COMMUNICATION SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

This paper presents best practices derived from the first year of offering discipline-specific communication support to international students of Commerce at Dalhousie University. A literature review of Asian international student learning behaviours and needs and on pedagogical approaches reveals that ESL students require discipline-specific language and writing help. This assistance should occur within an educational environment that is culturally responsive and regards international students not as deficient in skills but as positive contributors to the academic community. International students would benefit from changes in pedagogical approaches, faculty and staff attention to discipline-specific language development, and the facilitation of cross-cultural peer relationships.

BACKGROUND

Dalhousie and other Canadian universities have experienced increasing numbers of international students. Statistics Canada data reveal that the number of international students doubled between 1992 and 2008. In 2008, 9.3% of university students in Nova Scotia were international students, placing Nova Scotia among the largest providers of international education in Canada. These international students have enrolled in increasing numbers in the fields of business, management, and public administration. While the percentage of Canadian students enrolled in business fields remained about the same from 1992 to 2008, the percentage of international students in business fields rose from 14.5% to 23.2%.

The Faculty of Management at Dalhousie University and the Commerce program in particular have experienced dramatic growth in the numbers of international students. Since 2009, the number of Chinese students at Dalhousie has more than doubled from 291 to 699. The number of international students in the Bachelor of Commerce program has risen from 100 in March, 2009, to 220 in March, 2012. Of the 955 students enrolled in the Commerce program, then, 220, or 23%, were internationals. However, Chinese students in the Faculty of Management, according to the Retention Committee, have the highest attrition rates in the university.

These numbers indicate a clear and pressing need to address the academic requirements of the international student population as well as our responses to this growing population as the host institution. This paper identifies best practices in making fruitful changes to our approach. The first section presents a literature review, which is followed by observations of current practice at Dalhousie. The final section offers recommendations on how to facilitate change.
LITERATURE REVIEW: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EDUCATION

This section offers an overview of issues in international student education with an emphasis on Asian international students in Canada enrolled in faculties of management. The increase in numbers indicates an urgent need to understand both international student issues and the issues of the university in adjusting to these changes while meeting the expectations of industry. Similar challenges have been faced by other institutions in Australia (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Zhang & Mi, 2010), New Zealand (Campbell & Li, 2008; Hebblethwaite, 2010), and the UK (Ryan, 2011).

International students often arrive in Canada without the background necessary to meet academic expectations. Difficulties with language interfere with the abilities to listen to lectures, understand course expectations, read sophisticated academic texts, produce writing assignments, complete examinations, and converse with instructors and domestic student peers. Zhang and Mi (2010), in a study of international students in Australia, assert that language issues (reading, writing, listening, speaking) are the most urgent problems among international students. Yang’s (2010) study attributes English Language Learners (ELL) challenges to “underdeveloped English conversational ability” (p. 157) and addresses the difficulties students experience in attempting to engage in academic dialogue. Campbell and Li (2008) found that Asian students’ difficulties, most notably with writing assignments, “came from their insufficient knowledge of academic conventions” (p.382). Zhang and Mi as well as other scholars (e.g. Kameda, 2012) note that cultural differences exist in rhetorical conventions, cultural schemata, writing perspectives and expectations as well as in the focus on argument. Academic literacy requires “disciplinary enculturation” and understanding of conventions, which are “embedded in cultural values and beliefs” (Campbell & Li, p.390).

Instructors play key roles in developing this knowledge of academic conventions. Arkoudis and Tran (2010) argue that because writing in the university is discipline specific, subject instructors are essential for developing language skills. Campbell and Li (2008) confirm the importance of instructors in equipping students with the language of their academic discourse. Delivering this knowledge, however, has proven challenging for educators.

