Closing the gap between teaching and learning styles – an internationalised pedagogy for offshore VET

Wenjie Shi
Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing

Carolyn Woodley
Victoria University, Melbourne

According to NCVER’s blurb on the Teaching and Learning theme of this year’s No Frills (2008) conference, “The diversity of VET’s clients makes teaching a particularly challenging task”. This is especially true in China. While the diversity of the student cohort might not be apparent in the classroom except for in the vital area of verbal English language proficiency, the diversity of teaching strategies required by VET teachers to ensure that learners are learning makes teaching in China an especially challenging task. The levels of VET provision in China by Australian providers continue to rise with many of those programs articulating to onshore higher education programs. Given the differences between what might broadly be described as typical Chinese teaching and learning styles and the often communicative pedagogies favoured by Australian teachers, Australian VET teachers need a range of skills to both be effective offshore and to prepare students for future study onshore. Chinese teachers teaching into Australian VET programs also need to have teaching strategies suitable to both the students and the program.

This paper will examine not so much the “what” of teaching offshore in China, although that is an issue, but rather the “how” of teaching offshore in China. This paper will consider the difficulties that might arise should teachers be sent offshore without a proper appreciation of culture, educational traditions and expectations of student and teacher roles – and without the means to teach in what are, after all, quite challenging contexts. This paper will draw on a collaborative research project undertaken by Victoria University (VU) and Chinese partner staff and will include Chinese teacher perspectives of “Australian” teaching styles.

Context
The number of Australian VET programs being taught in China continues to grow. While recent AEI figures suggest that the Indian education market, especially in relation to VET, is growing faster than China for Australian providers at the moment, the fact remains that in sheer numbers, offshore delivery in China for Australian educational providers is still substantial and is expected to be considerable for some time to come. Maintaining a substantial educational offering in China will in part depend on Australian providers’ ability to offer quality programs in what is an increasingly competitive market. While institutions may get excited at the prospect of more and bigger programs offshore, the fact remains that the interface between the teacher and the student is still small. Further, the teaching and learning space in offshore programs is a cross-cultural space where both teachers and learners need to negotiate new educational practices – what Brick (2004) calls “a cross-cultural laboratory”. Biggs (2003) summarises the stereotypical problems associated with students from Confucian heritage cultures (CHC) identified by Australian teachers: such students, it is claimed, “are too teacher-dependent, too uncritical of material they have been taught, prone to rote memorization; they misunderstand the cardinal sin of plagiarism, and lack knowledge of the genres of academic writing” (Ballard and Clanchy, 1997 and Harris, 1997 cited in Biggs, 2003: 122). These concerns or the accuracy of them will not be addressed in this paper but clearly the student is the focus of these complaints: an internationalised pedagogy would require Australian teachers to interrogate and articulate their own pedagogical expectations and cultures.
An internationalised curriculum would be grounded in a positive, rather than a deficit, view of students’ cultural and educational differences. Offshore pedagogies should relate to the culture of the student rather than the teacher and if exposure to “Western pedagogies” is part of what the students are paying for, then such methods must be explicitly taught and expected student behaviours must be clearly stated and modelled. What is a student expected to do when told to “discuss” issues? What is the correct response, in a country where criticism of authorities is not encouraged, to the teacher’s vague expectation to “be critical”? How can serious students learn from games and role plays if they consider such activities as frivolous and unacademic?

The range of accredited Australian VET programs taught in China extend from English courses to Information Technology to Hospitality and Business. For Victoria University, the most populous VET programs in China are English programs and the Diploma of Business. While a number of VET English programs could be appropriate for offshore delivery, in Victoria University’s partnerships programs, the Certificate III in ESL (Further Study) is best suited at present to prepare students on a Pathway to Diplomas of Business or IT and then degrees jointly awarded by VU and partner institutions. All of these VU VET qualifications are taught offshore in collaboration with Chinese partner staff.

