Education or Indoctrination? Cultural Considerations in The Export of Australian University Education

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The paper raises some crosscultural concerns for the export of Australian business study programs by distance education to non-native English speaking countries, particularly the developing countries. If it is true, as relevant literature suggests, that language actively symbolises the social system of those who are native to that language, then it can be argued that Australia is exporting specific cultural values along with its distance education. If this is so, then the relevant Australian educational institutions may be practising a form of cultural imperialism. It is argued that the relationship between English as a linguistic entity and as an ideological vehicle when used as an international language has not been sufficiently studied. In particular, no research has been attempted to discover whether non-native English recipients of Australia's overseas educational programs perceive them to function as a symbol of Australian ideology: yet such studies are relevant to the growing export of Australian education, especially to developing countries and in the areas of business and management practices. The paper outlines a relevant research method, offers some suggestions for simple, non-technical adaptations to the language presently used in study packages for students overseas, and concludes with some exercises that might usefully be incorporated into CSU's English language learning curriculum that might prepare overseas students more adequately to assess the cultural component of CSU's business studies and relate it to their own cultural values.

1. Introduction

Distance education is a study mode provided by a number of Australian universities, to allow students to complete their courses from home. Study notes, textbooks, and various interactive delivery methods - such as telephone tutorials - take the place of on-campus lectures.

Charles Sturt University (CSU) is one of the major providers of distance education in Australia and overseas, and part of its brief is to expand even further its export of education by the use of overseas agents, visiting lecturers, and AARNet, the Australian Academic Research Network. AARnet is a facility that connects every university in Australia and has links to academic institutions in more than 80 countries around the world. It gives access to research data bases, news groups, bulletin boards and other information sources such as the World Wide Web. CSU provides disks which carry the software necessary to take advantage of these resources (Charles Sturt University 1995).

In addition, in some subjects, CSU's study guides are supplemented by audio cassette tapes or video tapes. Textbooks are supplied to overseas agents for purchase by students in their countries; and there are occasional telephone and video tutorials for some countries. Students are expected to submit regular, written assignments which are marked and returned by the relevant lecturers. The work requirements of subjects vary, but «skills of selection, interpretation and presentation» (p. 6) are required in every subject. Examinations are held at the end of each session and are compulsory. For each subject in their

undergraduate and postgraduate studies, students receive a mail package which includes an outline of the relevant subjects; a study guide and a selection of readings from the literature in the field. They receive also a distance education manual which contains information under headings such as: study methods, managing your time; active reading; writing essays; succeeding in examinations; and the university's methods of assessing students' work. All correspondence and tuition are in the English language.

2. The nature of the problem

The systematic, widespread and growing export of distance education by Australian universities, of which CSU is a representative example, has implications of cultural imperialism which so far have not been raised in the relevant literature, let alone discussed. These concerns relate specifically to the importation of Australian study programs (most of which are business studies) to non-native English speaking countries, particularly developing countries such as Malaysia and Turkey whose cultural traditions are very different from those of Australia.

There have been some studies of overseas students in Australia, suggesting that they bring a very different educational and intellectual experience to their host university environments compared to their local counterparts and that this often leads to culture shock both for overseas students and host staff. For example Westwood and Barker (1990) studied the relationship between academic achievement and social adaptation among international students on Australian campuses; Ballard and Clanchy (1988) wrote a manual for Asian students studying in Australia; Samuelowicz (1987) identified specific learning problems for overseas students; and Burkey (1986) described the experiences of overseas undergraduates in Australia.

In 1989 the International Development Programme of Australian Universities and Colleges commissioned a collection of papers on policies and practices concerning overseas student in Australia (Williams 1989). This report commented that the increasing demand for full-fee places for overseas students raised important questions about problems in teaching them (1989:3) and referred to the need for orientation and special courses to bridge cultural

differences between these students and their hosts Universities in teaching and learning styles. Yet nobody has so far suggested that overseas students who study Australian courses by distance education in their own countries, or their Australian academic supervisors, should receive such orientation.

3. The importance of the problem

Some studies have been carried out in the US that address problems in crosscultural education, for example by Hofstede (1986); and Kauffmann and Martin (1992) argued the need for a special study of education for a global society after researching problems of students abroad: but it seems that no comparable studies have been made of the cultural implications of Australian English-language distance education for non-native English speaking students in their own countries.

It has been argued since the 1950s (eg Whorf 1956) that the grammar and vocabulary of a language dictate the habitual thoughts and behavior of the speakers of that language: to some extent people are at the mercy of the world view forced upon them by the language they speak and write. While this argument can be criticised for lack of empirical research (for example by Kelling 1975), it is generally agreed by semioticians such as Halliday (1978) that language is a social construct that in its turn constructs the society within which it operates.

