Viewing students as multilingual learners: Implications for preparation courses for Indonesian students in Australia

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Abstract

This paper describes a small exploratory research project investigating the use of the full linguistic repertoires used by Indonesian students embarking on postgraduate study in Australia, and the resulting implications for preparation courses. A group of students were followed through from their pre-departure course in Jakarta to their studies in Australian universities. It was found that some courses encouraged students to include sources from Indonesia in their studies. Nevertheless, the majority of students included reference to texts in Bahasa Indonesia, which they either translated or paraphrased. It is suggested that academic preparation courses should include a focus on the skills and strategies students will need to incorporate texts from their home country into their English medium study.

Introduction

This study grew out of my teaching during a six-week intensive pre-departure course in Jakarta. The course was designed to prepare a group of Indonesian scholarship students for their Master’s level study in Australia. In the section of the course which I taught, the main purpose was to prepare the students for the use of English language as the medium of their academic postgraduate study.

It can be argued that a student-centred approach which looks at the total language needs of bilingual or multilingual learners requires ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers to take some responsibility for the development of their students’ total language repertoires, including the interactions between their different languages. The viewpoint I took in the course followed the shift from the dominant approach in English twentieth century English language courses, which had focused solely on the development of the students’ skills in the target language without any use of the students’ other languages (Cook, 2002). Such prohibitions are now disappearing, and a growing number of teachers are taking an approach which aims for the development of students’ bilingual - or multilingual - abilities (Hornberger, 2004, p. 168). This perspective does not reduce the focus on English language development, but includes overt attention to the students’ strategies for manipulating all the languages in their linguistic repertoire in order to carry out their academic study most effectively.

The activities with the 17 students in my class were based around acknowledging the issues for students who had carried out their undergraduate studies in Bahasa Indonesia, but would be required to carry out their post graduate studies in English. For example, I encouraged classroom discussion of the translations of key concepts from English into their other languages (and vice versa), with frequent reference to bilingual dictionaries. Students were encouraged to discuss their personal strategies of translation, beginning with a “process dictation” adapted from Deller and Rinvolucri (2002, p. 15), in which they reflected on the cognitive processes they used. Other
tasks included overt comparisons of discourse styles, such as in an analysis of the coverage of controversial topics in local English language and Indonesian language newspapers. Students also discussed some of their personal uses of translation, such as the on-line English-Indonesian translator Toggletext\(^1\).

However, these classroom activities were exploratory in nature, because details of the linguistic nature of tasks the students would be required to do in their Australian studies was not known. In particular, there was little information about the extent to which students would be encouraged to incorporate sources from Indonesia into their assignments. A follow-up study was therefore carried out with the students in Australia, to obtain information which would then be able to inform the future development of pre-departure courses. In this paper I report on the first part of the study, which took place after the students had completed their first semester of study in Australia. Of the 16 students who took up their scholarships in Australia, 14 participated in the study.

### Language background of the students

If students include information from Indonesia in their studies, a wide linguistic range of potential resources is opened up to them. The linguistic context in Indonesia is characterised by diversity, and even before they learn English most Indonesians are bilingual in the national language, Bahasa Indonesia, and often one of the other five to six hundred regional or ethnic languages (Renandya, 2000, p. 121). Indonesia also has a long and diverse literary history, dating from 5th century stone inscriptions in Indian script which developed into scripts used for some local Indonesian languages (Hunter, 1998, p. 14); Arabic religious and educational texts from the 16th century (Johns, 1998, p. 20); Chinese historical romances from the 16th century (Kumar and Proudfoot, 1998, p. 39); Malay/Indonesian used in the Dutch colonial administration from the 17th century; and Dutch which was taught in schools from the 19th century (Kaplan and Baldauf, p. 87). However, today it is Bahasa Indonesia, which uses the Roman script, which is in wide and increasing use throughout the country. As Kaplan and Baldauf (2003, p. 95) point out, “Bahasa Indonesia is seen as providing the cognitive, integrative, instrumental and cultural bases for the nation”.

