in informal conversations       | 3.4  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.4  | 4    |

(d) ESB off-campus students (n = 29)

| Statement  | Mean | Mode |
|--|------|------|
| I regularly listen to lectures by NESB lecturers   | 3.7  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB lecturers speak  | 3.6  | 4    |
| I usually feel I need to modify the way I speak for NESB lecturers to understand me                          | 2.5  | 2    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that NESB lecturers understand me                                | 3.3  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.3  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB students speak in tutorials                                | 3.6  | 4    |
| I usually feel I need to modify the way I speak for NESB students to understand me in tutorials              | 3.6  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that NESB students understand me in tutorials                    | 3.8  | 4    |
| I usually find that ESB and NESB students participate equally in tutorials                                   | 2.8  | 2    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.5  | 4    |
| I often have friendly, informal conversations with NESB students   | 3.8  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way NESB students speak in informal conversations                   | 3.6  | 4    |
| I usually feel I need to modify the way I speak for NESB students to understand me in informal conversations | 3.4  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that NESB students understand me in informal conversations       | 3.5  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may  | 3.6  | 4    |

## (e) NESB academics (n = 16)

| Statement   | Mean | Mode |
|---|------|------|
| I usually feel confident that the way I speak in my role as a lecturer is easy for ESB students to understand | 4.3  | 5    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB students speak to me in my role as a lecturer                | 4.5  | 5    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 3.3  | 4    |
| I usually feel that ESB and NESB students understand each other easily in tutorials                           | 3.9  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to ensure that ESB and NESB students participate equally in tutorials                  | 3.7  | 2    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 2.8  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB staff speak in meetings                                      | 4.5  | 5    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that ESB staff understand me in meetings                          | 4.1  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 3.6  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to get into a friendly, informal conversation with ESB lecturers whenever I want to    | 4.5  | 5    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB lecturers speak in informal conversations                    | 4.5  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that ESB lecturers understand me in informal conversations        | 4.1  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 3.0  | 4    |

## (f) NESB general staff (n = 3)

| Statement   | Mean | Mode |
|---|------|------|
| I usually feel confident the way I speak is easy for ESB students to understand | 4.7  | 5    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB students speak                 | 4.7  | 5    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may                               | 4.0  | N/A  |

## (g) NESB on-campus students (n = 6)

| Statement  | Mean | Mode |
|--|------|------|
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB lecturers speak                 | 4.3  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so ESB lecturers understand me          | 4.0  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may                                | 4.2  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way the ESB students speak in tutorials | 2.7  | 2    |

Table 3(g) cont'd.

| Statement   | Mean | Mode |
|---|------|------|
| I usually find it easy to express myself so ESB students understand me in tutorials                       | 4.0  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 3.3  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB office staff speak                                       | 3.6  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to ask questions and express myself to ESB office staff                            | 4.0  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 4.0  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to get into a friendly, informal conversation with ESB students whenever I want to | 4.0  | 5    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB students speak in informal conversations                 | 4.2  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that ESB students understand me in informal conversations     | 4.0  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 4.0  | 4    |

## (h) NESB off-campus students (n = 4)

| Statement   | Mean | Mode |
|---|------|------|
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB lecturers speak  | 3.8  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so ESB lecturers understand me                                   | 4.3  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 3.3  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way the ESB students speak in tutorials                          | 5    | N/A  |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so ESB students understand me in tutorials                       | 3.5  | N/A  |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 3.7  | N/A  |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB office staff speak                                       | 4.3  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to ask questions and express myself to ESB office staff                            | 4.3  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 4.3  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to get into a friendly, informal conversation with ESB students whenever I want to | 4.8  | 5    |
| I usually find it easy to understand the way ESB students speak in informal conversations                 | 4.5  | 4    |
| I usually find it easy to express myself so that ESB students understand me in informal conversations     | 4.3  | 4    |
| I have no problems myself, but I think others may   | 4.0  | 4    |

## Appendix 2. Responses to open-ended questions

**Table 4.** (a-d) Summary of three most common themes in responses to open-ended questions, with number of respondents in each ESB demographic group expressing these views. Please see text for further explanation and discussion. Note: NESB participants did not respond to open-ended questions in sufficient numbers to warrant separate tables.