Therefore it may be that Australia is exporting specific cultural values along with its distance education. If this is so, then CSU, with other Australian educational institutions, may be practising a form of cultural imperialism, especially in developing countries and through English-language business studies programs, which are linked strongly to concepts of modernization, industrialization, technological expertise and an urban culture. Chomsky (1968) poses the question, how to disentangle meaning in language from use of language? He argued that language must be studied as a form of communication which is embedded in its social context; and Frake (1980:2) suggests that:

> In actuality not even the most concrete, objectively apparent physical object can be identified apart from some culturally defined system of concepts.

CSU's business and management programs presently provide concrete, practical and technical information based on a set of assumptions about 'good' business practice. CSU is a well respected Australian university with an international reputation, therefore the cultural assumptions underlying their education products may be accepted without question by their consumers.

Miller and Burgoon (1973), for example, argue that highly credible sources of communication, using opinionated language, are very effective regardless of the relative open- or closed-mindedness of the receivers.

This paper does not attempt to argue whether cultural imperialism is or is not defensible: the paper merely points out that such a suggestion needs to be examined. If it can be substantiated, then action can be taken to identify and if necessary modify those aspects of distance education that appear to be particularly culture-specific. However, no studies have been attempted to discover whether non-native English recipients of Australia's overseas educational programs do in fact perceive them to function as a symbol of Australian ideology. Flaitz (1988:201) conducted a study of French perceptions of English as a world language, in which she concluded that her findings «may complicate the role of English teachers abroad» because «their language may be projecting an image; it may convey an ideological and cultural message to its learners». Studies such as that of Flaitz are relevant to the growing export of Australian education, but the cultural effects of this particular use of international English have not yet been explored.

4. The concepts of language as culture; and cultural imperialism

Williams (1981:10) points out that culture is «an exceptionally complex term» that began as a noun of process - as in 'crop cultivation' - and has been extended to become descriptive of a whole way of life of a particular set of people. Williams argues from the historical development of the term that today it implies an emphasis on the «informing spirit» (1981:11) of a whole way of life, its language and methods of intellectual endeavour. He uses arguments from the sociology of culture, wich regards culture as «the signifying system» through

which «a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored» (1981:13). Culture, argues Williams, is «a selection and organisation of past and present, necessarily providing for its own kinds of continuity» (1981:184). Its «signals and conventions», including its language, must be capable of reproduction or they will lose all meaning. This concept of cultural reproduction is essential to the argument that the reproduction of one culture's educational processes in another culture will necessarily include the reproduction of other elements of the imported culture. Williams points out that it is characteristic of educational systems to claim they transmit knowledge as if it were universally applicable: yet it is obvious that different systems in various historial periods and in different countries, will provide their own selective versions.

Tomlinson (1991) provides a very useful summary of the long-standing and extensive debate over the meaning of 'cultural imperialism'. He quotes from the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (Bullock and Stallybrass, 1977:303) to define cultural imperialism as:

> The use of political and economic power to exalt and spread the values
> and habits of a foreign culture at the expense of a native culture.

However he goes on to argue that this is an imprecise and ambiguous definition because the communication practices of one culture may not necessarily be straightforwardly imposed on another. Moreover the intention of the communicators may not be directly to exalt and spread their own values at other people's expense. The example offered by Tomlinson is the export of television programs. For the purposes of this paper, the example is the export of education. The paper makes no suggestion that CSU or any other Australian university deliberately sets out to export Australian culture with its distance education programs; only that they may effectively be doing so.

Tomlinson finds it useful to examine the language in which any communication is made. He points out (1991:11) that according to UNESCO estimates, more than two thirds of publications are printed in English, Russian, Spanish, German and French; which is in itself a form of cultural imperialism

because there are more than 500 written languages, all of whose 'voices' save four are thus effectively silenced. He comments further that the very fact of his writing in English, i.e. one of the dominant languages, «reproduces this imperialism» (1991:12) - an argument which can be applied to the export of education in the English language.

It is not the function of this paper to discuss these large questions; only to demonstrate that they exist, and that they are relevant to the export of Australian education in English, particularly business studies programs, to developing countries. The above are powerful arguments to suggest that this export is heavily value-laden, not only in terms of its educational content but also the language in which it is written.

Relevant literature suggests that language actively symbolises the social system of those who are native to that language. Through language, people act out their social structure, affirm their own statuses and roles, establish and transmit a particular system of values and knowledge. Written language is only partly words and grammar; it also encodes social meanings (Halliday 1978). Moreover it is argued (for example in Fisher and Todd 1986) that the structure of a text cannot be separated from the institutional context in which it occurs. Thus, for example, not only the language but also the organisational and wider social contexts within which CSU exports its education will inevitably affect the content of its educational programs.