This linguistic diversity of potential oral and written resources may provide challenges for students wishing to incorporate Indonesian knowledge into their academic study in Australia. Such challenges might include the location of appropriate resources, methods of data collection, strategies for translation of texts, and conventions for using and referencing non-English sources in academic writing.

The students in this class all had sufficient levels of English language to meet the requirements for Master’s level study in the Australian universities they were applying to, with overall IELTS (International English Language Testing System) band scores ranging from 6.5 to 7.5 (from a possible maximum of 9.0). All students had completed undergraduate studies in the medium of Bahasa Indonesia, and were therefore high level users. In addition, four of the 14 students who participated in the study reported some ability in one other language, and four others reported ability in two other languages. As can be seen in Table 1, these languages included the

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\(^1\) Toggletext is accessed at www.toggletext.com.
Indonesian languages of Javanese and Sundanese, other Asian languages Malay and Japanese, Arabic as the language of Islam, and the European languages of French and German.

Table 1. Language ability of students in addition to English and Bahasa Indonesia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>No. students (max = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Javanese</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sundanese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These students would, therefore, have a wide linguistic range of possible source texts available to them as resources for their studies, if a full range of mediums (such as written, oral, audio-visual) and genres (including academic, government document, popular press) were taken into account.

Previous studies

Research on the language aspects of study by international students in Australia has tended to focus on the students’ problems with communication in English (Harman, 2005, p. 128). For example, Kell and Vogl’s (2007) study identified students’ problems in understanding Australian spoken English, and communicating in social and study contexts. Kettle’s (2005) research took this approach further in her analysis of the discourse of one Thai student, who had problems in expressing himself in class and noted the responsibility he felt to represent and explain the context from his home country (Kettle, 2005, p. 53). Novera’s (2004) study focused on the experience of Indonesian postgraduate scholarship students in Australia, and again found English language learning to be a major problem for the students. Although the students were motivated to read widely and carry out their own research (Novera, 2004, p. 481), the topics or sources of such research was not mentioned. Recommendations made by Novera about English language issues in preparatory courses include the suggestion that “students should be made aware of different styles of writing, and how to modify their own approach so as to meet Australian university requirements” (Novera, 2004, p. 485). This approach puts the responsibility for matching the linguistic needs of students to their coursework into the hands of the students themselves.

Another theme in studies of Asian international students in Australia is whether or not they have different study and learning approaches from Western students (Harman, 2005, p. 129). Doherty and Singh (2005) criticise the preparation courses for Asian students which are designed to meet the “deficit” such students bring to their studies in Australian universities, which follow a Western tradition:

However, the continuing and growing presence of international students in the globalizing Western university suggests that such a claim to a pure, authentic tradition is nostalgic, a simulation seeking to recreate an
imagined purity which is no longer there, if it were ever so. (Doherty and Singh, 2005, p. 54)

They suggest that preparation courses need to be better designed in order to meet the real needs which the students have expressed (Doherty & Singh, 2005, p. 69). Similarly, Vandermensbrugghe (2004) has critiqued the concept of critical thinking, and in contrast to the approach described by Novera, concluded that the onus is on Australian academics to develop a better understanding of international students:

Few have questioned what international students bring in terms of experience and knowledge and a lot of adjustment has been asked from international students … If universities are going to continue attracting international students and want to be successful at integrating and educating these students, they must develop their programs by becoming internationally and culturally competent institutions. (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004, p. 422)

The outcomes of study for international students have also been a focus. Cannon’s (2001) study into the outcomes of overseas study for Indonesian graduates from aid schemes emphasised that training administration and design involves:

… a complex interplay of educational and administrative matters that links pre-departure activities with the design of learning and teaching, the return of the trainee, and his or her re-integration into the working environment. (Cannon, 2001, p. 113)

He includes the recommendation that the curriculum for international students be reviewed to ensure their relevance to home conditions (Cannon, 2001, p. 117), although language issues other than the need for high levels of English are not mentioned. The acquisition of “superior English language competence” is mentioned as one of the personal and career advantages gained by Indonesian students from study in Australia (Nilan, 2005, p.164), along with acquisition of technical and professional skills, development of a regional consciousness, improved social and professional opportunities, and greater awareness of the Australian context.

