Designing Investigation Methods to Research Indiscernible Impediments of an Invisible Equity Group in Australian Higher Education

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Abstract: Research related to Australian Indigenous people is of national significance and is full of challenges as well as opportunities for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. It requires cultural sensitivity, innovation and pragmatic approaches to frame the enquiry to reach its intended outcomes. Indigenous students are the most marginalised equity group at Australian universities and some aspects of their access and success at university, especially those related to the use of English as the sole medium of instruction, are yet to be explored thoroughly. A grounded approach to the research was guided by the advice of Indigenous mentors of the researcher. The host university's strong commitment to the compliance of ethical practices for Indigenous research combined with the collective experiences of the mentors and the researcher in Indigenous education informed and guided the drawing up of a pragmatic and culturally sensitive research framework. This paper outlines the development of a framework to investigate the potential language barriers encountered by Indigenous students from EALD (English as an additional language or dialect) backgrounds at a regional Australian university.

Keywords: EALD, Education, Indigenous education, Higher education, English as an additional language

Introduction

This chapter provides a description of the genesis of the research plan and its purpose during the doctoral research into the potential barriers encountered by Indigenous students from English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) backgrounds at an Australian university. Difficulties with accessing course materials and performing well in assessments is part of student experiences and in general, research into the experiences of Indigenous students is limited (Day and Nolde, 209). It is also noted that these students face multitude of barriers (see Oliver, Rochecouste, Dann, & Grote, 2014).

The researcher's EALD, multilingual, multicultural personal backgrounds and professional practices helped relate with EALD Indigenous students' numerous English and academic language issues at the university. It has been confirmed that learning in a language not spoken at home would disadvantage learners (Siegel 2010) and most Indigenous students learn Aboriginal English (AE) and Standard Australian English (SAE) at home (Sharifian, 2006). English language and literacy skills have already been found critical for successful student engagement in tertiary education ((Malcolm & Rochecouste, 2003; Malcolm, Rochecouste, & Hayes, 2002). Insufficient English language proficiency and academic language skills could therefore become detrimental to course outcomes, and hence it was hypothesised that Indigenous students from EALD backgrounds could be facing the same or similar difficulties like any other 'non-English-speaking' student. Researching this initially required establishing the presence of these students at the university; however, the literature review undertaken only confirmed their invisibility (Koramannil, 2016). Further, researching this required examining the English and academic language barriers they encountered.

Researching least ventured-in areas provides augmented challenges and opportunities

The Research Context

This research situates centrally within the domain of Indigenous Education an area that has had 'ongoing policy focus and repeated official inquiry' (Gray and Beresford, 2008). Indigenous higher education itself has a visibly significant history (see Wilson and Wilks, 2015) and has its inherent complexities.

Indigenous Australians are the traditional owners of their respective territories in Australia and therefore, they are also the established custodians of the languages, culture, spirituality and the wellbeing of the land. However, Colonization of Australia took away their right to their land, their right to speak the language and the freedom to practice their culture. Even after the referendum that provided Indigenous Australians with Australian voting rights and citizenship, their socio-economic conditions, life expectancy and participation rates in education and employment have remained far below the national standards. An alarmingly wider gap exists between the living conditions of Indigenous Australians and the mainstream Australian society.

This gap is significantly evident in education as well. There are far fewer Indigenous students than their mainstream counterparts attending schools in Australia and those who attend fare relatively far below the national averages of academic performances. Indigenous participation in higher education has also remained far below parity compared with non-Indigenous Australians (see Day, Nakata, Nakata and Martin, 2015).

Indigenous Australians form the most disadvantaged equity group in Australian higher education. Many of them face many traditional barriers encountered by equity groups in general.
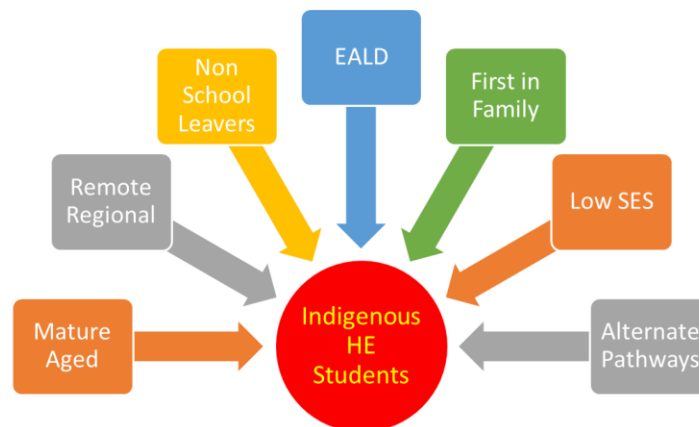

Figure 1. EALD background of indigenous students: One among the many possible disadvantages

To name a few, low socioeconomic conditions, health problems, impediment of distance for students from regional and remote Australia, and having to seek alternate entry pathways to university, have posed traditional barriers for these first Australians. Indigenous students, especially from the rural and remote parts of Australia, speak a language other than English as their first language. This could be a traditional Indigenous language, a Creole or one of the many varieties of Aboriginal English. In fact, many of these Indigenous Australians speak more than one language at home and in their communities and for some, English could be the third, fourth or even the fifth language they speak.

