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# Dealing with diversity in higher education: awareness-raising and a linguistic perspective on teachers' intercultural competence

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## Abstract

*Higher education institutions around the world are educating an increasingly diverse student population. While this responds to government discourse around widening participation and the need to internationalize, and while it can make for a stimulating teaching-learning environment, it can also present teachers with certain challenges that demand greater intercultural competence. This article considers how, as part of their intercultural repertoire, teachers – and by extension, students – can benefit from developing an understanding of language, and, in particular, the general principles governing how we mean in language and the lingua-cultural variability that impacts upon the process of doing so. It proposes awareness-raising activities as a way of promoting such understanding.*

**Keywords:** widening participation; multicultural/multilingual student population; teacher development; intercultural competence; language awareness-raising, internationalisation

## Introduction

Student populations in higher education today are trending toward ever greater diversity. Universities can be viewed as microcosms that reflect broader demographic changes in society seen in the kind of linguistic, cultural, socio-economic and educational variation Vertovec (2010) has referred to as 'superdiversity'. Provided suitable conditions exist, this increased diversity in university populations makes for a potentially more vibrant and stimulating teaching-learning environment.

Along with broader societal changes, there have been two particularly significant developments – one government policy driven and the other originating from within the sector itself – that have promoted greater diversity. The first is widening participation, the product of a moral imperative that has driven government and educational institutions to adopt policies reflecting an agenda which seeks to ensure that access to higher education is based on the fundamental principle of equal opportunity for all, regardless of an individual's socio-economic circumstances. This moral imperative has been accompanied by an equally compelling economic one, as governments strive to increase their nations' human capital by raising levels of participation in higher education, thereby creating a more skilled workforce that enables their respective countries to better compete in an increasingly globalised market economy (Cooper, 2010).

The widening participation agenda has been particularly strident in Europe and North America. In the UK in particular, it has continued to impact higher education for over forty years following publication of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Lord Robbins (Robbins Report, 1963) at a time when only 4% of UK school-

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leavers went on to university. It has since found voice in other similar government reports/initiatives, including the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), the American Graduation Initiative in the U.S. (2009), and, in Australia, the West Report (1998) and the Bradley Review (2008). These documents have sought to promote greater representation of non-traditional groups in higher education and the targets they have specified have contributed to the massification of higher education such that the number of students enrolled worldwide by 2030 is forecast to rise from 99.4 million in 2000 to 414.2 million in 2030 – an increase of 314% (Calderon, 2012).

As a result of these developments, the student make-up of universities today is markedly different from five decades ago and fewer assumptions can be made about the necessary cultural capital with which students enter higher education and thus their degree of ‘fit’ with the institutional habitus (Bourdieu, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Thomas, 2002). This fact has important implications for pedagogy.

The second development that has played a major role in diversifying the student body in higher education is the efforts of universities to internationalise. The globalisation of education has meant that universities today are having to compete not only nationally but internationally in order to ensure their ongoing viability and growth. This has meant increasing their allure through performance excellence and maximising their visibility through savvy marketing. Universities the world over are seeking to broaden their domains of influence, enhance their academic reputations, and put themselves on a firmer financial footing by diversifying their income streams. This has served to foster an increase in international research collaborations, cross-/inter-institutional degree programmes, offshore and student exchange programmes, degree programmes by distance, the strategic design and marketing of courses, and better articulation with the programme curricula and academic cycles of those countries from which they source their students. Today, brand and positioning as universities with international reach is seen as a hallmark of academic prowess and evidence of being in tune with the times and able to respond to the rapidly changing global context of education. For students obtaining a degree overseas – particularly through the medium of English, the world’s lingua franca – an international education is often seen as prestigious and can represent an important means to social mobility.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that in 2013 the OECD reported that the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship increased more than threefold, from 1.3 million in 1990 to nearly 4.3 million in 2011, representing an average annual growth rate of almost 6%. Furthermore, 42% of all such students chose to study in English-speaking countries.

This increased heterogeneity of the student body brings with it particular challenges that require institutions and the staff they employ to have the wherewithal to deal deftly with diversity in a way that ensures a positive, supportive and affirmative student experience. To this end, and along with counselling services, language and learning services, and orientation programmes that facilitate transition to university study, academic staff need to adopt appropriate attitudinal and pedagogical behaviours. A prerequisite to their doing so is increased sensitivity to difference and ways of negotiating difference such that students feel included, valued and empowered (Gale, 2009; Hockings, 2012; Talbot, 2004).