The new model for staff development Cannon proposes for training schemes in countries such as Indonesia includes “iterative co-construction of agendas and curricula” by learners, institutions, planners, and educators (Cannon, 2001, p. 119). This aligns well with the approach taken in this study, which involves former students as research participants.

Methodology

As the students in Jakarta were all about to embark on postgraduate courses which would include research to a greater or lesser extent, the pre-departure course included discussion of academic research skills. As part of their transition into post-graduate study, I encouraged a collegial approach to learning and enquiry. This was facilitated by my own lack of background in the Indonesian context, and as a New Zealander, I was also somewhat of an “outsider” to the Australian context. Although no formal plans for follow-up were developed during the course, there was an intention of
keeping in touch and the students knew of my interest in their progress in Australia. When I was developing the plan for this study, I emailed the proposal to the students and encouraged any feedback.

A two-page questionnaire was developed and emailed to the students at the end of their first semester of study (see Appendix). Replies were received by 14 of the 16 eligible students. The first set of questions confirmed the respondents’ courses of study and their language background. A set of statements then followed to elicit opinions about the use of resources from Indonesia in their study, and a further set about what sources from Indonesia they had used in their study so far, how they managed any non-English sources in their writing, and if their Australian introductory academic programme had covered this. Finally, respondents were asked about topics for any research they had carried out, or were planning to carry out.

**Results**

Results from each part of the questionnaire are presented in turn in this section. To preserve their anonymity, each student was assigned a “respondent number” which has been used in presenting some supporting comments for the questions.

**Background**

The 14 respondents were attending six universities in Australia. Eight students were studying business or economics subjects, and six were studying ESOL or education subjects.

**Indonesian sources**

This section of the questionnaire aimed to find out how the students’ Indonesian background and experience was incorporated into their Australian study. Four statements elicited the students’ opinions about including resources from Indonesia into their study. Respondents were asked to tick their responses on a five-point scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”, or “not sure”, and space was also included for comments.

1. **Student opinions of relevance**

The first statement was about perceived relevance of information about Indonesia in their courses: “Information from/about Indonesia is relevant to my area of study in Australia”. As can be seen in Figure 1, slightly over half (eight) of the 14 students tended to agree with this statement, although four gave the middle response and two were “not sure”.
The comments by respondents for this statement reflected two different approaches to the relevance of information about Indonesia. Some stressed a clear focus in their courses on developing new theoretical knowledge, or knowledge about the Australian context:

*The context of my study is Australian.* (Respondent 1)

*I am studying applied linguistics so info from/about Indonesia is not much needed.* (Respondent 14)

However, in other comments the students’ backgrounds appeared to be expressly integrated into the teaching:

*Since my interest is on curriculum and teacher development, information on Indonesian secondary school curriculum and Indonesian teacher development program is essential for my references.* (Respondent 8)

*I took (and will take) some subjects which are specially designed to discuss Asian matters and for those subjects I prepared my paper based on Indonesia.* (Respondent 11)

2. Perceived staff opinions of relevance

The next statement was designed to find out what messages the students were receiving from the teaching staff on the Master’s programmes, through responses to the statement, “Staff in my courses say that information from/about Indonesia is relevant to my area of study”. As shown in Figure 2, just under half of the respondents (six) agreed with the statement, although the same number also responded with “not sure”.

