Unintelligibility: World Englishes shock and repetition shock in an Australian context

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the result of a study into the effects of English as an international language on the sense of security of overseas students in an Australian academic and social context. The 27 volunteer non-native English-speaking background participants were from China, the Czech Republic, Colombia, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Mexico, Peru, Slovakia, Sweden, Thailand and Vietnam. The study involved interviews with the participants about their experiences of unintelligibility when they communicated with people from different cultures, producing World Englishes shock and repetition shock. While some students reported positive attitudes, the most common negative emotion was insecurity, resulting from feelings of frustration.

Introduction

English has a global status and recognition as the dominant academic language, the most widely studied second language (Altbach 2007) and the most powerful international lingua franca (Crystal 2003). This is due in part to the academic and innovative technological achievements of the United States and the United Kingdom. It is viewed as the language of globalisation and economic and political power (Tsuda 2008) and as a contributing factor to the growth of intercultural communication (Hatoss 2006). English increasingly plays an essential role in the lives of non-native English-speaking background people who are inspired and persuaded to learn English at home and abroad. If they become competent in English, they have access to better jobs and concurrently develop feelings of security but, regardless of personal ability, many people experience difficulties in learning English, due to lack of financial support and/or unequal opportunities.

More than half a century ago, Harold Lasswell (1950: 3) used a pyramid to conceptualise how the powerful elite have power over the masses: ‘The influential are those who get the most of what there is to get. Those who get the most are elite; the rest are mass’ [emphasis in original].

Harold Lasswell identified seven values that influence how people control their circumstances. Professional skill is one factor affecting feelings of security and others can take the form of fighting, political organisation, using symbols to lead people and bargaining. The skill of bargaining indicates an impressive achievement of professional speciality, earning the respect of others and providing opportunities for higher income. With the globalisation of English, the implication is that non-native English-speaking background people who acquire English will develop better bargaining skills and better opportunities for employment.

The ideal of possessing the bargaining skill, set more effectively in a real environment, motivates students to pursue education abroad. Large numbers of non-native English-speaking background international students have invested time and money to acquire an education and master English as the medium of communication in English-speaking countries. Australia is the world’s third largest provider of international education, after the United States and the United Kingdom (Novera 2004). According to Australian Education International (AEI 2004–06), enrolments grew in the higher education sector by a significant 5.2% in 2006, with a total number of 322 230 international students enrolling in 2004, 344 815 in 2005 and 383 818 in 2006. Students from Asia have remained the primary source of international students, with strong growth from the Middle East, South America and Africa. In 2006 China, India, Korea, Hong Kong and Malaysia were the top five source nations, with 52% of enrolments in higher education, vocational and technical education (VTE), English-Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) and schools. Towards the end of 2007, enrolments of full-fee-paying international students increased by 19% to 437 065, with the largest proportion (40%) of enrolments in
the higher education sector (ABS 2008). With the increasing numbers of international students coming to Australia, the quality of education needs to be maintained and attention needs to be paid to the wellbeing of international students.

The idea that ‘the world is coming to English’ (Eggington 1997: 42) is reinforced, even among native English-speaking people, and the internationalisation of student populations is not reflected in the study of foreign languages in Australia. The Australian Government has identified the importance of political and economic relations with Asia and has encouraged students to study Asian languages such as Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian and Korean (Bianca 1997). However, only 13% of recent high-school graduates have chosen to study a foreign language, a 27% decline since the 1960s (Mercer 2007). Since English is recognised worldwide and used as a *lingua franca*, the need to study foreign languages and opportunities to use them in the real world are perceived to be rare. In 2004 less than 1% of all Australian higher education students studied abroad, and those who did chose other English-speaking countries, particularly the United States and New Zealand (Linacre 2007).

**The study**

The lives of non-native English-speaking background international students in Australia are positively or negatively affected by the degree of change they encounter as they enter the disorienting environment of the university. Ting-Toomey (1999: 233) describes the process as ‘involv[ing] an intercultural boundary-crossing journey from security to insecurity, and from familiarity to unfamiliarity’. In the home countries, simply acquiring the ability to speak English is deemed a valuable asset and a vehicle of accomplishment. If the students are competent in English, or gain the bargaining skill, they enjoy greater opportunities for securing better jobs, earning social recognition and developing feelings of security. On the other hand, in Australia, where high proficiency in English counts, they may experience linguistic and cultural unfamiliarity and develop feelings of insecurity.