If academic staff are to bring these qualities to the classroom, it is incumbent upon institutions to ensure that their teacher-training and professional development programs foster the intercultural competence of teachers; that is, the ability to work well across cultures and to manage and accommodate cultural difference and unfamiliarity, intergroup dynamics, and the tensions and conflicts that can accompany this process. Byram, Nichols & Stevens (2001, p. 5) see intercultural competence as comprising knowledge, skills and attitudes ‘complemented by the values one holds because of one’s belonging to a number of social

groups'. They suggest that it is the attitudes of the intercultural speaker and mediator that are the foundation of intercultural competence, and they define these as 'curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own. This means a willingness to relativise one's own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours. This can be called the ability to "decentre"' (2001, p. 5; parentheses added).

Those working in higher education need to be able to decentre in the way Byram et al. describe and to have a sound understanding of diversity and what it means for the classroom. They require opportunities to develop the skills set necessary not only to negotiate difference but to use it in ways that provide students with a richer, more rewarding learning environment that prepares them as work-ready graduates (Premier & Miller, 2010; Simonds et al., 2008; White-Clark, 2005). Invoking the work of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Zeichner & Hoeft (1996), Lee & Herner-Patnode (2010) suggest that there remains work to be done in this space. They argue that 'pre-service and in-service teacher education has not done an adequate job of preparing teachers to teach diverse populations, including low-income students, students of colour, English language learners, and students with academic challenges' (2010, p. 222). Specifically, teacher education programmes need to focus more on developing teacher trainees' knowledge, skills and attitudes in the manner described by multicultural education scholars (e.g. Gay, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 2004) and national institutions such as the United States' National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE] Such knowledge, skills and attitudes need to reflect an understanding of diverse learners, their families and communities. Only then will teachers be able to empathise, develop rapport and adjust pedagogical practices in ways that best engage and validate these diverse student cohorts and ensure their integration and ultimately their success. This shaping of multicultural teacher education pedagogy involves teacher trainers and academic developers nurturing a facility in teachers that promotes what Lee and Herner-Patnode refer to as 'the critical selection of suitable teaching materials, use of culturally responsive instruction, creation of a culturally sensitive classroom environment, and incorporation of various assessment tools' (ibid., p. 222).

While they focus in particular on the secondary education context, the general principles espoused by Lee and Herner-Patnode are equally relevant to tertiary education (Hockings, 2010). This fact is reflected in the quite recent appearance of graduate diploma/certificate courses in higher education teaching that increasingly form part of staff probationary schemes (Quinn & Vorster, 2004; Ginns, Kitay & Prosser, 2008). In a context where staff have traditionally been employed on the basis of qualifications, industry experience and professional reputation, but who often come with no formal teacher training and thus little awareness of the factors governing successful classroom management, interaction and learning, such professional development courses are seen as increasingly important..

Critically, developing academics' positive disposition toward difference requires what Lee & Herner-Patnode describe as a 'continuous and conscious examination and reconstruction of their [teachers'] own existing assumptions about differences and high expectations for all learners' (ibid., p. 222) such that equity principles are upheld (Johanessen & Bustamante Lopez, 2002; Tellez, 2007), prejudice reduced and all students given the opportunity to perform to their full potential. Particular strategies that have been proposed for preparing teachers to educate diverse learners include: autobiography (Clark & Medina, 2000), simulation (Frykholm, 1997), debate (Marshall, 1998), action research (Buck & Cordes, 2005), community-based learning (Burant & Kirby, 2002), and field experience in educational institutions where student populations are diverse.

It is important to recognize, however, that the issue is not solely one of training and professional development for coping with diversity in the classroom by understanding the issues and dynamics involved and developing the necessary interpersonal and pedagogical skills; it is also one of developing a process of self-reflection. Pre-service and in-service teachers need to be given the conceptual tools and opportunities to consider what precepts, presuppositions and predispositions they themselves bring to the classroom and to their student interactions. They require an intercultural competence that involves not just a reactive facility that enables them to respond appropriately and constructively to students' cultural, linguistic and experiential diversity, but also a proactive one that allows them to objectify and adjust their own behaviours in order to reconcile or reduce cultural divergence or misalignment. In other words, the construction of an intercultural classroom space should be as much a product of the lecturer's efforts to accommodate as it is the students'. It is a partnership that should affirm and integrate rather than stigmatise and divide.

'Intercultural', is a superordinate that encapsulates linguistic, cultural (in the traditional sense of ethnicity, community and tradition), socio-economic and educational aspects. Here, I focus on the linguistic dimension in order (a) to demonstrate the importance of understanding and reflection to fostering intercultural awareness in teachers, and b) to illustrate how one might go about developing such reflection and understanding.