Multiple studies have explored the issues surrounding international education in Western universities. The learning differences between Asian and Western students have been a primary focus of many of these studies. Ward’s (2001) literature review “The impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions” offers a summary of the literature conducted to 2001 on cross-cultural differences in teaching and learning. Ward notes the research on individualism-collectivism (IC). This research finds that students from individualist cultures “are more likely to want to ‘stand out’ in class, to ask questions, give answers and engage in debate” and to exhibit competitiveness. In contrast, students from collectivist cultures “are more strongly motivated to ‘fit in.’ They are less likely to be verbally interactive in classes and are usually unwilling to draw attention to themselves” (Ward, 2001, “Cross-cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning,” para. 2). According to these theories, then, Canadian students and instructors, coming from an individualist culture, exhibit behaviours that conflict with the cultural expectations of predominantly Asian international students.

Cheng (2000), however, sees this view of Asian learners as a “dangerous over-generalisation” (p. 435) and the view of Asians as reticent and passive as “a groundless myth” (p.438). Tian and Low (2011) dismiss studies that claim passivity is an emanation of Chinese culture as limited or inconclusive in evidence. Seeing the problem as a Western versus Eastern dissonance tends to elevate the West and to stereotype, and therefore simplify, the East. Despite various cultures of origin, Asian students become lumped into “a single cultural basket,” an homogenization that reinforces cultural stereotypes (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 710). Kumaravadivelu summarizes the most common stereotypes of Asian
students: “They (a) are obedient to authority, (b) lack critical thinking skills, and (c) do not participate in classroom interaction” (p. 710). Kumaravadivelu points out that these stereotypes have persisted despite inconclusive or contradictory research findings. Clark and Gieve (2006) warn against these “reified, abstracted, and frozen” (p.69) conceptions of culture. They argue that viewing Asian students as a single homogenous group lacking in critical thinking skills, withholding from classroom participation, exhibiting passivity, and relying on surface learning and attributing these deficits to Confucian heritage reinforces stereotypes and denies individuality.

Stereotypes contribute to the devaluing of Asian students. Asian students are frequently seen as operating at a deficit, as lacking the critical thinking skills and level of engagement necessary for success in university. Instructors may believe that ESL students should overcome this deficit, “rise” to acceptable standards, and assimilate. Ward’s (2001) work confirms this tendency. She cites Smith’s (1998) study of instructors of international students in the United States that found that instructors tended to adopt an assimilationist approach. These instructors maintained the importance of a uniform (and culturally situated) standard by which to measure understanding and achievement and failed to consider the difficulties that international students may experience in reaching this standard.

As Holmes (2004) asserts, there are “unexplained conventions” that students must adapt to for success in western universities: The “onus is on these Chinese students to reconstruct and renegotiate their primary culture learning and communication styles to accommodate another way”, a process, Holmes claims, that disadvantages and further differentiates students (p. 303). Tran (2011) argues that “reciprocal adaptation from international students and academic staff rather than the onus of adaptation being placed on international students is paramount to the enhancement of teaching and learning and the sustainable development of international education.” (p.80). Her study suggests that reciprocal adaptation of academics and international students is critical to the process of internationalizing the curriculum.

Ward’s (2001) literature review reveals, however, that “for the most part educators (particularly those at the tertiary level) make few, if any, changes in either the process or content of classroom activities” (“Impact in the Classroom: Section Summary”, para.1). This assertion is confirmed by Knight (2000, as cited in Ward, 2001) who found minimal interest from faculty members in internationalizing pedagogy or the curriculum. Research a decade later confirms that pedagogy has not adapted to the changing demographics of the university. Arkoudis and Tran (2010) report that assistance for international students is relegated to support staff despite evidence that indicates that lecturers are key in the development of student writing and essential for the learning of the discipline. Their research indicates that lecturers do not address ESL needs on a departmental level. Departments demonstrate a “lack of course planning related to integrating disciplinary and language learning or guidelines that can inform lecturers’ practices” (p. 172). Instructors may not know how to internationalize course content or how to alter the process or content to respond to ESL needs.