In a foreign or second language-learning context, according to Reasoner and Dusa (1991), security is a characteristic of self-esteem and refers to personal feelings. For Hansen (1999), security is the opposite of fear, which results from threats to the security of the language learner, including public humiliation, emotional attack or failure (Reid 1999). Further, fear affects language learning because language is an integral part of self-esteem and self-confidence. In the present context, feeling a sense of security or insecurity results from how non-native English-speaking background students personally feel when they communicate in English inside and outside the classroom, based on perceptions of how well they have learned English and utilise it with others. Use of English depends on the types of relationships students have with others and with the culture as a whole (Arnold and Brown 1999). If they experience success in communication, they feel secure in themselves and gain self-esteem and self-confidence. From this perspective, the study outlined in this paper aimed to investigate the following two questions.

1. Do non-native English-speaking background students encounter cultural and linguistic barriers? When and how are they affected?

2. Do cultural and linguistic barriers affect the sense of security of non-native English-speaking background students? How do they affect their sense of security?

**Method**

**Participants**

Data in this study were qualitatively collected through one-on-one interviews using structured open-ended questions. The method was seen to be appropriate because the study was not concerned with numerical measurement but with the personal lived experiences of the participants in relation to their communication in English and their sense of security in the Australian context (Johnson and Christensen 2004). To keep the quality, as noted by Oppenheim (1992), a small number of students (27 in total: 8 males and 19 females) were recruited on a voluntary basis. The participants responded to an advertisement placed at an internationally recognised university in Sydney, where more than 8000 international students...
were enrolled. Although studying at the same university, the students were studying in different Master Degree programs.

The participants were from 12 different countries and were all assigned pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity (Table 1). They had been in Australia from two months to one year. To be admitted to the university, the students had to pass the minimum requirement of a standardised English proficiency test, usually the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Most of them had shown English competence through overall IELTS band scores of 7.0, indicating that they were:

good user[s] [of English because they had] operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally [they could handle] complex language well and [understand] detailed reasoning (IELTS n.d.).

Table 1: Participants’ countries of origin

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<tr>
<th>Student</th>
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<td>1 Hui</td>
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<td>9 Diane</td>
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<td>10 Priscilla</td>
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<td>11 Nickel</td>
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<td>14 Hayin</td>
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<td>15 Young</td>
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<td>16 Naoko</td>
<td>Japan</td>
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<td>17 Jose</td>
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<td>18 Yuri</td>
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<td>27 Thung</td>
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Interviews

To create an informal atmosphere for the interviews, the interviewees were not audio-recorded. The researcher and the aims of the study were first introduced and notes were taken during the interviews, which lasted about half an hour. Participants were asked to recall their experiences in communicating in English inside and outside the classroom since coming to Australia, through the following questions.

1 Have you had any cultural and linguistic barriers inside and outside the classroom? If yes, when and what were they?

2 How did you feel when you faced the barriers?

3 Did the feeling(s) affect your sense of security? How and why?

All the participants admitted that their memories were still fresh and hard to forget.

Kvale’s (cited in Hess-Biber and Leavy 2006) communicative validity was used as a conceptual framework to ensure the accuracy of the data. The validating process occurred within the week following the interviews, with the interviews transcribed and emailed to the participants for validation. Responses were received electronically and only three of the participants suggested minor changes. The data validated by the participants were analysed and then constructed into critically common barrier categories (Bogdan and Biklen 1998).
Findings

All the participants experienced language barriers in understanding English-speaking background people, especially Australians, at the beginning of their studies at university because they were unfamiliar with this language variety. Alana, Diane and Thung were more accustomed to British English and the remainder of the participants were more familiar with American English through the teaching in their homelands and through popular culture. Some participants also encountered difficulty in comprehending other varieties of English. The following seven factors were identified as affecting the wellbeing and sense of security of the participants.

1. **Australian English barriers**

All 27 participants claimed that they had a hard time understanding the Australian accent and that Australians spoke quickly, as Mau explains:

They said something like they did not really open their mouth and pronounce short ‘e’ instead of long ‘e’… I did not know what they talked to me about. It took me half a year to get used to it … not fully understand them though.