### **Linguistic diversity: a perspective on form and meaning**

Language is fundamental to learning. Not only does it enable us to understand, contemplate and express ideas and opinions, it also enables us to express who we are; it is a label of identity and provides each of us with our own voice. Furthermore, it is the primary means via which we negotiate our relationships with others in the classroom. Our facility with language, therefore, has the potential both to influence the effectiveness with which learning takes place as well as the 'tone' of the learning environment in general – two elements that impact upon each other.

Our ability to use language effectively is a product of our understanding of the relationship between form and function – between what we say and what we mean. It is a relationship mediated by context, and speakers draw on their understanding and experience of using language in multiple contexts to determine what will most effectively convey their intended meaning in a socially sanctioned fashion. Listeners infer their interlocutors' intended meaning on essentially the same basis. This ability to correctly encode and interpret intended meaning constitutes what Bachman (1991) referred to as pragmatic competence and, for the most part, we are highly adept at deploying that competence such that breakdowns in communication are relatively rare and almost always readily repairable. Issues arise, however, when there is a divergence in the relationship between form and function – between the words spoken and what they signify for the listener in any given context – as a result of dialectal differences within a single language or, more likely, differences between languages. That is, while interlocutors of different language or dialectal backgrounds may both understand what Widdowson (1990) terms the *surface* 'semantic meaning' carried in the words and sentences uttered, they may assign them a different 'pragmatic meaning' – the deeper *intended* meaning. Such divergence in the relationship between form and function can have significant implications in the classroom and more generally. There is a need, therefore, to be sensitive to such difference and to have the facility to traverse it. The Association of American Colleges & Universities recognises this verbal (and non-verbal) dimension of intercultural competence, incorporating it within their Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric, where it constitutes one category of 'behavioural skills'.

As we acquire our first language, we simultaneously acquire not only an understanding of its grammar – what Hymes (1972) referred to as the ‘formally possible’ and Canale & Swain (1980) as ‘grammatical competence’, but also the ability to deploy well-formed language appropriately according to context. This Canale & Swain (ibid.) referred to as ‘sociolinguistic competence’ (1980), Hymes (ibid.) as the ‘appropriate’, and Bachman (1990) as ‘pragmatic competence’, as we have seen. In other words, almost without noticing, we learn form-function correspondences, indexing these to contextual features. And just as there exist rules that govern what is grammatically possible in any given language, there are also rules that govern how we use language such that we are able to communicate our intended meaning effectively without threatening the ‘face’ of our interlocutor, defined by Goffman (1955, p. 213) as ‘the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact’. These rules are learned by all first language speakers and are rarely articulated except by linguists. As Grice recognised in his Cooperative Principle (1967), there are times when we may choose to deliberately flout them; however, we can do this and achieve our communicative purpose in the process only because there is a system of rules in place that is universally understood and which might be termed ‘social grammar’.

Lecturers, of course, cannot possibly be expected to be conversant in the social grammars of all their students, and this can have consequences where the lecturer’s social grammar does not align with that of the students. For example, a teacher might say to a student who keeps opting to work with the same partner, ‘You might like to think about working with a different partner next time’. Although the student concerned may interpret the utterance as a suggestion they can accept or reject, the teacher intends it as a request – even an order – but one softened by being expressed through an indirect speech act; that is, where one speech act form is used to realise another, *different* speech act (or ‘function’): a request/order realised as a suggestion, in this case. The indirectness here mitigates any possible loss of face and helps ensure that good relations are maintained; however it only works if the student shares the same social grammar with the teacher. Similarly, ‘I could see you spent a long time trying to understand the question’ could be interpreted by a student as a compliment rather than an expression of concern over their failure to answer the question correctly. Furthermore, an utterance the teacher produces that may be non-face threatening in their own language or dialect, may be highly face-threatening in the student’s language/dialect, with the result that interpersonal relations suffer, and thus, potentially, learning too (see, for example, César Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Farnia, Buchheit & Salim, 2010). Nor is it difficult to see how the way in which attitudes are communicated, and the cultural specificity of this, can affect discipline in the classroom and how it is dealt with by teachers. Those sensitive to cultural difference and equipped with strategies for negotiating it will be better placed to more appropriately and effectively address discipline-related issues such that they modify students’ behaviours while maintaining authority and without loss of face.

