

Integration of Trainee Teachers (who speak English as an additional language) into the Student Community

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This paper considers some of the obstacles that trainee teachers with EAL (English as an additional language) may need to overcome to “belong” to a student community in a Higher Education setting. Forty trainee teachers trained to teach modern foreign languages (MFL) at the University of Worcester between September 2008 and June 2010. Fifteen of them spoke EAL.

Wenger (2000) suggests that there are three modes of belonging: engagement, imagination and alignment. The three modes are linked. Engagement suggests participation and results in shaping how we perceive our identity. Imagination entails developing an understanding of who we are in relation to a community. Alignment implies that common goals or principles frame and shape the way we participate. While Wenger (2000) defines how we can ‘belong’, Biggs (2003) considers some of the factors that could interfere with students’ ability to fit in and to be successful. He explains that issues of a linguistic nature prove detrimental to learning. Some EAL students may find it difficult to articulate their thoughts with the level of precision and proficiency they would have in their mother tongue. A lack of proficiency in English may impact on students’ perceived ability to “belong” fully to a community of practice. Bandura (1993: p.121) states that “The people with whom individuals compare themselves influence how they judge their ability.” This echoes Wenger’s (2000) argument that the modes of engagement and imagination are interconnected. However, students’ feelings of self-efficacy, whether positive or negative, may not mirror the perceptions that other students and tutors have of them. In addition, experiencing feelings of anxiety at the prospect of following a postgraduate course “abroad” does not necessarily have negative repercussions on students’ success. Indeed, Bandura says that “students’ level of scholastic anxiety bears little or no relationship to their academic performances” (1993: p.134) It is also important to reiterate that not all EAL students face issues of a linguistic nature.

Biggs (2003), Ryan (2000) and Trahar (2007) believe that some issues may stem from the need to adapt to a different culture. Ryan (2000,p.15) opines that the challenges faced by some EAL students may derive from having to “assimilate new attitudes to knowledge and approaches to learning”. Trahar (2007: p.14) exemplifies this by explaining that students may hold a different view of the way learning occurs and she suggests that some non English speakers may not be inclined to participate because “of a belief that learning does not occur *through* discussion but by discussion following acquisition of ‘knowledge’”. This is echoed by Biggs (2003: p.122) who mentions that international students may experience difficulties to accustom themselves to the “*style* of tertiary teaching adopted in the host country”. Some EAL students also need to develop an understanding of the values that underpin Higher Education in England. Those values might be at odds with the principles upheld in the University culture of their home country. Undertaking a teacher training course in England might destabilise EAL students in so far as they are required to adjust to a new environment and a new culture. This might reduce the extent to which they feel that they can belong to a community. Kraus and Sultana

(2007, p.63) write that “culture is an effect of homogenising practices and at the same time ‘produces’ cultural borders and collective identities, categorising some ‘insiders’ and others as ‘outsiders’ some as ‘us’ and others as ‘the other’”. This echoes Wenger (2000: p.162) who refers to the need to construct “an image of ourselves, of our communities, and of the world, in order to orient ourselves”. However, categorising English trainee teachers as “insiders” and trainee teachers with EAL as “outsiders” would constitute a fallacy for a number of reasons; not least that English groups and EAL groups are not homogeneous. One could argue that some trainee teachers are more or less central to a variety of communities. Examples could include trainee teachers who train to teach a specific language, trainee teachers who worked in a secondary school before the start of the course, trainee teachers who last wrote an academic essay in 1990 etc. Individual trainee teachers can therefore be more or less central or more or less peripheral to a variety of communities. Trainee teachers on the PGCE course need to understand what belonging to the community of PGCE trainee teachers, a subject specific group and a Professional Studies group entails.

It is therefore interesting to consider whether trainee teachers with EAL encounter obstacles and to investigate to what extent their individual needs are different from those of their English peers.

Data were collected by talking to trainee teachers and by collecting end of year subject evaluations. All the fifteen trainee teachers with EAL filled in subject evaluations. Trainee teachers were also asked to fill in a survey online. The aims of the data collection were to

- ascertain the nature of difficulties encountered by trainee teachers with EAL in University, if any.
- evaluate the appropriateness of the support in relation to their needs.
- explore their perceptions of “belonging”

Nine trainee teachers with EAL completed the survey. The very limited amount of answers limits the validity of the findings.