Hui claimed that her Australian tutors and lecturers spoke English with a strong accent and she assumed that they could have talked better but they seemed lazy to pronounce words well. Hong labelled Australian English as a tongue-twister. Jeab described her Australian lecturer as talking in his throat and Yai described the customers at Starbucks as talking fast and mumbling in their throats. Ming thought that Australian English was new, while Diane particularly thought that the Australian accent was so special that it was difficult to get used to. Thung presumed that maybe Australian English was not standard and Yuri came to the conclusion, from his personal experiences in America for a few months and in Britain for a week, that Australian pronunciation was different from American and British because it was so chunky.

Hayin stated that most Australian classmates and lecturers did not know how to interact with her so that she could feel at ease, understand them and take part in class. She claimed that most lecturers did not seem to care about language, as they spoke quickly. At first, she thought she would be able to understand 75% in class, but she actually understood only half and she was not sure if she understood the lectures correctly.

2. **Asian and Brazilian English barriers**

Some participants experienced difficulties in interactions when people from Asia, Europe and Brazil spoke in English. Alana’s main problem was her listening skills when her teachers from Chinese and Chinese Malaysian backgrounds spoke in unfamiliar accents. British and European accents were the easiest for her to understand because of her Slovakian background, because [she] came from Europe and [has] been meeting many Europeans with different accents and learned British English at school.

Kimberly shared a similar experience with Alana in understanding her Asian classmates. She stated that her classmates from Asia seldom spoke in class and, when they did, they usually spoke with a softer tone of voice, which made it more difficult to understand them. However, she concluded that this did not mean that their English was not good and that perhaps they lacked confidence. Naoko was unfamiliar with the accents of her Chinese-background lecturer and her classmates from China, India and Brazil.

The Chinese tended to cut the end of the word and pronounce it incorrectly unlike Japanese people … pronunciation was different from Japanese speakers … in our language, vowels were important so it was customary to pronounce every vowel.

Nickel was able to develop a very good friendship with a student from South Korea but found it hard to understand some of her Asian classmates who spoke English with different accents and without full sentences. However, she thought that Chinese students who studied a double degree in translation and interpreting and international relations were good at English. Young, a South Korean student, could not understand her lecturers from Japan, Thailand and even South Korea. She emphasised that it was necessary for her to understand everything the lecturers said because of the nature of her study program in translation and interpreting. She thought that she could not hear properly because this was the first time she had studied abroad in a country where the primary language was not her mother tongue.
3 European English barriers

While some participants had a hard time comprehending Asian- and Brazilian-accented English speech, others faced obstacles with European English accents. Wai encountered difficulties in grasping the content of class discussions due to the accents of her European classmates, especially one from Poland. Nickel had a little difficulty in understanding her tutors from Greece and Turkey. She felt that their English was influenced by their first language and this made it hard for her to comprehend. In contrast, Ming appreciated his tutor from Greece after the first week, although at first he only understood 30% of what he said because he talked too friendly, too fast. After the first week, Ming adapted to the tutor’s English accent and this man became his favourite tutor. However, another tutor from Turkey made him feel moody because he spoke unclearly and ambiguously.

4 Repetition barriers

Many participants described similar experiences as senders of messages. Neil and Young shared the common experience of having to repeat what they said, which hindered their communication. During the first few months, Neil tried to share his opinions but his Australian classmates did not understand him and asked him to repeat what he said again and again.

They missed the point I wanted to express … and I had to repeat myself. At first, I tried to get involved with the class … then I preferred to be silent, just listened to the lectures.

Additionally, Neil was reluctant to make contact with local people: The problem was similar. It was inconvenient to repeat myself over and over again … sometimes it was misperception. For example, at a supermarket, when he needed to ask about food or at a bank when he needed to interact with a teller, he was unsure because of the language barrier. This apparently affected his selection of shops because he preferred to go to Asian supermarkets where it seemed there was a better cultural understanding. At the bank, he relied on one bank teller:

> there is a lady who looks like a Middle Eastern [and] seems to understand me so I tend to queue in her window every time I go there … and she will come to me and help so it becomes common understanding.