Clearly we cannot and should not be trying to turn all academics into linguists. Nor can academics reasonably be expected to be conversant in the multiple languages, dialects and social grammars students bring to the classroom. We can, however, raise their awareness of those principles that apply universally across languages and enable us to mean and be understood and to present/project ourselves in whatever light we choose. Critically, they need to appreciate that, while they may themselves be universal, the realisation of these principles will often vary according to one’s lingua-cultural background yet will always play a crucial role in lubricating classroom interaction. Such awareness-raising promises to reduce, or at

least mitigate, misunderstanding in classroom interactions, increase tolerance, establish trust, maintain face, and help create a positive and effective learning environment.

### **Linguistic accommodation and the multicultural/multilingual classroom**

By instilling in faculty an appreciation of those general and universal principles that govern language choices and our ability to be appropriate with language, we provide them with a toolkit, a kind of metalanguage, which they can then use to analyse the performance of particular speech acts in particular settings, and to consider the forces that shape meaning. These principles have, as I have mentioned, been learned and applied by all of us as an integral part of acquiring our first language, but are unlikely to have been brought to consciousness and articulated. In this respect they are similar to the rules governing the formal grammar of our first language in which we are fully competent for all intents and purposes yet unable to explain, because we are rarely, if ever, required to do so. However, by raising teachers' awareness of the general principles around what is going on in the encoding and interpreting of meaning, we empower them to respond in a more insightful, sensitive and nuanced way to students' language and behaviour. Such awareness-raising increases their appreciation of the linguistic and cultural variability in the way meaning is coded and interpreted, often with considerable implications for cross cultural communication and the way in which we are understood and perceived by others, Drawing on suggestions I have made elsewhere (Murray, 2010), and subsequently implemented with some success, for developing language learners' pragmatic competence, I propose that similar such awareness-raising activities can be adopted for use with academic staff via a few simple reflective activities that can form the basis for fruitful discussion and, where necessary behaviour modification.

To begin with, teachers need to be aware of the potential for misunderstanding in the classroom and the possible impact this can have on students' progress, sense of confidence and self-affirmation. They need to be made aware both that their own utterances may be interpreted differently by students from different lingua-cultural backgrounds and in ways not necessarily intended, and that the same utterance produced by two different students may have two divergent intended meanings, or at least be nuanced differently. Perhaps more importantly, they need an appreciation of the possible implications of such divergence for the way individuals are perceived in the classroom, and for interpersonal relations and, ultimately, learning. Such differences in the way meanings are encoded and interpreted can be accounted for by symbolic interactionist theory which sees meaning – the individual's interpretation of the world – as essentially socially constructed and a product of his or her interactions with others in society. That is, the meaning we ascribe to things 'is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society' and 'handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters' Blumer 1969, p.2). We are, then, inevitably, products of where we come from and of the milieu within which our world view has been shaped; as such, we each come to interactions with our own lingua-cultural baggage, or 'profile'. Furthermore, like their students, academic staff today originate from increasingly diverse backgrounds. Consequently, the potential for misunderstanding is significantly greater and there is a need for increased insight and sensitivity by all concerned.

Having thus established the need for this particular focus in professional development activity, a series of reflective questions can serve to get teachers thinking about how we mean in language. For example, the question '*During conversation, what do you*

*think are some of the things that influence what we say and how we say it?’ can prove productive and elicit responses such as the following:*

- 1 who it is we're talking to and our relationship with them
- 2 our status relative to that of the other person
- 3 the physical context in which the exchange is taking place
- 4 the other person's feelings
- 5 the impression we want to give of ourselves
- 6 the kind of image we want to project
- 7 our purpose in communicating
- 8 what has been said previously in the exchange
- 9 how much we want to share with the person we are talking to
- 10 our attitude or emotional state at the time
- 11 how comfortable we are with the subject; it may be too personal or emotive, for example
- 12 how much we know about the subject
- 13 the overall tone of the discourse

Participants can drill down into these responses, which lend themselves to substantial discussion. A follow-up question designed at this stage to generate general rather than specific responses would be, ‘*How* do these things affect what we say and how we say it?’ Responses might include:

- a They sometimes affect the amount we say.
- b They may affect how direct we are.
- c We might not say exactly what we feel.
- d We may lie or be dishonest.
- e Our language might be more formal or more casual, depending.
- f We may be vague or deliberately unclear.
- g We might exaggerate.
- h We might minimize or downplay something.
- i We might change the subject

The next step involves encouraging teachers to inquire more deeply into the relationship between the motivation for what we say and how we say it (1-13), and the way in which these factors are reflected in types of language behaviour (a-i). This can be done via a series of prompts that invite them to consider, in more specific terms, the effects of language behaviour in relation to items 1-13. Such prompts can include:

- X Why are we sometimes indirect in the way we say things?  
Y What happens when we use very informal language in formal situations?  
Z Why might the amount we say be important?  
Why might we say more than we need to say?  
Why might we say less? Can you think of a specific example?

