Culture or Language: 
Culturally-embedded Spoken English 
for Tertiary Students

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Content

1. International students’ socio-cultural needs
2. Monash University post-entry conversational English skills
3. Good Practice: Let’s Chat Program
4. Challenges and way forward
Monash University

One of Australia’s largest universities, over 70,000 students
Comprehensive and research intensive
Over 20,000 international onshore students
Over 10,000 students offshore
Multiple campuses in Melbourne and overseas
68% UG, 24% PG, 6% HDR students
International Students’ Challenges

1. Linguistic challenges
   - Academic English
   - Limited linguistic pragmatics
   - Limited exposure and practice

2. Social challenges
   - Disconnected from the educational institution
   - Unstable social network

3. Cultural challenges
   - Mismatched expectations
   - Misread situations
   - Unexpected reactions

Simultaneous multiple challenges
- Diminished sense of belonging
- Disengaged community
- Disengaged learner
- Limited success
- Unsure employment outcomes
Language challenges: English language proficiency

- English as a foreign language
- Focus on academic reading and writing
- Lack of conversational practices (exposure)
- Unfamiliarity with Australian English
- Absence of linguistic pragmatics
- Relying on code switching and translations

- Confidence
- Expression

- Social and academic success
- Employment outcomes
Major issues with conversational skills

1. Struggle with conversational vocabulary and pragmatics (rules of interaction)
2. Lack of socio-cultural knowledge (misreading and misinterpreting social situations, verbal courtesy)
3. Limited practice (and limited participation) in local community (house sharing, daily life)
4. Not sharing cultural backdrop to conversations (personal history, differences in prior educational experience)
Major implications of lack of conversational skills in the literature

- Significantly depletes students’ confidence, further impacting on students’ wellbeing and mental health (Robertson, 2000)

- Prevents students’ full participation in academic and wider community

- Contributes to students’ social isolation and creates a feeling of not belonging – leading to disengagement (Sawir et al, 2008)

- A major factor in creating a gap between international and domestic students

- Flow on effect on employability
Cultural Challenges

Culture is a ‘measuring tool’ - humans apply to make sense of the world around them. Culture translates into behaviour and expectations /reaction (perception of time, discussion contribution, goal or relationship focused, etc).

- Team work
- Discussion contribution
- Professional relationships
- Miscommunication
- Mismatched expectations

I am confident to work in a team of people from different cultural background (MU, Let’s Chat 2017 survey)
Students’ focus groups (2014, n=35)

‘I don’t know what to say to local people.’

‘I don’t go (to talk to the tutor), I don’t know what he’s saying.’

‘It is scary, I am too … embarrassing (to talk to local peers).’

‘We (international students) are different, we don’t want to say anything (in a tutorial), because no one will understand us.’

‘I don’t know what is polite.’
Employers

..are concerned that international students ‘won’t be able to communicate strongly enough’

‘students have difficulty conversing (…) in terms of small talk’

‘they only provide one word responses’ (at the interview)

‘there is a big discrepancy between their CV and performance in the interview’

Academic staff

The student will not pass her placement, he needs to improve her English communication.’

They (international students) are not seeking help, however their English is very poor.’

They (international students) do not participate in discussions. Maybe they don’t understand what has been said?’
Monash Practice: conversational English in cultural context

High-impact co-curricular program addressing conversational skills
Peer to peer ensures buy in and connectedness
Modelling, practicing and using language in context
Engaging students in social and cultural context
Providing necessary safe environment
Facilitating unique social connectedness
Project Conversational English: Let’s Chat is born

Stage 1 - Planning 2014

Stage 2 - Pilot 2015
    Conversational English (Let’s Chat)

Stage 3 - Operational 2016
    English Connect (Let’s Chat)

Growth and development
Let’s Chat: careful planning and monitored outcomes

Lesson plan
- Three foci: linguistic, socio-cultural and student engagement
- Pedagogically well structured lesson plans

Detailed instructions
- Detailed facilitators’ instructions
- Associated activities (dialogues, scenarios, games, simulations, videos)
- Specified desired outcomes and steps to attain these

Evaluation
- Pre and post program surveys (students)
- Facilitators’ feedback (Google forms)
- Anecdotal feedback (case studies)
- Monitored attendance
Let's Chat program