Victoria University is a multi-sector institution in Melbourne, Australia. It has a number of different partnerships with Chinese institutions offering English Language qualifications (most commonly the Certificate III in ESL (Further Study)), Diplomas in IT and Business and degrees in Business. VU also offers post-graduate qualifications in partnership with Chinese universities in some locations. One of our largest partners, Liaoning University, offers three distinct VU qualifications: students enrol in the Certificate III in ESL (Further Study), articulate in the Diploma of Business and articulate again into the Bachelor degree in Business. The VET English, Business and IT programs have been crucial to the success of VU’s overall offshore offerings.

The popularity of English language programs is currently guaranteed by the Chinese Ministry of Education’s continuing expectation that while all students graduating from high school will have a language other than Mandarin, the vast majority of those graduating students will have English. Of the foreign universities operating in China, most deliver and assess in English. In a recent Chinese Ministry of Education publication (2004), College English Curriculum Requirements, the authors make the important point that, beyond a narrow English language proficiency, “colleges and universities should cover components of learning strategies and intercultural communication in their teaching so as to enhance students’ abilities of independent learning and of communication” (p. 21). Joint programs such as Victoria University’s English language program at CUFE, are ideally placed to achieve this aim as they integrate what might broadly be described as Chinese teaching approaches and Australian teaching approaches. The Diplomas of Business and IT are also taught in partnership with several Chinese partner institutions and the popularity of these programs is currently guaranteed by the pathways they provide into HE programs – both in Australia and elsewhere.

Methodology
A recent project (2007) undertaken by VU and funded by AEI (Australian Education International) had collaboration with Chinese partner staff as a basis. Due to time limitations, space, difficulties finding shared spare time, the cost of travel, the distance between locations and the number of partner staff involved, the final approach was more consultative and less collaborative than expected. Nevertheless, the participation of and input by partner staff was critical to both the outcome of the project and report called Quality English: internationalised, shared, equivalent (2007) and to developing a shared knowledge of cross-
cultural teaching approaches. Partner staff were invited to Australia to co-develop curriculum, discuss pedagogical approaches, articulate differences between Chinese teaching contexts and styles and Australian approaches and to start to think about an internationalised pedagogy for offshore programs. Such cross-cultural relationships are also pivotal to challenging the fallacy “that English is best taught monolingually by a native speaker of English” (Phillipson, 2003).

Opportunities for Chinese partner staff and VU staff to work collaboratively in research projects, professional development activities and curriculum design has been limited by distance, funding and time. However, with the federal government’s Transnational Quality Strategy projects in 2005, funding became available to involve Chinese partner staff in projects that addressed a range of quality issues from student support offshore, to quality assurance processes offshore, to professional development needs of Australian staff and internationalising the curriculum. VU has been fortunate to have been successful in all 3 rounds of DEEWR (formerly DEST) Good Practice Projects funding. These projects researched quality issues in VU’s Higher Education (HE), Vocational Education (VE) and English Language Teaching (ELT) programs offshore. One of the projects paid for 2 Chinese partner staff to come to Melbourne to work on Internationalising the Curriculum and, in particular, internationalising pedagogies.

The collaborative nature of VU’s English programs in China is particularly interesting as it is quite extensive. VU’s English teachers typically deliver English to students from between 12 and 18 weeks for up to 8 hours a week in different partner arrangements. This is different to most other VU VET programs delivered in China which employ “burst mode” delivery style. “Burst mode” is common to many Australian VET programs offshore and VU is certainly not alone in this approach. “Burst mode” usually involves Australian teachers delivering an intensive burst of course “content” – often through lectures to large numbers of students. Ironically, while such methods might be regarded as inappropriate for VET programs, the highly structured transmission of information from an authoritative teacher is probably more familiar to Chinese students – if only they could follow the quickly spoken English, the idioms and the humour of the teacher! The teaching styles of Australian and Chinese teachers – and more particularly English teachers trained in communicative methodologies – can be quite different. The fact that Australian teachers have distinctive accents, may speak very quickly for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, may use colloquial phrases, assume English levels that are beyond the learners…all of this, on top of different teaching and learning traditions, means that the learning experience for Chinese students of Australian teachers can be mystifying. In VU’s VET programs in China, all programs are taught in collaboration with Chinese teaching staff – and it is these partnerships that should be the starting point for an internationalised teaching program.