### (a) ESB academics (n = 35)

*If you could change anything about speaking and listening to NESB students in your role as a lecturer, what would you change?*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Total responses to this question                                | 18 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness       | 2  |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB                  | 10 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB | 5  |

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening to NESB students in your role as a lecturer?*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Total responses to this question                                | 17 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness       | 8  |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB                  | 5  |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB | 3  |

*If you could change anything about speaking or listening in tutorials including ESB and NESB students, what would you change?*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Total responses to this question                                | 10 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness       | 3  |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB                  | 6  |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB | 0  |

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening in tutorials including ESB and NESB students?*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Total responses to this question                                | 13 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness       | 6  |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB                  | 4  |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB | 1  |

*If you could change anything about speaking or listening in meetings with NESB staff, what would you change?*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Total responses to this question                                | 6 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness       | 1 |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB                  | 0 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB | 5 |

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking or listening in meetings including both ESB and NESB staff members?*

|                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Total responses to this question | 1 |
|----------------------------------|---|

*If you could change anything about speaking and listening in informal conversations with NESB staff members, what would you change?*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Total responses to this question                                | 5 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB | 3 |

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening in friendly, informal conversations with NESB staff members?*

Total responses to this question ----- 1

*Any other comments?*

Total responses to this question ----- 7

NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness ----- 0

More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB ----- 2

ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- 2

---

(b) ESB general staff (n = 55)

---

*If you could change anything about speaking and listening to NESB students, what would you change?*

Total responses to this question ----- 29

NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness ----- 3

More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB ----- 5

ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- 15

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening to NESB?*

Total responses to this question ----- 27

NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness ----- 5

More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB ----- 3

ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- 9

*Any other comments?*

Total responses to this question ----- 16

NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness ----- 4

More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB ----- 3

ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- 7

---

(c) Open-ended questions ESB on-campus students (n = 65)

---

*If you could change anything about speaking and listening to NESB lecturers, what would you change?*

Total responses to this question ----- 36

NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness ----- 14

More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB ----- 13

ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- 5

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening to NESB lecturers?*

Total responses to this question ----- 21

NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness ----- 7

More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB ----- 2

ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- 3

*If you could change anything about speaking and listening in tutorials with NESB students, what would you change?*

Total responses to this question ----- 24

NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness ----- 4

More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB ----- 6

ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- 5



*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening in tutorials with NESB students?*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Total responses to this question -----                                | 6 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----       | 2 |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----                  | 1 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- | 1 |

*If you could change anything about speaking and listening in informal conversations with NESB students, what would you change?*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Total responses to this question -----                                | 16 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----       | 0  |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----                  | 5  |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- | 5  |

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening in informal conversations with NESB students, what would you change?*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Total responses to this question -----                                | 11 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----       | 0  |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----                  | 3  |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- | 3  |

*Any other comments?*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Total responses to this question -----                                | 11 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----       | 3  |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----                  | 1  |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- | 2  |

---

(d) Open-ended questions ESB off-campus students (n = 29)

---

*If you could change anything about speaking and listening to NESB lecturers, what would you change?*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Total responses to this question -----                                | 6 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----       | 3 |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----                  | 2 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- | 0 |

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening to NESB lecturers?*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Total responses to this question -----                                | 6 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----       | 0 |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----                  | 1 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- | 0 |

*If you could change anything about speaking and listening in tutorials with NESB students, what would you change?*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Total responses to this question -----                                | 4 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----       | 0 |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----                  | 2 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB ----- | 1 |

*Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening in tutorials with NESB students?*

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Total responses to this question -----                          | 4 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness ----- | 0 |

|  |   |
|--|---|
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----   | 1 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB -----  | 1 |
| <i>If you could change anything about speaking and listening in informal conversations with NESB students, what would you change?</i>        |   |
| Total responses to this question -----   | 5 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----  | 1 |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----   | 1 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB -----  | 1 |
| <i>Do you have any additional comments about speaking and listening in informal conversations with NESB students, what would you change?</i> |   |
| Total responses to this question -----   | 3 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----  | 0 |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----   | 1 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB -----  | 1 |
| <i>Any other comments?</i>   |   |
| Total responses to this question -----   | 4 |
| NESB should have better English and/or cultural awareness -----  | 0 |
| More time/resources needed to accommodate NESB -----   | 0 |
| ESB should adapt better to speaking and listening needs of NESB -----  | 2 |

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