Barriers related to language and culture which prevent overseas students from achieving their potential.

By

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Executive Summary

Recently, there was a significant increase in the number of international students in the UK. Many universities and college offer courses to international students but the figure shows international students don't show their full potential while they have good academic backgrounds from their native countries. It is hard for students to undertake course or research and write in the language that is not their first language i.e. English. Many students struggle with cultural or social as well as academic adjustment in the UK.

This paper will investigate the cultural and language barriers that prevent international students to show their full potential in the colleges and universities. It will also suggest the solution how to cope up the situation and assist students to get full advantages of education facilities in the UK.

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Introduction

UK Institutions are considered overseas students' academic hub where students from all over the world come to quench their educational thirst. Overseas students are a reasonable source of income for underfunded universities and colleges. Britain announced the "setting up of a goal of attracting 100,000 more international students in the next 5 years" (Johnson 2006.p16). The contribution of overseas students to UK economy is 5.3 billion per annum. Their contribution is not just in economy but also in social and cultural values and international development. Around 10 % of UK graduates are working back homes after their successful completion of courses and playing their vital role in international development.

Students, who come here to get education, went back to their home countries with better skills and attitude and serve their nation. The exchange of cultural values by these graduates brings harmony among the global communities. The importance of international students in UK economy and international development by their service cannot be denied.

Why Action Research?

To investigate and inquire any social situation, action research is a practical approach. This paper is related to education and has particular application to lecturers engaged in their daily contact with children or students. It does not cover just teaching areas but also management or administration in a school or college. It will suggest recommendation to all sectors who are working for equal rights, managing diversity and working for global peace and development. The context for professional inquiry might change, but the principles and processes involved in action research are the same, regardless of the nature of the practice.

Indeed, action research did not come up in education, but was applied to the development of teaching as its potential was identified. Curriculum research and development must to belong to the teacher (Stenhouse, 1975 p. 142). He was most obstinate that 'it is not enough that teachers' work should be studied: they need to study it themselves' (p.143).

Barrett and Whitehead (1985) ask six questions to work on any action research:

What is your concern?

Why are you concerned?

What do you think you could do about it?

What kind of evidence could you collect to help you make some judgement about what is happening?

How would you collect such evidence?

I made these questions the base to work on my action research project.

What is Issue?

Many overseas students meet lots of learning barriers and find it difficult to understand the education system of the country and the medium of instructions. Students may also have difficulty with the accent of their instructor even when they have already good proficiency in English. They have difficulty in understanding the class lectures and are reluctant to participate in the class activities and discussions. Many students get stressed due to their poor English and can't express their knowledge in the exams or research papers even where they have good ideas. Pronunciation is also a factor as some students can't pronounce and feel embarrassment in presentations. Their work and social life balance, combined with a new culture and its norms may cause a deadlock in the way of their academic progression.

Phongsuwan (1997) studied the relationships between college satisfaction and language ability, and academic performance of international students. He found that:

1. There was a momentous relationship between language ability and satisfaction with the college's contribution to academic growth particularly in terms of grades.

2. There was also a relationship between grades and satisfaction with the institutional environment.

3. There was no significant relationship between grades and satisfaction with the college's contribution to academic services or growth.

Furthermore, it is understood when international students leave their home countries they certainly do have some changing transitions such as

Moving to a new country

Moving to a new country as a student where students have work restrictions is not an easy thing to deal with. Even although tuition fees are paid by their parents or sponsors, in order to maintain their social life, students have to find some work. Some students have to manage their fees by doing work. Such students have to work and study along with the pressure of the language barrier. There is a small percentage of students who just use the student visa as entry clearance and their objective is to earn money, but to live here legally they have to attend classes as well and this pushes them into a chaotic situation.

Separation from family and friends

Students who are strongly tied up with their families and have never had experience of living without their parents and siblings have to struggle to get used to studying in a new environment. Students from Asia have these problems and they spend their time on the phone telling them how much they are missing their parents and family. In a new environment where everyone is speaking another language and whose cultural values are totally different, students are led into a stressful situation and they can't progress with their courses as they would if doing in normal conditions.

Struggling for accommodation and friends

It is not easy for students to come to the UK and find accommodation of their own choice. They have to sacrifice their choices and have to compromise by limiting themselves within their budgets. A new place, new people and new cultural values definitely are challenges for the students to get used to these things and start their life. In London, finding accommodation is very difficult and a time consuming process. Some students can't adjust to them, feel bewildered and this ultimately detracts from their objective of getting a good education.