![Figure 1. Relevance of information from/about Indonesia](image-url)
The comments showed that a number of students felt that staff actively encouraged input from their home contexts:

*The staff here are welcome to any information from Indonesia as long as there are supporting evidence.* (Respondent 6)

*Some lecturer motivate students to do research about our home country.* (Respondent 2)

*Some of the materials included in the reading pack were based on Indonesia’s late event.* (Respondent 11)

In addition, other comments reflected a more implied attitude of relevance by staff:

*They never particularly say so, but some of the assignment require me to talk about my teaching contexts.* (Respondent 8)

*We are allowed to use Indonesian company or information as a case study or object of observation.* (Respondent 10)

Only one comment showed that staff did not include any of the student’s own background context in the course:

*We never really discuss about Indonesia in class.* (Respondent 7)
3. Availability of resources at the university

The third statement focused on the resources which would enable students to incorporate an Indonesian perspective in their Australian studies: “Resources from/about Indonesia in my area of study are available at this university”. Figure 3 shows an even spread of responses to this question, although they tended to be at the agreement end of the scale.

Figure 3. Availability of resources from/about Indonesia at the university

Comments to support the respondents’ rankings for this statement expressed mainly positive opinions about the universities’ resources, and highlighted the importance of electronic resources and access to the internet:

*My university subscribes some references from Indonesia, beside the IT here is very helpful.* (Respondent 6)

*[My university] provides good resources related to Indonesia.* (Respondent 2)

*There are some Asian journals and also online databases on Asia.* (Respondent 11).

*I never attempt to find the resources in the library, but I can always access the digital texts through the internet.* (Respondent 8)

However, one respondent identified some limitations to the information available:

*Those are Indonesian economy, development issues, statistic reports, not on specific companies.* (Respondent 13)
Only one student reported never having the need to access resources about or from Indonesia:

*Never been in need to use it.* (Respondent 1)

4. Ability to access resources elsewhere

The fourth and final statement in this section of the questionnaire elicited opinions about other types of resources: “I am able to access resources from/about Indonesia relevant to my area of study from other places”. Half of the respondents (seven) agreed with this statement.

![Figure 4. Ability to access resources from/about Indonesia elsewhere](image)

The comments from respondents again emphasised the importance of internet access to resources:

*Yup! The [university] website is sufficient to do that.* (Respondent 2)

*Using IT at the university.* (Respondent 6)

*We can do inter-library loan with major libraries in [this Australian state].* (Respondent 13)

Two comments showed that internet access also allowed contact with Indonesian colleagues who could help with resources:

*Usually I do it though online databases or through e-mail to my colleagues in Indonesia.* (Respondent 11)
From the internet, or with help of my colleagues back in Indonesia. (Respondent 8)

One student identified problems with the resources once they were accessed:

Data from Indonesia is a little hard to find, government websites sometimes not up to date. (Respondent 10)

Indonesian sources used

A more detailed examination of the sources from or about Indonesia accessed by the students was in the following section. Respondents indicated the type of sources they had included in their studies in Australia, and whether the language they were in was English, Bahasa Indonesia, Javanese, Dutch, or Other. Table 2 shows that only English or Bahasa Indonesia sources had been used by any of the 14 respondents. Academic literature and audio-visual sources had been used more in English, whereas non-academic official literature, popular literature, and people had been used more in Bahasa Indonesia.

Table 2. The language of Indonesian sources used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Type</th>
<th>None (max=14)</th>
<th>English (max=14)</th>
<th>Bahasa Indonesia (max=14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic literature</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-academic official literature</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular literature</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio-visual</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Strategies in writing

The strategies which students had used were the focus of the fourth question, which asked how students had presented any non-English sources in their academic writing. Table 3 shows that the most commonly used strategy was paraphrase of the text in English (10 respondents), followed by an English translation of the text (seven respondents).
Table 3. Strategies used with non-English sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>No. students (max = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English translation of the text</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of the text in English</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both English translation and the original</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original text, with comments in English</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original mentioned only as a reference</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preparation programmes in Australia

When the students arrived in Australia, they joined a university-specific introductory academic programme. This was a further opportunity to help students focus on developing strategies for including non-English sources in academic writing. A question was included to ask about the strategies identified in the previous question had been covered in their introductory programme. Five students indicated that some of the strategies (reported in Table 3) had been covered in their university introductory programme, and a further nine indicated that they had not.