Evaluation methods must also consider the changing student population. Ryan (2005, cited by Smith, 2011) “cautions against assessment that tests ‘the mastery of academic discourse’ (99) more than mastery of learning” (p.15). Smith argues that exams may handicap ELLs with the need to express themselves conceptually under time constraints, a potentially “discriminatory” practice that assesses language ability more than mastery of content: “The realities of a multicultural educational setting mean that the academic community cannot sensibly ignore the possibility that one of its prime assessment technologies may be unfairly discriminating against an increasing proportion of its student population” (p.22). Group work, discussions, and projects, on the other hand, contribute greatly to the academic and social experiences of students (Campbell & Li, 2008). Group work increases understanding of course content and academic and cultural expectations, enhances intercommunication skills, and offers the possibility of forming relationships with native students.
Holmes (2004) summarizes the challenges for host institutions. In order to become more culturally responsive, institutions, in Holmes’ view, must move from a “mind-set of a deficit to a difference view of Chinese learning and teaching methods” (p.304). In addition, Holmes advocates discipline-specific preparation in cultural, educational, and linguistic knowledge. Perhaps most importantly, Holmes recommends that host institutions identify ways to value international students, different business practices, and alternative world views. Reducing the deficit view and emphasizing the significant contributions that international students make through their varying practices and world views can invigorate the educational environment and strengthen the global business foundations of domestic, as well as international, students.

This literature review reveals that international students often enter Western universities unprepared to deal with academic expectations. Universities are equally unprepared to deal with these students. Pedagogical practice and the university culture have not adapted to a changing student population. Although research demonstrates the importance of teaching academic conventions and the language of the disciplines, little changes in pedagogy have occurred. Despite the benefits of internationalization, these benefits have not been exploited. The School of Business Administration at Dalhousie has attempted to address the needs of international students by providing discipline-specific language support for international students.

**Business Communication Support**

In Fall 2011, I started in a newly-created, part-time position supporting international students in the Commerce program and particularly with the course Business Communication, a required course for all Commerce students taken sometime prior to the first work term in the Winter of the second year of study. The purpose of the position was to address the needs of international students, to facilitate their success in the Commerce courses, and to prepare students for the co-op term.

During the fall term, students required assistance with assignments in the writing-focused Business Communication course as well as with assignments for an International Business course. In addition, students requested assistance with interpreting assignment expectations, understanding English colloquialisms and academic language in textbooks and mass media, and adjusting to Canadian culture. In the second term, students required assistance in preparing assignments for the oral portion of Business Communication as well as written assignments in other courses. The number of students requesting assistance dropped dramatically an average of 8 per day, with a high of 18, to an average of 6 per day, with a high of 14 students in one day. Discussions with students indicated four reasons for coming less regularly for help: First, second term courses generally did not require writing; and second, having attained merely average marks in the written section of Business Communication, students opted instead to focus on subjects in which they could succeed such as accounting. Third, students seemed more adjusted to academic demands and required less assistance dealing with the reading requirements and culture shock. Finally, my part-time schedule contributed to limited availability of services and did not fit well with many international student schedules.

Two one-hour conversation groups per week were also held in the second term. These sessions were designed to allow students an opportunity to practice oral presentations with a small and supportive audience and to provide a time to practice interview and conversation skills. Instructors were invited to share their expertise as occasional guests. These groups ranged in size from 2 to 6 and averaged 4 per session. While this number is disappointingly small, the students who attended on a regular basis were highly successful; they joined various societies on campus, participated in events such as the Research Symposium and First-Year Case Study Competition, attended job fairs, and interviewed for and received part-time positions in the community. The confidence of these students increased dramatically. To
develop cross cultural peer relationships, a student volunteer joined the conversation groups once per week. She was able to provide insights on course requirements and the job market, participated with three international students in the first-year case competition, and facilitated networking into the local community.

In addition, I engaged in a number of departmental activities in the Faculty of Management, including committees, case study competitions, research symposiums, and awards events, which familiarized me with perspectives and experiences of both students and faculty. I worked with students on co-op term reports and provided support for a student who was accused of plagiarism, helping him prepare for his hearing, understand the academic integrity process and his errors, and re-establish his confidence. During the second term I also attended classes in which international students were presenting to offer support, maintained regular contact with the Business Communication instructors, and began networking to facilitate the integration of international students. In addition, I helped redesign the assignments for a 100 level management course so that the assignments were more understandable to second language learners. These activities developed my familiarity with international student concerns.