Managing their expenses in a restricted permission of work

A considerable number of students from abroad are dependent on their parents. Their parents manage their college fees and their pocket money, and students are free of tension and able to concentrate on their studies and therefore excel in their career. But when such types of students come to the UK, they have to manage their own expenses and plan for their budgets. This problem keeps them from showing their full potential.

Justifying their studies along with other commitments (family, friends)

Overseas students are not entitled to any state benefit; students with families have a hard time to give proper time to their families as well as their studies. For their studies they need a peaceful environment in the house.

Attending classes, working, and giving time to their family causes their potential to be limited.

Totally self dependent

In the Indian subcontinent students enjoy the support of their families and do nothing except study until they have completed. Such types of students have to work and maintain themselves without the support of others when they come to the UK. They find it hard to manage time and they resort to just looking busy but actually doing nothing until finally failing their courses.

Adjustment to new culture

Cultural differences are an additional challenge for international students .They need some time to adjust to the new culture, the amount of time depending on the degree of the similarity of the culture. For instance, students coming from the neighbouring countries of the UK need less time to adjust as compared to students from Asia. Students having limited leave to remain in the UK often ignore the cultural awareness segment of their lives and fail to achieve the required results in their academic development.

All the above mentioned things cause stress that keep the learner away from showing his full potential.

Furthermore, many institutions, particularly in the private sector, don't give overseas students value for money because of the poor quality of education. There are no proper checks from the Government on these institutions so students waste their money and misuse the immigration system to earn back that money they have spent on coming here: in this way the real purpose of their arrival has turned into an immigration offence.

Why am I concerned?

Many teachers are involved in teaching international students in universities and further education as well. I teach international students, so it is a good reason to work in this area and find out about the concerns of international students and then try to resolve them, thus the quality of education can be improved and more students will be attracted to come to the UK to complete their courses and then go back to their homes with a quality qualification. If students' problems and learning barriers are not resolved, it will be a constant fear that students will not attend their courses and will consequently become a challenge for law and enforcement agencies.

Furthermore, it is my primary concern to find out the problems overseas learners face and suggest the solution so students after completion of their courses can play a vital role in international harmony, peace and development.

- 'Action research investigates everyday problems experienced by teachers' (Elliott, 1981).
- 'All you need is a general idea that something might be *improved'* (Kemmis and McTaggart , 1982).
- 'I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice' (Whitehead 1985).

Starting points might be of the following kinds:

1. I want to get better at teaching my subject.
2. I'm not sure why my students don't engage in discussion.
3. I have to implement the speaking and listening guidelines, but I'm not sure what is the best way
4. How can we make staff meetings more productive?
5. I've seen something working well in one college, so why not in my work place.

It is important to choose an area that I can do something about. Some questions are not amenable to action research:

- Is there any relationship between the language barrier and attendance?
- Can foreign student bring those values which the UK appreciates and promotes?
- Does ethnicity affect performance?

Remember that it is the 'strategic action' (Kemmis and McTaggart 1982) that you can employ to try to solve the problem that will give you an insight into the factors affecting your practice.

I took the initiative to work in this area when I experienced that foreign learners in my class of business administration were not participating in class activities and speaking freely. If I gave them assignments or other case studies, some of them did well but when I asked them to present, they felt shy and tried to make excuses. It was part of the assessment policy to give students assignment and ask them to write reflective journals and present in the classroom. I found that on the presentation day student attendance dropped dramatically.

I started to investigate why it happened and I personally interviewed students and asked them about their real problems and the findings were very interesting.

In the class of 60 students, I found 10 students who just came to the class for attendance and 15 students whose English proficiency was below the course they were taking. I put those 15 students in the English Class for a 6 month course and regularly contacted them about their progress and found they were happy there and progressing well, and their confidence level was high. Around 10 students had problems understanding idioms I used during class, and some students were distracted by their personal liking or disliking of classmates due to differences in race and religion.

Academic and language Barriers

It is widely acknowledged that prior educational experiences really influence learning. This applies to all students whether they are overseas or national. However students from different educational backgrounds and norms are significantly affected when they go abroad to complete their education. Students having no experience of self-directed studies may feel uncertainty and isolation, some students may be used to a more passive style of learning which could be interpreted as lack of engagement.

Regarding academic barriers, a lack of awareness of the educational system combined with poor communication skills are extra pressures because many students report that they are unable to grasp concepts due to the pace of the lecturing.

According to Laad and Rudy (1999) a teacher's instructional style can be a barrier rather than a bridge to student learning. Teacher should use alternative examples in combination with the international students' culture.

