

Students as ‘Resourceful Peers’

*What does this mean in the context of the
Research Project module of an English
Language Teaching master’s programme?*

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Rationale

- The research project aimed to explore the term 'resourceful peers' in the context of the MA Education (ELT).
- The cultural diversity of the class encouraged us to explore what resourceful peers meant to the participants.
- The Research Project module on the MA programme formed the basis for this research project.
- The project is based on previous research on intercultural learning.
- The project is funded by the KU Learning and Teaching Development Fund.

Setting and Sample

- The participants were from the 2013/14 cohort.
- The research was conducted at the end of the taught part of the module.
- Of the cohort's 21 students, 11 participated in the online questionnaire – 1 male, 10 female.
- UK students: 4, European students: 5, Overseas students: 2.
- Ethnic groups: White: 6, Black/African/Caribbean: 2, Other: 3.
- Tutor response: 1

Contextualisation

- The research topic is part of recent learning, teaching and research strategy at faculty and university level (e.g. Led by learning).
- The research is also embedded within recent internationalisation discourse, where a shift away from deficit and assimilatory approaches is taking place.
- ‘any culture can be a resource’ (Jin and Cortazzi, 2013, p. 1)
- ‘using the perspectives, knowledge and attitudes of international students as a resource for learning’ (Ryan, 2011, p. 633)

Data

- The data concerned aspects of the taught Research Project module and students' views towards various activities which sought to engage students with intercultural learning.
- The vast majority of responses in terms of experiences relating to interactivity were positive.

Learning from other students

- 10 out of the 11 students thought at the start of the course that they might learn from other students on the course.
- Having completed the module, 9 students said that they learnt from other students.

Learning on the module

- Students' varied cultural backgrounds impacted learning (e.g. 'refine my research questions'; 'obtained resourceful information').
- The interactive nature of the various activities elicited intercultural experiences (e.g. 'because of the way the activities were organised ... they encouraged people to give their own point of view without judging anyone').
- The interactivity of the module was perceived to be helpful both on a subject and personal level (e.g. 'It helped me to be more reflective and critical about my topic'; 'feeling assured I was on track').

Learning Activities

- Of the 7 activities on the module, students found **‘Learning through artefacts’** (10), **‘Poster presentations’** (9), and **‘World café conversations’** (8) particularly useful, with regards to opportunities for intercultural learning.
- **‘Critical friendships’** (3) and **‘Writing retreat’** (1) were found to be less useful.

Student comments

- ‘the activities ... involved some communicative interaction between the students, allowing us ... to speak or listen to a wider variety of people in the course’.
- ‘In the induction day ... I must admit that our course director ... was right when she said this is an opportunity you do not get them every day in life so try to make the most out of it’.
- ‘Those activities allowed more the expression of ideas and personal feelings’.

Student comments (continued)

- ‘I had already engaged with other students before but the activities certainly helped me bond more with other students’.
- ‘because of these I had in-depth conversations I might not have had otherwise, and that provided a foundation to encourage out of classroom conversation’.
- ‘During the support sets, my peers did not really help ... One of them did not even take part in the group’.
- ‘I was more interested in my research area and work on my own as they were not committed to the support meetings’.

Teacher's role (Students' view)

- All students agreed that teachers on the course played a central role in encouraging interaction.
- 'they were very supportive and they always wanted us to interact with the other students'.
- 'during poster presentations ... I would have wanted all the lecturers to be present as they eventually became our respective supervisors'.

Teacher's role (Teacher's view)

- 'to create a space [ACTION] ... with a purpose [WHY]' – 'beyond putting culturally diverse students in the same classroom'
- 'From the beginning of a semester' [TIME]
- 'students can be teachers and teachers must also be learners' [CHALLENGES / BOUNDARIES OF SUCH AN APPROACH?]

Understandings of resourceful peers

- Other students' experiences as a resource, enabling independent reflection and self evaluation.
- The way activities were organised provided opportunities for interaction.
- It helped students as *students* but also as *teachers*.
- Interaction and support inside and outside of class ('how to approach others'; 'in-depth conversations').
- Interaction encouraged trusting relationships ('you can count on them') – cf. tutor response: Resourceful peers 'emphasises students' responsibility'

Influence on students' teaching

- 'The experience will definitely be useful in my ELT – I will aim to apply the technique where possible in my future teaching practice'.
- 'This understanding allows me to keep open minded and to look at 360°'.
- 'I'll always strive to keep people around me with whom I can have constructive discussions based on topics or issues within our work'.

Conclusions

- The data showed how cultural diversity might help to establish a link to students' individual research projects and their learning as part of the module.
- Encouragement of interactivity throughout the module emerged as vital, thereby fostering understanding of the usefulness of interaction.
- The research enabled reflection of how the module will be structured in the future (e.g. earlier introduction of critical friendship groups).