Research topics

The final question asked the students to write the titles or topics of any research projects which they had carried out, or were planning, in their Australian study. All topics except one reported by the respondents referred to Indonesian contexts.

Implications of the study

This small exploratory study with a class of Indonesian postgraduate students beginning their courses in Australia found that the approaches taken on postgraduate courses in Australia vary widely in the extent to which they encourage an input from the students’ own country and language backgrounds. It highlights the need for ESOL teachers working with students in pre-departure or bridging courses to find out what students will actually need to do in their particular postgraduate courses, and develop classroom activities to develop the students’ relevant abilities. However, Doherty and Singh (2005, p. 70) point out that employment conditions for teachers of preparatory courses do not usually allow the innovative teaching practices necessary to meet “the shifting educational needs of the large cohort of international students now attending Australian universities”.

The opportunities which the internet has provided for the internationalisation of courses of study, in allowing quick and easy access to a range of texts from around the globe, mean that students are no longer bound to the facilities provided in their destination university. Teachers in preparation courses should include an overt focus
on strategies for accessing and utilising such texts, some of which the students might be able to collect in advance of departure from their country.

This study found that for the majority of this group of students texts in Bahasa Indonesia were used as a resource for their studies in Australia. A number of students were translating texts either directly, or in a more general way as paraphrasing. Therefore, if students need or wish to incorporate resources in languages other than English into their academic writing, ESOL teachers should be able to help them develop the translation and paraphrasing skills they need.

Finally, the study points to a need for students who are intending to study in Australia to find out about their courses in advance, so that their expectations are met in areas such as how much course content is relevant to their home country context.

Conclusions

The results of this study support an advocacy approach by teachers in preparatory courses which will encourage bilingual and multilingual students to maximise the use of their full linguistic repertoires. The students in this study were using a variety of linguistic sources for their courses in Australia, and there is an opportunity for ESOL teachers to support the development of their students’ multilingual abilities in academic contexts. In this way ESOL teachers will be able to support subject area staff in the development of university staff in countries such as Australia in becoming “internationally and culturally competent institutions” (Vandermensbrugge, 2004, p. 422).
REFERENCES


Appendix

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

Use of language resources by Indonesian scholarship students in Australia

*Please type your answers on this form. You are welcome to add comments or examples to any question.*

1 **Study in Australia**

University: Qualification:

Major subject/specialisation:

2 **Language background**

Please tick √ to show your ability in any languages you can communicate in, NOT including English or Bahasa Indonesia. *(Please copy and paste more rows for more languages if necessary)*

Not applicable: ___

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language 1:</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language 2:</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3 **Opinions**

Please tick √ to show how much you agree with each statement:
<p>| | | | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
</table>
| a | Information from/about Indonesia is relevant to my area of study in Australia.  
   Comments: |   |   |   |   |
| b | Staff in my courses say that information from/about Indonesia is relevant to my area of study.  
   Comments: |   |   |   |   |
| c | Resources from/about Indonesia in my area of study are available at this university.  
   Comments: |   |   |   |   |
| d | I am able to access resources from/about Indonesia relevant to my area of study from other places.  
   Comments: |   |   |   |   |

1
4 **Indonesian sources**

Please tick √ to show which sources you have included from/about Indonesia in your Australian study. They might be as references, or as your research data. (*Please tick √ as many as you need*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>None</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Bahasa</th>
<th>Javanese</th>
<th>Dutch</th>
<th>Other language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

5 **Strategies in writing**

If you have included any non-English sources in your academic writing in Australia, how did you present the material in the text? (*Please tick √ as many as applicable*)

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6  **Australian preparation programme**  
Were any of these strategies for including non-English sources in academic writing covered in your introductory academic programme in Australia?  
*(Please delete one)*  
Yes *(Please explain):*  
No

7  **Research topics**  
Please write the titles or topics of any research projects you have carried out, or are planning, in your Australian study:

8  **Any other comments?**

THANK YOU!