Trice (2000) reckons that teachers can play a vital role in international students' learning experiences. His research reveals that the attitude of the faculty, the teaching style and awareness of the learner's culture are crucial for their progress in the course. Learners having a different language for studying and communication can make progress in their studies, but a teacher should learn some words of their language and use while conversing informally with them.

Educational barriers may include hurtful racial attitudes, intolerance to linguistic and cultural differences, lower levels of expectations from school professionals, a lack of access to adequate or higher level educational services due to tracking, and the implementation of policies and regulations insensitive to the needs of culturally different students (Cummins, 1989)

According to Lynch (1992), culturally different families may differ in terms of their family composition; primary caregivers; child rearing practices; sleeping and eating patterns; response to disobedience and aggression; perceptions of disability, health, and healing; language; religion; communicative interaction styles; and help-seeking behaviours. These cultural characteristics and differences should be examined in the context of how they influence the students' functioning within assessment and classroom situations, schools, families, and communities. In planning and evaluating interventions, careful consideration should also be given to the benefits of incorporating activities, interaction styles, and instructional sequences that match the students' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural styles (Tharp, 1989).

Lin (2002) points out a conflict between Chinese postgraduate students' learning style and the American way of teaching and learning. Chinese students use their prior knowledge and books, written in their language, as a resource. But they have problems while researching due to a lack of research skills and cultural knowledge.

Xu (2003) in his research about Chinese students' adjustment to learning in an American university says that they had difficulties caused by the language deficiency and not enough awareness of the differences in teaching and learning between China and USA.

What can I do about it?

I investigated the problem and found language and cultural differences make a student stressed and prevent them from showing their potential. I used alternative procedures including Curriculum Based Assessment activities such as informal reading sessions, error analyses, and task analyses that use the student curriculum materials as the basis of the assessment. Criterion-referenced tests were helpful as a measurement when attempting to establish accomplished and future academic goals. Test-teach-test dynamic approaches can be productive when the assessor uses tasks and materials directly related to the student's academic functioning rather than more cognitively based procedures (e.g., Feurstein's Instrumental Enrichment program), which are less pertinent to the classroom setting and demonstrate limited validity (Duran, 1989).

Whatever alternative procedures are used to measure bilingual students' academic performance, careful consideration should be given to the interaction between the content of the procedures and the student's background. Bilingual students' performances on academic tasks are dependent on the type of previously established knowledge they bring to the testing situation. Thus, asking comprehension questions after they read a story they know little about limits their ability to understand the story and to respond appropriately to the questions in either language.

Beca (1984) suggests class room interaction and management strategies should be formulated in the context of bilingual students' cultural perspective and the potential effect of using objective behaviour strategies.

There are three instructional programs usually available for bilingual students:

1. Bilingual transitional

2. Bilingual maintenance

3. English only

In the UK an English only curriculum is designed for national and international students; as a teacher I try my best to use easy and clear language and encourage students to participate in the class and gain confidence. I found that students speaking the same language just asked each other what teacher had said and this is a negative effect on their learning.

I personally tried to contextualise instructions that fit in with the student's experience, I tried to bridge previously learned information with new skills. Often, making the initial connection with colleagues may be difficult due to language and social barriers. Providing a platform for initial contact created valuable opportunities for information exchange that will allow them to maintain the thread of communication throughout.

Bringing culture into the classroom and school also motivates students to become personally involved in their learning when they recognize their "cultural and linguistic characteristics in the curriculum" (Gonzalez, 1992 in Nathenson-Mejia, 1994).

It is not an easy task for a teacher to bring culture into the classroom but dealing with diversity shows that a teacher has respect for all cultures and norms ; I learned about different festivals and greeting words. This makes the student feel proud that their culture is being given respect.

Methodology

I randomly distributed questionnaires to students in the college where i teach and the college where more than 5000 foreigner students are studying. I distributed questionnaires by myself but a few I distributed via emails. For interview I selected 20 to 25 students who were in my class doing MBA with me, 5 to 10 from the college where I teach and the rest from another 3 colleges. For interview I chose those students who really wanted to express their views in regard to the issues I was working on. I contacted students to tell them that I was doing this project and they were voluntarily ready for interviews.

I was thinking maybe the response I would get through questionnaires would not be very good, that they might just select the first options to get rid of the questionnaire . In the questionnaires there were closed questions but while interviewing I asked the interviewees open questions and got much more material than i expected but overall the response from the questionnaires was not that much different. The nature of the questionnaires and the interview questions was almost the same. The problem I faced was in reminding students to respond to the questionnaires.