Ryan (2000: p.28) makes a list of the fears that EAL students may have to me when they are asked to participate. Some of these include: “embarrassment, making a mistake, using incorrect English, loss of ‘face’” This is echoed by Kraus and Sultana (2007: p.231) who explain that non native speakers of English can feel “frustrated and vulnerable”. Trainee teachers who completed the survey were asked to indicate whether they had experienced some of those fears in University sessions or when talking to tutors. Their answers only partly corroborate what the literature says. Each of these fears was experienced by no more than one EAL trainee teacher, apart from the fear of “embarrassment”. The way answers are collated online does not make it possible to ascertain whether each EAL trainee teacher experienced one fear or whether one trainee teacher experienced them all. The only notable point is that one EAL trainee teacher felt embarrassed when talking to University tutors whereas three trainee teachers with EAL often felt embarrassed when participating in University sessions.

As mentioned earlier, “embarrassment” may stem from a lack of proficiency or perceived lack of proficiency in English. One to one interactions and whole group discussions can carry different functions. In one to one discussions, students may seek individual guidance and answers to specific questions whereas in whole group discussions, students want to contribute ideas that benefit the whole group and that shade a new light on an issue.

As discussed earlier, Biggs (2003) suggested that EAL students may experience language difficulties and Ryan (2000) advises lecturers to use less complex vocabulary and structures at the start of the course. Although the needs of trainee teachers with EAL should be acknowledged and catered for, strategies cannot be implemented at the expense of their peers. A few trainee teachers commented in their evaluations that they would benefit from every piece of information being written as they can sometimes, as one of them put it, “miss comments”. Trainee teachers were asked in the survey whether they experienced difficulties with the English language. None of the nine trainee teachers with EAL who answered the survey questions indicated that they struggled with reading skills or listening skills. Five trainee teachers with EAL said that they did not experience any difficulty, one said that they found it hard to make themselves understood while four said that they found writing essays challenging. In June 2009, external examiners for the PGCE course highlighted the need to provide trainee teachers with EAL with further academic guidance to write essays. This had also been highlighted by trainee teachers in course evaluations. Strategies were put in place in September 2009 to address this issue, including an introduction to academic writing, requiring all trainee teachers on the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) in MFL courses to hand in a paragraph on the use of the target language at the beginning of the course. This strategy was supplemented by three sessions organised by a University tutor whose expertise was enlisted to help trainee teachers with EAL develop their academic skills and prepare for assignments. Sessions were evaluated and responses were overwhelmingly positive. External examiners commented that the course team “has enhanced the support provided for trainee teachers with English as an Additional Language and this has been beneficial.” One trainee teacher commented that additional sessions helped them understand “what academic writing means”. Bruner (1996: p.10) states that “the meaning of any fact: proposition, or encounter is relative to the perspective or frame of reference in terms of which it is constructed [...] understanding in any particular way is only “right “ or “wrong” from the particular perspective in terms of which it is pursued”. This echoes Blaise Pascal who wrote in 1656: “There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees which are falsehoods on the other”. This also bears some resemblance with Wenger’s mode of alignment. Students may not be successful unless they understand, apply and evaluate the principles that underpin academic writing in England. This suggests again that students can be more or less peripheral and more or less central to a mode of belonging.

Evaluations completed by trainee teachers with EAL suggest that they would have liked extra support to write assignments and more tutorials. Last year, none of the trainee teachers with EAL had to resubmit the third assignment. Hughes (2007: p.136) states that “Our sense of security and belongingness seems to be a positive factor in success.” One to one conversations with tutors may reassure trainee teachers and help them test whether their understanding and interpretations of principles and tasks are “aligned” with course expectations and requirements. In this sense, their needs are not necessarily different from those of English trainee teachers. Although the vast majority of the trainee teachers wrote in their evaluations that they felt well supported by tutors, three of them indicated in the survey felt that they did not get positive reinforcement. It would be interesting to take this further and research to what extent the affective needs of EAL students can affect their perception of self-efficacy and of belonging to a community. None of the nine trainee teachers with EAL who completed the survey were worried about adapting to a different culture before starting the course. However, some of them became anxious once they were on the course and once they had to write assignments.

Bruner (1996: p.11) writes: "An 'official' educational enterprise [...] inevitably courts risk by "sponsoring" however implicitly, a certain vision of the world." As mentioned before, a difficulty for trainee teachers with EAL may be to make sense of the principles underpinning a course, to compare them and to reconcile them with their own set of values. They may not necessarily at odds. If they are, this does not mean that trainee teachers with EAL are asked to surrender or relinquish their culture and their identity. Kraus and Sultana (2007: p.232) explain that 'identity' is "in permanent flux and is built up by more or less integrating different aspects within the process of identity formation." The inability to integrate the known and the unknown may preclude trainee teachers from addressing effectively their individual needs. However, trainee teachers with EAL should not be categorised as trainee teachers with "extra needs". Ryan (2000: p.7) states that international students "enrich the cultural and intellectual environment of a university and its locality, stimulate new curriculum approaches and foster new understanding between cultures." It could be argued that they enable home students to put their sense of belonging to a community of practice into perspective.

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