- Peer facilitated
- Interactive lessons
- Conversation practice
- Models and practices
- Talk and use of English
- Fun and engaging
- Low commitment 1h p/w
## Let’s Chat themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module 1</th>
<th>Module 2</th>
<th>HDR 1</th>
<th>HDR 2</th>
<th>Workplace Talk</th>
<th>Partners’ Module</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus: Expressing opinions and thoughts in the classroom and in the workplace, as well as developing cultural and linguistic skills appropriate to situations such as apologising or making requests.</td>
<td>Focus: Developing skills how to express one’s ideas and opinions in a professional setting, while working comfortably with a supervisor and across cultures.</td>
<td>Focus: This module is designed for participants who wish to transition effectively into the Australian work environment or English-speaking international workplaces, focusing on cross-cultural communication and developing flexible sociocultural and linguistic expertise.</td>
<td>Focus: Communication skills for professional workplace, strategies for communication in interviews and in professional settings.</td>
<td>Focus: This module is designed to help partners of PhD students with their transition into Australian society.</td>
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**Module 1**
- Introductions
- Expectations and reality of life in Australia and titles
- Conversation starters
- Conversation closers
- Body language
- Finding common ground
- Requests: politeness and indirectness
- Complaints and apologies
- Voicing opinions
- Phone conversations
- Australian slang
- Workplace communication

**Module 2**
- Finding common ground
- Language and culture
- Culture shock
- Social conventions
- Requests and politeness
- Complaints and apologies
-Voicing opinions
- Phone conversations
- Workplace communication
- Talking to medical professionals
- Social rituals

**HDR 1**
- Workplace expectations
- Employability skills
- Demonstrating experience
- Workplace feedback
- Small talk
- Sociability
- Entertaining
- Education systems
- Queer communities in Australia
- Indigenous Australia

**HDR 2**
- Interview Language
- Professional workplace conversations
- Networking

**Workplace Talk**
- 1. Interview Language
- 2. Professional workplace conversations
- 3. Networking

**Partners’ Module**
- Introductions
- Expectations and reality of life in Australia
- Conversation starters
- Conversation closers
- Body language
- Finding common ground
- Language and culture
- Culture shock
- Social conventions
- Requests and politeness
- Complaints and apologies
- Voicing opinions
- Phone conversations
- Workplace communication
- Talking to medical professionals
- Social rituals
- Education systems
- Queer communities in Australia
- Indigenous Australia
- Career Connect.
Authentic material

Scripts and role plays
Games
Short videos
Scenarios

Example:

You did not understand the assignment topic but did not approach the tutor. You now realise that you cannot finish your assignment by the due date. Approach your course coordinator to discuss the possibility of an extension for your assignment.
In class short videos are used to present real situations as a background to discussion, model conversation and for questioning.

Videos showcasing situations: facilitators’ input: scripts written, storyboarding, acting
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<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>6 Modules</th>
<th>Topics as chosen by students</th>
<th>38 hours per week</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>96% international, 63% PG</td>
<td>70% students new to the program, 30% returning</td>
<td>62.6% of students in their first year in Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitators</td>
<td>41 peer facilitators from all faculties</td>
<td>Selection process</td>
<td>5 days face to face + online training + prof. development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Contact Hours/Week</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Employed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2845</td>
<td>68</td>
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In 2017, the university saw an increase in students from 1929 to 2845, a decrease in the number of students employed from 41 to 68, and a growth in the number of students from 31% BusEco, 27% Edu, and 13% Arts to 34% BusEco, 21% Edu, and 13% IT.
Survey Results (n=1286 pre-survey, 38.3% response post-survey) Sem. 1 2017

Figure 1: I am confident in speaking English

Figure 2: I can understand native speakers of Australian English
Survey Results

Figure 3: I use English in my day to day life

Figure 4: I feel confident when I interact with this group of people (from different CAL backgrounds)
Post-program survey: To what extent has LC met your expectations?

- To develop my Australian cultural knowledge:
  - A lot: 64.6%
  - Some: 34.6%

- Provide opportunities to talk to other students:
  - A lot: 75.5%
  - Some: 23.6%

- Provide opportunities to meet other international students:
  - A lot: 62.9%
  - Some: 33.3%

- To contribute to my academic performance:
  - A lot: 38.8%
  - Some: 51.1%

- Give me a more confident speaker of English:
  - A lot: 62.0%
  - Some: 38.0%

- Opportunities to talk to domestic students:
  - A lot: 38.8%
  - Some: 46.8%
Let's Chat has helped me feel more confident in spoken English

Let's Chat has helped me understand what is expected of me at Monash
Let's Chat has encouraged me to participate in other university programs
Major impacts of Let’s Chat – Summary

Significantly raised confidence in students’ abilities in spoken communication

Significantly improved understanding (linguistic and cultural decoding) of (Australian English speaking) academic staff and peers

Increased use of English outside the curriculum

Significantly better understanding of university expectations

Significantly increased student engagement on campus

Significantly improved understanding of Australian culture
Challenges and questions

- Co-curricular programs – less impact than in curriculum
- Uncapped growth?
- Sustainability
- Attrition rates
- Locations (multiple campuses)
- Facilitators’ recruitment and training

- Peer facilitators vs professional staff?
- Accompanying online resources?
- Discipline-specific content?
Bibliography


Thank you

Monash University
English Connect

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