To understand more fully the experiences of international students, I have engaged in research on international student education with a particular focus on Asian students, international education in Canada, and students in management fields. A chart outlining the key points of these studies was compiled to determine the aspects most applicable to our situation with the international commerce students at Dalhousie. This research has resulted in a compilation of the best practices as well as identified areas for future research.

**DISCUSSION**

Students in the Dalhousie Commerce program experience many of the problems addressed in the literature. My experiences with and observations of these students, interactions with instructors in meetings and classrooms, and readings of instructor and marker comments on student papers all indicate that the issues addressed in the literature are evident in our program. I did not conduct a scientific study, and the comments and papers shared with me represent a small percentage of the population. Nonetheless, I believe these observations may be generalized in assessing the international student experience in the Bachelor of Commerce program.

**Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

I have repeatedly heard from instructors that international students who come to a Canadian university must adapt to the culture as it is. Some instructors refuse to make accommodations for students and insist that international students who cannot adapt quickly are deficient and do not belong here. Although instructors often regard this deficiency as a language deficiency, these instructors make limited changes in their uses and displays of language. Some instructors do not provide students with Powerpoints, which would enable students to focus on listening to the lecture and enable them to review the notes later. The structure of lectures is often unclear and transitions and linking words are sometimes omitted. Students complain that some instructors turn their backs on students, denying them the opportunity to link the sound with the facial movements and expressions. And although instructors have been told that ESL students often cannot read cursive writing, instructors and markers continue to write in this form, forcing students either to ignore the feedback or to ask someone for help. These behaviours unintentionally serve to reify the dominant culture, exacerbate language barriers, and disadvantage international students.
Students have, however, often found the pedagogical approaches of instructors to be positively suited to their needs. International students refer to their instructors as generally “nice”, accessible, and helpful in understanding difficult concepts. They value instructors who post Powerpoints because they often miss information as it is delivered in class and having the slides allows a way to retrieve key words and concepts. They also voice a preference for instructors who ban distracting cell phone and computer use. Instructors who place students in intercultural groups for projects also tend to have more culturally inclusive classroom dynamics.

**Intercultural Peer Relationships**

Many first-year international students at Dalhousie indicate that they have no Canadian friends, even though some students have been here nearly 18 months, having attended an English language school before enrolling at Dalhousie. This social barrier is also evident in the classroom. In one class, for example, domestic students occupied the top left section of the classroom while international students occupied the lower right section. International students, however, express a desire for stronger relationships with Canadians.

Facilitation of cross-cultural communication has been successful in crossing this divide. Group projects in some first-year courses facilitated students’ interaction with peers. International students in the conversation groups indicate that they prefer intercultural group projects. Some teaching assistants in one course asked students to form their own groups, while other teaching assistants randomly assigned groups. Students strongly prefer assigned groups because when students placed themselves in groups, groups were either domestic or international and were rarely mixed. International students express a strong preference for multicultural groups and domestic student contact. Students report that it is initially quite uncomfortable to participate in a multicultural group; they report feeling embarrassed about their language skills, and they feel like outsiders. Despite this initial discomfort, students report feeling very satisfied with their group interactions by the end of the project period. They credit group projects as the most beneficial means of establishing friendships with Canadian peers. They do, however, indicate that Canadian students have a tendency to complete presentation assignments at the last minute. This tendency creates academic difficulties for international students, who prefer more time to practice.

Events such as the first-year case study competition also contribute to developing peer relationships. A first-year student served as a peer support volunteer and attended one of the weekly conversation groups. One of the international students told her that she was unable to fill a team for the case study competition and wanted to include a native speaker of English. The peer support volunteer enthusiastically joined the team, which then included one Malaysian, two Chinese and one Canadian. Surrounded by a largely domestic student population in the competition, these students initially appeared intimidated, but as they went through the day and observed and interacted with peers, their self-confidence deepened. The competition served well to integrate the students, who now report feeling more at ease in their peer group.