There were certainly political considerations while writing up the questions. The new coalition government is trying to reduce the immigrants, particularly international students and the Prime Minister's remarks about multiculturalism were considered as well. For ethical issues i tried not to ask much about religion and their ethnic background.

Some students were not willing to talk about the questions I was asking them as they were thinking i was an official who was collecting data for the government. I assured them I was working on a project and their details would be kept confidential.

What kind of evidence could I collect that can help me to make some judgement about what is happening?

The questionnaires were distributed to 300 different students from 5 different international student colleges by hand and via emails. 50 students from these colleges were interviewed.

Nationality

S.No	Country	Numberof students
1	Bangladesh	33
2	China	40
3	Ghana	23
4	India	47
5	Nepal	29
6	Nigeria	32
7	Pakistan	40
8	Philippines	31
9	Sri lanka	25

Language barriers

International students who do not meet the initial criteria of language proficiency are offered English language courses but the structure of those courses is not designed in a way to fulfil this deficiency.

The data shows only 25 % of respondents consider themselves excellent in keeping up with the ability of following the course. 40 % of respondents reckoned they faced difficulties while communicating with teachers and 45% said lack of English proficiency restricted them progressing in their courses. 50 % of respondents of this survey said they found it hard to meet the required standard of English to follow the undertaken courses. 40 to 45 % of respondents said their overall education and grades were affected by the language barriers. 30% of students switched from their main courses to English language courses.

Questionnaires and response ratio

1. Name of the course you are studying
   a. _____   c. _____
   b. _____   d._____

2. How do you consider your ability to follow the course?   RESPONSE
   a. Excellent   c. Good
   b. Acceptable   d. Poor

a	b	c	d
25%	35%	25%	15%

3. Do you have problems while communicating with your teachers in and outside the class?

   RESPONSE

   a. Very often   b. Sometimes
   b. Often   d. Rarely

a	b	c	d
40%	30%	20%	10%

4. What restricts you to progress in the course you are studying?   RESPONSE
   a. Lack of proficiency in English
   b. Lack of knowledge
   c. Stress
   d. Others

a	b	c	d
45%	30%	10%	15%

5. How do you rate your efforts to meet the required English level for the undertaken course?   RESPONSE
   a. Very Hard   c. Hard
   b. Average   d. Inefficient

a	b	c	d
10%	50%	20%	20%

6. Do you feel that any of your grades are affected due to language barriers?

   RESPONSE

   a. Surely   c. May be
   b. Not sure   d. No

a	b	c	d
40%	30%	20%	10%

7. Do you feel that your overall education is affected just because of language barrier between you and teachers?   RESPONSE
   a. Surely   c. May be
   b. Not sure   d. No

a	b	c	d
45%	25%	20%	10%

8. Have you ever switched your course into English language course? RESPONSE

   a. Yes   b. No

a	b	c	d
40%	60%	-	-

9. Do you think your lecturers help you to learn English?   RESPONSE

   a. Yes   b. No

a	b	c	d
30%	70%	-	-

Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers also have a bad impact on the student's ability to develop their language skills and their academic performance. The survey shows 17 % of respondents said cultural differences did not affect their educational achievements but 40% said they are very much affected by this difference. It is a good thing that 55 % of respondents think UK is a multi-religious country where there is freedom to practise their religion. A good percentage of respondents said that British people welcome foreigners and the food of their choice was easily available in the UK.

10. How do you feel about the effect of cultural difficulties over your academic progress?

a. Very much   c. A bit   RESPONSE

b. Not sure   d. not at all

a	b	c	d
40%	27%	16%	17%

11. Do you think UK is a mutli-religious country where people have freedom of practice their religion?   RESPONSE

a. yes   b. No

a	b	c	d
55%	45%	-	-

12. Do British people welcome foreigner or people from ethnic backgrounds?

RESPONSE

a. yes   b. No

a	b	c	d
40%	60%	-	-

13. Do you easily find the food of your choice?   RESPONSE

a. yes   b. No

a	b	c	d
65	35%	-	-

14. Do you have any other comments regarding how to grasp opportunities to improve English Language?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself, for example your ethnicity and course you study.
2. Tell am about your class environment, are there any international students?
3. How many hours do you study?
4. How many hours you work during week?
5. What is your response on Government policies to tight the students entry route in the UK?
6. Do you experience work, study and life balance?
7. Do you experience any kind of learning barriers due to language or cultural difference?
8. How do language barriers affect you studies?
9. What have you done to minimise language barriers or what opportunities your institution gave you to overcome these barriers?
10. What are you main concerns as an international student?
11. What are your suggestions for international students to improve language skills?
12. What do you think attracts international students to UK Institutions?
13. What facilities or services you institution provide you to fit in?
14. Is there any workshop for students to get awareness with the culture? If yes then what was your participation?
15. Do students reported their problems to management? If so what was their response?
16. What type of informal groups international students should form? Only with people who can speak their language or with locals too whom they can learn language and cultural values easily?
17. Does your college offer any programs to encourage multiculturalism?