Young was in a similar situation on her first day at university, when she had to keep repeating the same sentences. An Australian administrative staff member could not comprehend what she said when she was trying to find out why her name was not on the enrolment list for one of the courses. She remembered this encounter and said that it was a very tough time.

As receivers of messages, participants shared the common experience of having to ask other people to repeat what they were saying. This hindered their communication and made them uneasy when taking part in two-way interactions. Lek described a bad experience and said that asking interlocutors to repeat themselves many times affected my communication because I did not understand what they said. Jose remembered a time he was talking with Australian friends and housemates and how troublesome and tiring it was for him in trying to understand what they said. He repeated the same question – What? – and did not enjoy saying it over and over. Wai did not have the courage to ask a question when she could not follow the discussion of her European classmates in class. She wanted to ask them to repeat things but she felt too embarrassed.

Kimberly recalled an experience of talking on the telephone, when it was quite hard for her to understand the other person. She could not express what she wanted to say and could not use gestures to assist communication. She thought they misunderstood me and missed part of my personal views. She would ask people to repeat again and again but, if she asked three times and they did not respond, she would pretend that she had understood them or would say never mind. Pen, who worked part-time in a Thai restaurant, rarely understood her customers because they spoke with an unfamiliar accent. When she took orders on the telephone, she had to ask them to repeat what they said again and again. She repeatedly asked customers to spell their addresses and names but, despite the repetition, she was not discouraged because I would try harder to understand [Australian] English.
Alana was the only participant who encountered difficulty in dealing with people from an American English-speaking background. She shared university accommodation with four American students and when all the American housemates gathered together, they spoke quickly, with slang and small talk, about topics she was unfamiliar with, such as television programs, food and the study system. They did not seem to care whether or not she understood them and how she felt. She began to feel excluded and unaccepted by the group, which she felt was because she was culturally and linguistically different from them.

6 Positive feelings

Nickel is the only participant whose confidence in English appeared to be high and she did not think her English made her life difficult. Her English-language barrier in understanding the English spoken by her Asian classmates did not appear to impact on or determine her sense of security.

I feel comfortable to talk with her. Communication doesn’t constrain my friendship with her because we always check … what she means and what I mean … we can improve our communication. It’s about how you feel towards the person … I feel secure in this sense.

Although they felt stressed, frustrated and depressed at times, Thung, Priscilla, Yuri, Naoko, Diane and Toa did not see language barriers as relating to their sense of security at all. Thung felt left behind in her studies but able to adapt. Priscilla and Yuri claimed that their sense of security was not fragile because they were easy-going, and Naoko felt similar and believed that it was to do with her seniority. Australian English-accented speech was very special to Diane, and Toa never thought about feeling secure or insecure and felt fine as an introverted student.

7 Negative feelings

When Neil, Lek, Young, Pen, Kimberly, Jose and Wai had a difficult time with repetition, they all admitted that they were affected emotionally, which in turn affected their sense of security. Neil felt reluctant and unsure, and Lek felt awkward, losing his confidence and security. Young and Pen felt frustrated and insecure, whereas Jose and Kimberly felt a little desperate and insecure. Wai was too embarrassed to ask others to repeat what they said, and he and Mau also felt frustrated. They became insecure when they could not follow class discussions because of difficulties in understanding different accented speech. Hong also felt frustrated and wondered if he would ever acquire Australian English. When he had a hard time understanding what tutors or other people said, his feelings were deeply impacted.

my English is still far from enough, which makes me feel uncomfortable … unable to talk with [my tutors and other people]. If I cannot fully understand people and continue to talk with them, this surely makes me feel insecure. I will not have many friends here and can hardly get help when I need help because of no friends.

Alana felt uncomfortable, unhappy and excluded by her American housemates, rendering her a little insecure. Hui felt upset and a little discouraged and insecure. She was upset about Australia and felt like going home:

I felt upset because why the Australians did not have to study Mandarin [but I had to study their English] … when I had these feelings, I did not like to do homework, skip the lectures and tutorials. I did not know how to handle the problem, who I should turn to for help and I had to start to study independently … it’s hard to turn to anyone for help. Sometimes, I would quit doing homework.