**Evaluation Methods**

Instructor and marker feedback contributes to students’ success and their understanding of their discipline. Students report appreciation of instructor and marker feedback; however, feedback on papers varies in quality and quantity. Students show me instructor feedback for three reasons. The first is to learn from errors and make necessary changes in later assignments. The second is to share their success. The third reason is to have me interpret the marker’s comments. International students cannot read cursive writing, nor do they understand abbreviated comments like “awk”. Students highly value instructor
comments. Their confidence and abilities improve through effective feedback, and they pay close attention to it.

The rubric used in business communication courses deducts 10% for a single spelling error. The rubric deducts 5% for each grammatical or mechanical error up to 20%. These penalties for errors have an extremely negative effect on English as a second language speakers. For one thing, they are highly focused on retaining this 30%. This focus inhibits the language play and experimentation that would lead to faster language development. Instead, students focus on simple words and manners of expression. Despite seeking help through the Dalhousie Writing Centre or from me as an international student business communication advisor, students often lost marks. At times this was a result of instructor or marker error. Students have returned to me with papers that have lost marks for run-ons that were not run-ons and for stylistic choices that reflected the voice of the student writer and did not contain errors but perhaps did not match the stylistic preference of the grader. One student lost the full 10% for spelling “practice” with a “c” rather than an “s”. Markers do not mark spelling errors beyond the first one or grammatical errors beyond four, so students do not receive feedback throughout the paper. This practice hinders language development.

In addition to inadequate feedback, some feedback has been culturally insensitive. For example, one student brought his paper to me so that I could read him the following cursive comment: “You write very well for a Chinese student.” Another student, who worked with me on a draft and had only two errors marked on the paper, one of which was a marker error, received the comment, “Your English needs a lot of work!!” These responses attribute deficiencies to cultural origin rather than linguistic error.

Evaluative tools must be designed to ensure that the course knowledge, rather than linguistic knowledge, is assessed. On an exam, one instructor asked students to create a business plan on a “shoestring” budget. The ESL speakers had no idea what this meant and could not answer the question. The exam, then, evaluated skills with English colloquialisms rather than business acumen. A quiz in another class asked students how to ensure a résumé received an adequate number of “hits”. The international students were unable to answer the question. Such language uses rely on knowledge that accumulates with cultural experience and assesses students on cultural familiarity rather than subject knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several measures can be taken to facilitate international student success. As noted in the literature, internationalization “rarely emerges spontaneously or in a naturally organised fashion” (Ward, 2001) and requires School of Business Administration commitment.

Assurance of English Competence

Although students should not be expected to be familiar with the colloquialisms and jargon of business English or the cultural elements that influence Canadian language and rhetorical devices, students should be able to construct simple English sentences, recognize and use basic vocabulary, and converse in English. Unfortunately, students who lack proficiency have been admitted into the program. Standards for admission should be raised.
Abandoning the Deficiency-based Perspective

As Zhang and Mi (2009) assert, “Rather than focusing on ‘what international students are not able to do,’ a deficiency-based perspective” educators must focus on “‘what international students are able to do’” (p.385). Morita (2004) argues that discussion topics must “incorporate international students' perspectives as legitimate sources of knowledge” (p. 599). Viewing international students as assets to our programs will enable us to develop a stronger community, potentially increasing our global appeal and our retention rates. Efforts should be made to capitalize on international student strengths—their perspectives on global markets and their ability to communicate cross-culturally, for example. A group project in which students are asked to analyze a business plan might capitalize on international student knowledge by asking students to assess a business from the student’s home country. The advantage of being familiar with the language used in the studied organization would empower the international student and enable the student to participate in group work equally.