Now the Home Office has cracked down on so-called colleges and has introduced new policies and standards for education providers. They closed a lot of colleges and now only 744 private institutions have got licenses from UKBA to offer courses to international students. So this problem is being solved but the area which really needs to have more work is that of language barriers and cultural awareness which prevents students from realising their potential and being successful.

Conclusion

International students in the UK face a range of cultural, academic and certainly language barriers that prevent them from fulfilling their potential and completing their education. These barriers obviously cause a psychological distance between home and foreign students. In a limited timescale it is difficult for overseas students to adapt to a new cultural environment, learn a new language and gain awareness of an academic system. The paper investigated and identified the problems overseas students face through cultural differences and language barriers. These problems can be ranked in degree of importance as

1. Difficulties in gaining awareness of the academic system.

2. Language difficulties

3. Cultural difficulties.

1. Difficulties in gaining awareness of the academic system.

The Home Office cracked down on so-called colleges and introduced new policies and standards for education providers. New rules applicable after 21st April 2010 stated that private institutions had a one year transitional period to get the status of **Highly Trusted** sponsor and for quality assurance private institutions need to be accredited by Ofsted, QAA or the Independent Schools Inspectorate etc. It would be big relief for students who came here through agents and lost their money after finding their college was just a one room college. For academic awareness I suggest all education providers for international students should have a course or academic advisor who can educate students about the educational system of the UK. International students who are used to writing 3 hour exams papers find assignments, case studies and presentations very hard because it is totally new to them. Such students have problems in using proper references and they fail in their projects. Some students have to write about companies they don't know about.

The data I gathered by interviewing students shows 30 to 40 students do know about the grade system of the colleges where they study. A student told me he passed one subject on his 2nd attempt and got 60 % marks but when he received a transcript from the university his marks were given as 40%; when he inquired about it he was told it was university policy to award just a pass mark (40%) if it is a second attempt. Such kinds of things upset students when they are not told beforehand.

2. Language difficulties

A significant number of students are concerned about their language barriers; their language barriers are associated with cultural differences. The survey shows majority of students are concerned that pre-sessional English courses are not sufficient for preparing them for academic studies.

The survey shows that 35 % respondents believe their ability to follow their proposed course is "good", 40 % respondents feel difficulties while communicating with their teachers. 45 % students say their course progression is restricted by lack of English proficiency, 50 % students rate their effort "hard" to get required standards of language requirement to follow the course.

In my opinion there are two factors involved in bringing such students here to the UK. Firstly, the agents who represent college and universities in different countries are not properly trained to recruit eligible students. They are just after their commission and induct students by deception by telling them they don't need to worry about the language proficiency and assure them the college will help them to improve their language proficiency. When student arrive here, their expectations are dashed.

Another factor about the colleges' admission policy is that they don't have any criteria to check the eligibility of anyone undertaking a course. Some colleges have introduced a Skype interview process to assess language but this is not successful because agents find ways around this by having other persons ready to attend the interview session.

I would suggest here that colleges should strictly adhere to the policy for students to provide evidence of internationally recognised English qualification such as IELTS and TOEFL. When student apply for visa entry clearance they should call him/her for interview to check his/her language ability. If such steps were taken, at least colleges could produce good results.

I started a 10 days pre-sessional English course in the college where I teach; there were 3 native speakers and students were invited and given the chance to talk with them and ask them questions freely. I found it really helped the students. I still think colleges need to restructure their English pre-sessional courses because the present structure focuses on grammar while students need to improve their listening and should have practice in structuring proper sentences.

3. **Cultural difficulties**.

The data shows a low percentage of students at universities and colleges do not consider they have problems with cultural difficulties whilst more than 50% of students think multiculturalism should be promoted. Mostly students think English people are not in favour of welcoming international student in their country.

A significant number of students are concerned about their language barriers; these language barriers are associated with cultural differences. The survey shows the majority of students are concerned that pre-sessional English courses are not sufficient in preparing them for academic studies. The university and Colleges should improve the level of support for international students by incorporating cultural awareness of the local context as well as linking to academic research and writing.

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