Other participants described feelings of insecurity affected by language barriers. Ming was particularly helpless when he could not understand an announcement at Sydney Airport. Jeab became nervous and bored when she failed to comprehend lectures by Australian lecturers. Zhen was worried, and Hayin felt unconfident and excluded. Yai was insecure as if she was an outsider of the society when she was unable to understand her customers. Nok and Josh felt insecure when failing to understand Australians, and Jeab felt frustrated and insecure when he could not express himself.
Discussion

Data gathered from the interviews showed that the non-native English-speaking background participants from 12 different nations primarily faced an issue of intelligibility in relation to word/utterance recognition (Smith and Nelson 2006: 429). The first five factors outlined above related to the first key research question, with participants encountering difficulties understanding Australian English because of the accent and the speed at which it was spoken, as well as English spoken with Asian, Brazilian and European accents, resulting in their intercultural communication becoming unintelligible. The Australian variety of English and the speed at which it was spoken were seen to have the highest effect on interactions with classmates, lecturers, administrative staff, customers and bank tellers. The participants had been more exposed to American and British English varieties and disregarded Australian English because its accent is commonly thought to be ugly, lazy and slovenly, unclear and marred by lip-laziness (Mitchell and Delbridge 1965). It can be assumed that this variety of English has not yet gained a global status of power and prestige, as compared to American and British English. Factor five also related to the second research question, suggesting that the failure of intelligibility and unfamiliarity with American culture affected at least one participant’s sense of security.

The participants came from countries in the Expanding Circle (Kachru 1985, 1992), which refers to countries whose populations utilise English for specific purposes. English in these countries is the most popular foreign language taught in the school systems (Bolton 2006), and American and British English remain the norm-dependent varieties of English-accented speech (Kachru 1995). The participants were therefore more familiar with these varieties of English words and utterances, but this does not suggest that they had acquired the language and spoke like Americans or British people. There is a tendency for pragmatic transfer from first language to a foreign language and a need for pragmatic development acquired in a specific sociocultural context (Kasper and Rose 2002). Learners of English from Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands demonstrate higher levels of fluency than learners from other countries (Crystal 2003) and therefore there was a range in the pragmatic ability of the participants in the study.

After arrival in Australia to undertake postgraduate study, the participants were unable to use English as a medium of communication meaningfully, appropriately and effectively (Ochs 1996 cited in Kramsch 2002). Furthermore, they could not recognise and comprehend different varieties of World Englishes (Kachru 1985, 1992), specifically during the initial transition from their homelands to the new social environment of Australia. Mau and Hayin particularly pointed out that Australians could have empathised and adjusted their speech to accommodate them (Giles and Coupland 1991; Jenkins 2003) but did not. As such, these participants felt uneasy and unmotivated to participate in the classroom.

Seven of the participants did not enjoy asking Australians to repeat words/sentences, nor did they like being asked to repeat themselves. Neil and Wai, particularly, became unmotivated and lacked the confidence to speak up in class. This suggests that repetition constructs a perception of linguistic inability, which lowers affect. However, repetition for Pen gave her self-concept-related motivation (Dörnyei and Clément 2001) to develop her language pragmatic ability. Alana perceived her interactions with her American housemates as an obstacle, as she lacked cultural schema (Lustig and Koester 2006), and she became unmotivated to socialise with them. This suggests that cultural and linguistic barriers reflected symbolic relations of power and identity between English speakers and the participants, in that the former were linguistically influential over the latter (Norton 2000). It also suggests that the cultural and linguistic forms the participants had acquired were not adequate to function effectively in Australia, indicating that the process of their English acquisition impinged on the process of their socialisation to become socially competent members of the community (Schiefflin and Ochs 1986).

The ineffective use of English psychologically affected the participants in that they felt distant, not only from English-speaking groups (Schumann 1986) but also from other non-native English-speaking background groups. This appeared to inhibit them in acculturation and pragmatic development. Negative feelings impinged on the sense of security of 20 of the participants, with seven of them emotionally affected by repetition barriers, leading to feelings of reluctance, frustration, desperation, awkwardness, lack of confidence and insecurity. Thirteen of the participants were emotionally affected by unfamiliar
varieties of English, leading to feelings of frustration, worry, exclusion, helplessness, insecurity, boredom, nervousness, lack of confidence and discouragement.