Reciprocal Adaptation

As evident in the literature (e.g. Campbell &Li, 2008; Tran, 2011; Ward, 2001), the burden of adaptation is often on the international student. This view is evidenced at Dalhousie by the number of instructors who have stated that if students come to a Canadian university they must adapt to our ways. This belief, however, serves to elevate the position of the dominant culture and establishes a standard that international students cannot meet. Key to developing a successful program is the need to change the attitude that students are entering a Canadian university and must adapt to our ways. We are training students to enter a global business arena. We should model, for native and non-native speakers alike, the behaviour and attitudes that will be required in a global context. We need to demonstrate and model the methods of intercultural communication our students will employ in the future. Some of our current practices, unfortunately, serve to alienate the international student population. In a business context, this alienation of a key stakeholder group would be inappropriate.

Pedagogical approaches should adapt to a changing student population. It may initially appear difficult to adapt our teaching styles to an international audience; however, this adaptation is necessary to accommodate a changing student population and may, in fact, serve to make our delivery to all students clearer and more accessible. Adapting pedagogical approaches might include providing clear and consistent lecture formats, providing summaries of key points in lectures, defining key terms, allowing extra time for international students to formulate questions and answers, adjusting evaluation methods to enable international students to display knowledge, allowing more time for tests, and making effective use of Blackboard to support lecture and discussion material. The acceptance of international students into the program necessitates mutual adaptation.

Facilitation of Intercultural Peer Relationships

As Ward (2001) states, facilitation of intercultural relationships is necessary to maximize the benefits of internationalisation. Intercultural small group work, peer-pairing, and lecture groups facilitate intercultural communication, develop language skills in non-native speakers, assist international students in adapting to a new environment, help in eliminating negative stereotypes, and may increase retention rates. Collaborative learning enhances academic performance and creates social cohesion. Work in small groups offers peer learning support and creates a collaborative learning environment (Hebblethwaite, 2010). Ward (2001) effectively argues that peer interactions must empower the international student:

An important point for consideration, however, is that peer interactions should involve equal status contact. If programmes are set up to place local students in the expert or donor role and international students in the learner or recipient role, the programmes are less likely to empower the
international student and to enhance intergroup relations. It is important for international students to contribute something tangible to the interactive process. Whether their contribution is framed as cultural informant, language teacher or some other role, it is essential that their contribution can be recognised by both parties. (“Part II: Section Summary and Points for Consideration”, para.2)

Instructors who require group work, therefore, should seek to establish intercultural groups and identify ways to empower international students and ensure equal status among group members.

**Lecture groups also may be usefully incorporated.** Lecture groups are small groups within larger lecture classes. Students can be placed into intercultural groups to share lecture notes, participate in discussion, and complete in-class assignments. This approach would eliminate the physical barrier between domestic and international students and encourage cross-cultural communication.

**Content-based Language Instruction**

**Content-based language instruction should be offered throughout the Commerce and Management programs.** Content-based language instruction focuses on the teaching of language within the disciplines in which they are used. This recommendation is consistent with Zhang and Mi’s (2009) proposal that ESL support for listening and speaking skills should be provided in the first two years of university and for academic writing throughout the university years for linguistically challenging courses. Studies by Beasley and Pearson (1999) and Snow and Kamhi-Stein (1997) illustrate the benefits of collaboration between content and learning support specialists in increasing ELL success. Because the language of business is particularly heavy with jargon and colloquialisms and because the varied forms of business communication are discipline specific, language instruction and assistance are more effective within a business communication context. The Using English for Academic Purposes site ([http://www.uefap.com/vocab/vocfram.htm](http://www.uefap.com/vocab/vocfram.htm)) offers a list of the 2000 words occurring most frequently in academic English. This site contains a sublist of vocabulary in business. Instructors of first-year courses might be aware of the need to teach this vocabulary to all students. In addition, writing and communication support from people knowledgeable in business communication is necessary.

In addition to providing support throughout the undergraduate program, **writing requirements leading up to the co-op term should increase** to ensure that students continue to maintain and develop skills. Courses that require no writing assignments might be slightly redesigned so that students have more opportunities to write.