Halliday (1978) describes three levels by which meaning is transmitted through text: Field, Tenor and Mode. He argues that discourse Field represents the ongoing activity, the social process within which the discourse takes place; its Tenor identifies the role relationships of the parties concerned; and its Mode is the communication channel. These three levels together constitute the discourse Register, its overall meaning.

Following Halliday's argument and applying it to the process of distance education as it is administered by Australian academics for foreign students, the discourse Field becomes the particular subject content (for example, the theory and practice of modern management), the Tenor becomes the set of relationships between students, supervisors and the university administration; and the Mode becomes the mail package and other

communication media by which the distance education programs are transmitted.

Field:

Tomlinson (1991:102-103) summarises arguments that link cultural domination to the spread of capitalism particularly multinational capitalism and «cultural modernity» - a term in use since the 19th century to describe the effects of economic, scientific and technical developments associated with capitalism and including the concept of «limitless self-development» (1991:150) that «throws all cultures into constant flux and instability» (1991:151). He argues that the export of technology and capitalist enterprise (which he describes as «economic imperialism» 1991:162) is simultaneously an export of the western ideology of development:

Projects of 'development' by Western nations can be seen as instances of the colonisation of the social imaginaries of the Third World societies (1991:162). Tomlinson maintains this is a useful way of thinking about the cultural domination involved in the processes of modernisation as they spread around the globe, producing a general weakening in the cultural resources of societies.

Since one of the processes of modernisation is the spread of education, CSU's role, as representing the Australian export of education, needs to be examined as an exporter of the Western ideology of development.

Tenor:

Zimmerman and West (1975), in their study of conversations between men and women, note that when men and women converse, men interrupt more frequently. They use this observation to argue that in general, differences in power and status between communicators tend to disrupt a more normal state of balance in communication. Fisher and Todd (1986) maintain this asymmetry is heightened in institutional contexts because the structure of the institution is organised to lend those in power the authority to pursue their own defined goals.

These arguments have implications for the relationship between Australian teachers and their students overseas (and indeed for the relationship between

teachers and students everywhere). Negotiation between them is likely to be balanced in favour of the teacher, even when the student has a valid, though opposing viewpoint, for example on the merit of the student's arguments in an essay. This imbalance will affect the kind of meanings that students derive from their studies.

Mode:

In addition to the arguments above, that language transmits culture as well as other meanings, there is another aspect to English-language studies by non-native English speakers. It relates to the respective status of native- versus non-native English speakers. Studies such as that of Kachru (1982:3) suggest that:

> ...the perspective of those who use (English) as the other tongue has been largely ignored. The side of the native speaker has been concentrated on

The observations of Kachru and others who have studied the spread of English as an international language (such as Fishman, 1977) suggest that non-native English speaking students may be always at a psychological disadvantage when negotiating with native speaking teachers because not enough is known about the feelings of those who use English as 'another tongue'.

Another problem is that of comprehension. Since the Mode of transmission of Australian distance education is English, some of CSU's communication practices (and those of other relevant Australian universities) may be inappropriate in view of the linguistic inadequacy of many students, even those who have passed a language proficiency test to be eligible for enrolment. It may be that their English language learning has not equipped them for involvement and decision-making in their studies, particularly Australian business studies.

For example, the Subject Outline (which is part of the distance education study package) for CSU's MGT320 Managing Change, Autumn Semester 1995:19) contains the following statement for which discussion is required by students in the form of a written assignment:

> ...the 'learning organisation'...is not just a collection of individuals who are learning - instead, learning also occurs simultaneously at various collective levels within business units and sometimes within an entire company.

This concept, of collective problem-solving within organisations, is likely to be virtually incomprehensible to students from a country such as Turkey, where organisations normally are run on authoritarian lines. Thus not only is the assignment task loaded with cultural assumptions about how organisations should be managed, but it assumes that students will have sufficient command of English to understand the difference between «a collection of individuals» and «collective levels» within an organisation.

5. Research Questions

In an attempt to find answers to the questions raised above, the following reseach questions were asked:

1. What kind of meaning are students from developing countries likely to derive from the following three aspects of business studies by distance learning from Charles Sturt University:

a) The academic content of the study packages.
b) The relationship between students, CSU's administrative methods, and the relevant academic staff members.
c) The method of delivery, including language, of the study packages?

2. Even when overseas students have been enrolled in CSU's distance education programs on the strength of their scores in an English-language proficiency test, has their English language learning equipped them for involvement and decision-making in Australian business studies?

The paper concludes with some suggestions for simple, non-technical English and adapted English terminology in distance education study packages, to meet the needs of overseas students; and some suggestions for English language learning that might prepare overseas students more adequately to assess the cultural component of business studies and relate it to their own cultural values.

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