One of the reasons that Chinese English teachers were invited to participate in the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)-funded Transnational Quality projects is because Australian providers cannot achieve an internationalised curriculum without collaboration. VU’s English language program at Central University of

1 This project was one of 36 funded by DEEWR (then DEST) to consider the quality of Australian transnational education programs. All projects funded in the various rounds (Higher Education, VET and ELT sectors were targeted at different times) are available on AEI’s password protected website: www.aei.dest.gov.au

2 While many educators in the VET sector seem to think that the term “curriculum” has a usage limited to meaning “not Training Package”, I use the term as it is more broadly used by educationalists to mean the documentation and activities developed for any educational program – the learning activities, outcomes, assessment tasks, and resources that enable, support and encourage learning.

3 Co-author and English teacher in the Certificate III ESL (Further Study) program, Shi Wenjie of the Central University of Finance and Economics was one the researchers who came to Melbourne.
Finance and Economics (CUFE) in Beijing provides one example of a collaborative approach to teaching and course delivery. VU, in conjunction with CUFE teachers, deliver VET language programs and a joint undergraduate business degree. VU and CUFE have been working together since 2004. In that time, enrolments in the joint-program have steadily increased.

**Background**

VU English teachers work at CUFE for the whole 18-week semester. Chinese English teachers teach over the same time period also teach into the program. While VU provides the course materials and determines all assessment tasks, teaching staff work together to deliver all of different units. Competencies in the Certificate III in ESL (Further Study) are taught jointly with Chinese English teachers. Australian English teachers deliver Writing and Speaking units and Chinese English teachers deliver Reading and Listening units. The rationale for this division of labour is so-called “native” speakers stereotypically tend to be regarded as more competent than non-native speakers in teaching and assessing speaking and writing. Chinese English teachers, however, are often perceived as both having a better theoretical command of English grammar than their Australian counterparts as well as a better understanding of how Chinese students learn. This last point is most important in considering how the program should be designed and delivered.

Australian English teachers in VU’s programs teach the same cohort of students from 15 to 17 weeks. IT and Business teachers, however, typically teach in “burst mode” with one to two weeks of teaching at the beginning of a program and some teaching, administration and moderation of assessment at the end of the unit. Most of the teaching in IT and Business programs is done by Chinese partner staff. All teaching and assessment is in English even though Business and IT teachers may not be language teachers. Burst mode teaching by Australian teachers to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in an EFL context highlights the difference in teaching approaches and learning styles between Australian and Chinese teachers and Australian and Chinese learners.

In addition to federal funding to support the quality of offshore programs, VU has also supported collaboration between Australian and partner teachers and programs. One initiative by VU’s Teaching and Learning Support area has been particularly effective in maintaining strong relationships with offshore partners and creating forums for discussion on teaching and learning issues. For the last 3 years, VU has paid for partner teaching and managerial staff as well as agents to attend a conference in China. This year’s conference, *Enriching Partnerships: promoting and celebrating student success*, was held in Beijing over 3 days.4 One of those days was devoted to teachers who are delivering the Certificate III ESL (Further Study). Teachers delivering the Diploma of Business and Diploma of IT were also in attendance. The most pressing topic from the English teachers session (from both Australian teachers and Chinese teachers’ perspectives) focussed on teaching methodologies: what teaching methodologies are effective to both teach Chinese students in English and for further Australian educational qualifications? Overwhelmingly, participants stated that an integrated approach that adopted both Chinese and Australian approaches to teaching would be the most effective method. But what would such a method look like?