Pronunciation would appear to be the greatest barrier to successful communication (Jenkins 2000) and the participants appear to have experienced language shock (Schumann 1976) because of their difficulties in understanding unfamiliar English varieties. Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2004) suggest that language learners become confused, embarrassed or lost, and how much they can improve their language depends on how well they can cope with these feelings. When learners find it hard to use their cultural problem-solving and coping mechanisms, they may enter a mental state of disorientation, stress, fear and anxiety. Alana lacked an American cultural schema, rendering her uncomfortable, unhappy and excluded, suggesting that she had encountered culture shock (Oberg 1960; Schumann 1978; Sussman 2000) because she was exposed to disorienting or unfamiliar encounters while living with four American housemates. Consequently, she felt emotionally down.

Thirteen of the participants appear to have encountered World Englishes shock because they were disoriented by different varieties of English and felt insecure, lacking in confidence, frustrated, lost, nervous, helpless and upset. Seven participants experienced repetition shock because they were emotionally affected by repetition, becoming reluctant, unsure, awkward, unconfident, insecure and frustrated. While insecurity was the most common feeling experienced by the students, frustration had the greatest effect on their sense of insecurity. This implies that World Englishes shock was a mental state of disorientation and frustration due to an exposure to alien varieties of English, which extended insecurity in the participants. Similarly, repetition shock is a mental state of disorientation and frustration, but it tended to be the result of exposure to the unfamiliar variety of Australian English. Frustration was the key feeling leading to a sense of insecurity when the participants communicated with culturally different others.

Seven of the participants were not as affected by unintelligibility. Nickel felt comfortable and secure in the sense that she was able to build a friendship with a South Korean classmate, even though she did not totally understand her English. This was because she overlooked her encounter of unintelligibility and looked through to the personality of her interactant instead, and this affectively and integratively motivated (Dörnyei and Clément 2001) both participants to use English as a medium of communication. Although Thung felt disadvantaged in her study and stressed, she was secure because she thought she could adapt herself when she experienced unintelligibility. Priscilla, Yuri and Toa felt secure because their personal traits affectively and integratively motivated them to respond to the issue of unintelligibility positively. Naoko felt secure because she believed that it was normal for a 48-year-old learner like herself to be disadvantaged in language ability. Diane felt secure because she perceived Australian English to be special, so it was normal not to get used to it. This suggests that positive attitudes and personal traits influence a sense of security, which boosts self-esteem and self-confidence when communicating in English with culturally different others. A sense of comfort and adaptability may be characteristic of learner security.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study investigated how English as an international language affected the sense of security of non-native English-speaking background students in an Australian academic and social context. The study has a number of limitations in that it was restricted to a small sample of 27 non-native English-speaking background students and a qualitative research method. However, it gives some indications of the effect of English as an international language on the sense of security of international students in Australia.

The outcomes suggest that the participants from 12 different countries shared strikingly similar encounters of unintelligibility with culturally different others, following transition from their home countries to Australia. Unfamiliarity with Australian English affected them, in particular. Although they passed a standardised English proficiency test, which characterised them as good users of English, they all, without exception, experienced linguistic and cultural barriers. These barriers decreased their sense of security, since English was deemed essential as a bargaining skill in their homelands and is even more essential in Australia as a key to social and academic survival and success.

Factors relating to linguistic and cultural unfamiliarity, pragmatic transfer, pragmatic development, language accommodation, acculturation and motivation appeared to have influenced their pragmatic
ability in the university context. The findings of the study suggest that, regardless of English proficiency test results, non-native English-speaking background students can expect to experience World Englishes shock in the initial phase of studying in Australia. However, they may not experience this mental state of disorientation and frustration if they possess a positive attitude and certain personal traits. Intercultural contacts in their homelands may not affect their sense of security but when English shifts from being a bargaining skill to being an essential survival tool, students can expect to encounter repetition shock as they are asked to repeat themselves because culturally different others may not understand their English and they are forced to ask culturally different others to repeat what they say.

Teachers of English can play a key role in providing information so that their students are well prepared and know what to expect when they move to an English-speaking country. This may promote positive attitudes and enhance their ability to respond to language shock positively.

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References