**Continue to provide international student communication support.** The language of business is particularly laden with colloquialisms, and the forms of business communication are purpose and audience specific. Students of Commerce and Management require support from people knowledgeable in the requirements of the discipline. The Commerce program has changed the order in which students take courses, and International Business will now precede Business Communication. International Business requires the ability to listen, read, and write in academic language. It also requires group work. International students report that this course is the first time they have ever done a group project. Therefore, there is a particular need for support attached to this course. Students may require, for example, assistance not just in referencing but in how to paraphrase and summarise explanations of group work expectations, and the teaching of terms common in business English. As Arkoudis and Tran (2010) suggest, positioning academic writing support in a service area away from the core disciplinary activities contributes to the lack of common approach and separates language and academic support from teaching.

**Facilitate learning of academic expectations by developing or providing uniform School of Business Administration standards and resources.** A single, preferably Canadian, handbook on
grammar, formatting, and referencing, required as a supplemental resource for all classes, would alleviate some of the issues with understanding expectations.

**Changes in Evaluation**

*Ensure evaluative tools fairly assess what is being taught.* Instructors should review evaluative tools to ensure they assess the course material rather than cultural experience or speed in reading or writing. Tools should be designed to enable students to demonstrate their knowledge.

*Rubrics should not penalize international students through overemphasis on spelling, grammar and mechanics.* Rubrics that are too severe in penalties for errors inhibit language growth by preventing students from experimenting with new terms and structures. Rubrics that deduct 10% for a single spelling error and 20% for more than four grammatical errors force students to simplify content to increase the odds of earning this 30%. Rubrics that overpenalize students for errors are counterproductive to successful language development.

*Provide more effective feedback in writing intensive courses.* Because markers in some courses currently stop marking spelling errors after a single spelling mistake and grammatical errors after four mistakes, students are denied feedback throughout the body of the paper. This lack of feedback results in limited potential for growth. As Arkoudis and Tran (2010) suggest, international students rely heavily on feedback as a way to understand the language of the discipline. Particularly in the first two years of study, greater attention should be paid to feedback as a way of developing academic literacy and teaching the conventions of the discipline.

*Train markers and TAs to be culturally sensitive.* Instructors, sessional assistants, and markers should be made aware of the problems in attributing errors to cultural deficiencies. Instructors could ask for blind review of papers marked by graders and TAs to lessen the likelihood of bias.

**Encourage Instructors to Conduct Research**

To familiarize instructors with issues regarding the international student population and to involve instructors in changing the culture of the organization, *research opportunities instigated by the changing dynamics should be pursued.* The literature review reveals gaps that might be exploited. For example, studies might be conducted on how Asian students perceive the quality of our education, methods of explicating academic conventions, cultural distance in small group work, domestic student perceptions of international students, differences between international and domestic student classroom behaviours, the teaching of content-specific discourse, Eastern student expectations of Western universities, and methods of retention.

Conducting research not only serves to further the research aims of the university but develops the knowledge necessary for changing the approach to this increasingly international student population. Instructors familiar with the needs of both international students and global industries will offer a richer educational environment, which would lead to a stronger Dalhousie reputation and higher retention rates.

**CONCLUSION**

The international student population in the Dalhousie Faculty of Management has grown substantially; however, we also have the highest attrition rates. The high attrition rates may be due to students’ lack of preparation for an English-speaking, Western university. Or, attrition may be due to the Faculty of Management’s inability to meet the needs of these students. It is likely that a combination of these problems has resulted in our inability to retain students. While the school has begun to offer
language assistance, this assistance has been pushed to support staff rather than institutionalized. In addition to offering individual help with language issues through a business communication advisor, the school also must make changes in culture and practice. The burden of adaptation cannot be placed solely on the international students. These changes do not have to compromise the content of the program. Culture changes can occur through the facilitation of peer relationships and a focus on the benefits international students bring to the program. Pedagogically, changes include designing lectures and assignments with this new, more international, audience in mind; providing adequate feedback; and creating assessment tools that enable EAL students to demonstrate knowledge. These changes can ensure retention and provide an opportunity to create a program that models best practice in international business education.

REFERENCES