**Issues**

 Collaborative professional development and evaluation activities reveal just how different teaching approaches can be and how different the role of the student and the teacher is in Australia and China. While quality demands that offshore programs have equivalent outcomes and comparable learning and teaching experiences, it is also notable that there are

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4 More information about this year’s event can be found at [http://tls.vu.edu.au/vucollege/events/2008/enriching_partnerships.html](http://tls.vu.edu.au/vucollege/events/2008/enriching_partnerships.html)
major differences between teaching on- and offshore. You cannot simply do in China what you do in Australia and expect that anyone will learn or any equivalence or comparability will be achieved. Staff who teach offshore need specialist skills – they need to be intensely reflective and have time to act on their reflections, preferably they need to have TESOL qualifications or certainly TESOL strategies to assist with language development. These teachers are, after all, teaching EFL students. Teachers certainly need formal professional development (including mentoring and collegial support). Without highly skilled teachers, the quality of the learning for students offshore can be unpredictable.

A yet-to-be-published *Transnational Education Good Practice Guide* (AEI 2008)\(^5\) is adamant that the cultural dimensions of teaching offshore need to be considered. In fact, cultural assumptions and moral differences were identified as a risk for offshore programs. Moreover, the point often made in the *Good Practice Guide* is that Australian programs cannot simply be transplanted offshore. Any educational program must be reconceptualised to suit the cultural and pedagogical context of its delivery. In China, this means that alien teaching strategies like discussion, question and answer, role play or games must be explicitly explained and gauged for success with learners who are unaccustomed to such learning activities. Should Australian teachers persist with such strategies if students are confused or think, in the case of games, that such activities are childish and that they are not learning? Furthermore, teaching approaches that are based on communicative philosophies of teaching and learning such as discussion, debate or Socratic approaches need to consider that, not only are such approaches unfamiliar to students, but also that students may not have proficient English language levels to successfully participate in these highly verbal activities.

As part of the *Quality English* (2007) project, Principles of Internationalising were developed by the project team in collaboration with Chinese teaching staff:

- Education programs should be inclusive.
- Education programs should prepare students to work effectively in diverse environments.
- Intercultural communication skills and critical thinking are central to an internationalised approach.
- Education programs should prepare students to be global citizens.
- Teaching strategies should not disadvantage any students.
- Selection of curriculum resources and materials should not disadvantage any students.
- Collaboration and consultation with partners on resources, teaching methods and research is essential.
- Learners are valued and encouraged to produce culture.
- Internationalising strategies in programs on- and offshore should inform each other.

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\(^5\) AEI’s Transnational Quality Strategy website (http://www.transnational.deewr.gov.au/) will notify practitioners when this publication is available.
• Internationalising highlights a relational approach to culture, teaching and learning (Woodley, 2007: 76).

Even taking just one of these principals, that is, “Teaching strategies should not disadvantage any students”, it is clear that Australian teachers would need to know more about how students in China learn, what teaching strategies they prefer and how to assess if anyone is being disadvantaged. This principal alone, really, demands a more internationalised approach to teaching.

Amongst a number of other items on the Quality English (2007) Checklist for Internationalising which was also co-developed with Chinese teachers, the following points are particularly relevant in relation to an internationalised pedagogy. An internationalised curriculum

- Is explicit about the cultural context or assumptions of the topic
- Creates a learning environment where students are comfortable about comparing cultural perspectives
- Develops students’ ability to reflect on their own cultural perspective on an issue
- Develops students’ intercultural communication skills – including non-verbal communication skills
- Develops students’ ability to use bilingual resources to assist their learning, where appropriate
- Uses bilingual evaluation tools for student evaluation of teaching programs
- Combines teaching methods and approaches from a range of educational traditions
- Ensures that colloquial language is limited and/or explained, is not obscure and is from a range of countries
- Incorporates the perspectives of teachers from a range of cultural backgrounds wherever possible (for example, partner institute staff)
- Presents the point of view of the teacher as a culturally relative one.