Item Z, *might* provoke the following responses:

- If we don't say enough, people won't understand us.
- If we're too brief, people might feel we're hiding something, or maybe we're unwilling to say more.

- If we say very little it might seem unfriendly or rude.
- It allows us to be rude or unfriendly if we want to . . . if we don't like someone or their behaviour, say.
- Being quiet or saying very little tells the other person that you sympathize with them.
- Being quiet could mean that you dislike someone and don't wish to engage with them.
- People see us as boring if we say too much.
- People don't like individuals who talk too much and dominate conversations. It's a power thing.
- It's not good to stand out too much.
- If you say too much you can sound cocky and aggressive.
- We might say less because we want to show respect for the person we're talking to; maybe he's our boss, for example, or he's older than us.
- By not saying much, we can show that we feel hurt or angry...or maybe we're objecting or disagreeing with them.

These responses, allied with academics' personal experiences, provide an opportunity to consider examples of actual language use. These, in turn allow the principles to take on a more concrete, meaningful aspect. Furthermore, they allow for a comparison and discussion of differences of perception as well as a consideration of some of the ways in which different languages and dialects might realize different language functions, often with implications for how we are understood and viewed by others. Eslami-Rasekh (2005, p. 203), for example, cites the fact that when making offers in Persian, the more forceful and direct you are the more polite it is. Such insistence and directness, might, in contrast, be seen by those from different lingua-cultural backgrounds as an imposition that is denying the receiver ample options, thereby flouting two of Lakoff's (1973) three politeness maxims: Don't impose, give the receiver options, and make the receiver feel good. In-service academics are normally well placed to cite similar such instances that have arisen in their own professional interactions – both where English was the student's first language and where it was their second language – and to describe its effect on communication and the interaction.

An alternative to prompting teachers in this way is to ask the more general question, 'In what ways do the things we've listed in 1-13 affect what we say and how we say it (the things we've listed in a-i)? Can you say more about the connections between them and give some examples?' This approach is likely to elicit remarks such as:

- If we're very close to someone we'll probably be more direct and say exactly what we feel.
- If it's a relaxed, informal situation we'll probably talk more and use more casual language.
- Sometimes we lie because we don't want to hurt the other person's feelings. For instance, . . .

Having 'unlocked' the universal principles, the more focused questions (X, Y and Z) provide a means via which to highlight the fact that the function(s) which indirectness, for example, serves in helping establish the illocutionary force of an utterance in a given context in one culture may be different from that which it serves in the same context in another culture where the shared social conventions guiding interpretation are different (Murray, 2010, p. 299). The appreciation and understanding that can result represents an important first

step in considering strategies for negotiating lingua-cultural differences that are commonplace in higher education today.

The process I have described, and the particular prompts and responses I have highlighted, all featured during classroom interactions with students designed to improve their intercultural competence and showed the approach to be engaging and effective. Given the universality of those principles governing how we mean in language, there is every reason to believe that teachers can, through this process, similarly begin to develop an appreciation of the communicative significance of dimensions such as indirectness, irrelevance, terseness, vagueness etc, and of the variation in the meaning/perception of such features according to individuals' lingua-cultural backgrounds.

## Conclusion

Greater student diversity has meant that an understanding of the universal principles at play when people encode and interpret meaning, and the realisation that the way in which they do so and to what communicative effect, has become a crucial part of academics' skills set. It provides them with the facility to accommodate to their students rather than impose their own lingua-cultural values and associated expectations. As such, it needs to be a compulsory part of their training and development.

While there is certainly an important ethical principle at stake that derives from the idea that students' own values and traditions need to be respected in the classroom, the main point emphasised here is that increasing teachers' understanding of the important pragmatic dimension of language described, while only one element of intercultural competence, is critically important to ensuring that they truly understand their students (what they mean and the feelings and attitudes accompanying what they say) and are well-placed to create a learning environment that is empathetic, supportive, inclusive and empowering.

The kinds of professional certificates/diplomas of teaching in higher education that universities are increasingly requiring new academic staff complete as part of their probationary requirements provide an ideal vehicle through which to engage academics in the kind of awareness-raising activities I have described. The argument for an intercultural module within such programmes and of which language forms one element, is a compelling one. Among other things, it promises to produce (a) teachers better qualified to ensure that today's diverse student body has a positive experience that is less fraught, more rewarding and thus better able to achieve to its full potential, and (b) graduates who are self-assured, well-qualified, more workplace ready, and better positioned to contribute to society.

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