The complete checklist has been used to encourage all teachers to reflect on the cultural aspects of their teaching.

One of the key quality concerns for Australian providers working in China is that offshore teaching is both similar (same qualification, same assessment) and different from onshore teaching activity (different educational traditions and expectations, different cultural context and different levels of English proficiency). Australian teachers need to know that programs and teaching styles that work effectively onshore cannot simply be transplanted offshore. Teachers must reconceptualise and contextualise resources and teaching approaches for the Chinese context. Importantly, Australian teachers should not assume that they know what Chinese learners want or how they learn: work with partner staff to achieve effective contextualisation.
Findings
Teaching staff from Henan University (HU) in China were interviewed by their colleague Li Xuee as part of the Quality English: internationalised, shared, equivalent (2007) project. On the issue of teaching methodologies, and in particular, communicative pedagogies and the role of the student in the classroom, these teachers made several significant points. Overall, these teachers valued the teaching approaches of Australian teachers but they did concede that some students are disadvantaged by communicative pedagogies more broadly and Australian teachers’ approaches in particular. Chinese students, it was asserted, are “accustomed to listening to teachers carefully” from a young age: “The concept of being a good audience is rooted deeply” (Li Xuee cited in Quality English, 2007). Li Xuee also said that in the situation where a teacher asks individual students questions, the students would be so nervous that they “can’t concentrate on the topic”. Such attention usually means that the student is in trouble. One Chinese English teacher, however, noted that “these [communicative] approaches can be enriched or improved by training to make better use of these activities and [to be clear about] what is the point in doing them” (Ding Fuyan cited in Quality English, 2007); that is, teachers need to be explicit about what they are doing and why they are teaching in particular ways. Another HU teacher stressed that communicative pedagogies were especially important in language teaching but that it also reflected an approach to learning itself. This teacher conceded that some Chinese teachers did not have the skills necessary to adopt this approach and that the students weren’t ready for them: “thus we should try to adjust the communicative pedagogies to [suit] our social and individual needs” (Wang Yumin cited in Quality English, 2007).

The English teachers at Henan University developed a considered list of teaching strategies that they thought would support Chinese students in classes taught by Australian teachers and could help to ensure that communicative pedagogies and an English-speaking context do not disadvantage Chinese-speaking students.

1. Present the topic or problem beforehand so that the students have adequate time to prepare for it
2. Suggest some appropriate materials for students to collect in order that they have something to say
3. Create a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere for the conversation
4. Start with the common and easy questions and then draw the students’ attention to the bigger issues
5. Teach students some skills of conversation and do more oral practice in formal and informal situations.
6. Encourage them to make daily dialogues in English whenever and wherever they are to cultivate their thinking style in English. (Li Xuee cited in Quality English, 2007).

Even though these comments primarily refer to developing students’ English language skills, they also highlight the communicative pedagogies employed by Australian teachers in most discipline areas. Further, these points recall that Australian teachers need to be both language and discipline teachers; one VU teacher interviewed for this project described himself as “the glossary man”. English language and Western educational strategies need to be taught as well as “the content”. Language, educational culture and discipline or industry knowledge must be
an essential focus of teachers in any sector teaching Australian educational programs offshore.

Conclusion

English language proficiency for Chinese students is just one element of China’s internationalising agenda in education. While the English language remains evidence of China’s engagement with the world on a global scale, and while China’s Ministry of Education still permits foreign universities to participate in Chinese education, Australian providers will have the opportunity to work with Chinese colleagues to develop and deliver educational programs for Chinese students. It would be foolish, however, to imagine that teaching offshore does not demand an attention to teaching language and culture as well as an explicit and considered teaching approach that accommodates Chinese students’ rich educational traditions.
References


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