The problem

The evident disparity in Indigenous students gaining university education in Australia is sustained by low rates of enrolment coupled with significantly lower retention and completion rates (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012, Wilks & Wilson, 2015, and Edwards & McMillan, 2015).

There are many problems that are attributed for the considerably poor rate of participation of Indigenous Australians in higher education. Some of the traditional impediments that have been identified and intensely researched have gained acknowledgement and greater acceptance in the mainstream society. O'Rourke (2008) looked at the perceived institutional barriers for Indigenous students in the universities and identified six such obstacles. There is clear understanding that remote and regional Australia encounter notable educational

disadvantage (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000) and many Indigenous students reach universities after overcoming this 'tyranny of remoteness'.

Another barrier that has been identified as preventing Indigenous students from accessing education is the significantly low social economic status (SES) backgrounds they come from (see Blyth 2014, and Cardak and Ryan 2006). This not only incapacitates these students from accessing resources but also has a significant impact on their health and wellbeing. It is well documented that a high proportion of Indigenous people and therefore, Indigenous students, face severe health problems. The significant gap between the life expectancies of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is enough evidence for this aspect as a barrier.

Poor attendance, early attrition, and health issues among other factors have set traditional barriers for Indigenous school education (Gray and Beresford, 2008) and this, in turn, have proven to be impediments for Indigenous students aspiring for University education. As a result, many Indigenous students reaching Australian universities are mature aged and/or non-school leavers. Many Indigenous students at the universities also take the VET (vocational education and training) pathways through which they are admitted to undergraduate programs at the university by virtue of a Certificate III or IV qualification in any area. This is made possible through the widening participation agenda and policy initiatives to improve Indigenous enrolment at universities and this has provided Indigenous students with multiple pathways to Australian universities.

A significant fact and a potential barrier that never gets considered in this context is the fact that many Indigenous Australians do not speak Standard Australian English (SAE) as their traditional home language and this cohort remains invisible within the system (see Koramannil 2016). As a result, none of the above-mentioned pathways are equipped with mechanisms to ascertain whether these students bring enough English and academic language skills to the university and if they are study-ready in terms of their English and academic language competencies.

A student who receives a letter of offer to study at the university can be assumed to believe that they have met prerequisites to commence university education. Similar assumptions are made also by their family and relevant university staff including lecturers, mentors and course coordinators. Thus, the university system and people who engage with these students at the university remain oblivious to a barrier that the students almost certainly encounter on commencement of university education.

Initial efforts by the researcher to understand English and academic literacy barriers faced by Indigenous students at Australian universities provided little evidence or insight. Other than an earlier attempt by the researcher (see Koramannil 2015) to highlight the linguistic similarities between EALD Indigenous students and others from similar English language backgrounds, there was significantly negligible reference to this problem in research literature as well as in relevant policy documents. The invisibility of the linguistic identities of Indigenous students was thus established in a preliminary literature review by the researcher (see Koramannil 2016) which brought out the potential for related language barriers.

The Context of English Language Requirements

Australia has traditionally been a very popular destination for international students and their numbers continue to grow (Department of Education and Training, 2018). One key reason for this popularity is the fact that Australia offers education only in English and many students coming to Australia benefit from the English language exposure they perhaps do not have in their home countries. Also, traditionally the importance of having adequate English language proficiency has been identified, acknowledged and enacted in policy documents and admission practices at Australian education institutions. As a result, English language proficiency is included as one of the key prerequisites for international students' entry to Australian universities. See Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson (2012) for an elaborate discussion on English language standards in Australian higher education.

Today, there are multiple ways in which aspirant international students can demonstrate their English proficiency (see O'Loughlin, 2015). This could be done by scoring the threshold or above threshold English language proficiency benchmark in one of the acceptable international English language examinations including IELTS, TOEFL and PTE. Students may also produce evidence that their schooling and/or previous qualifications were gained in acceptable English language environments to gain admission to Australian universities.

In case they don't meet any of these English language criteria, there is the alternative of dedicated English language pathways to enter Australian universities. These courses are offered through what is known as ELICOS or English language intensive courses for overseas students. This systemic approach to English language proficiency requirements is based on the premise that it would be difficult for students from EALD backgrounds to study at universities that strictly deliver English medium instruction (EMI). Therefore, the courses offered under the ELICOS system follow ESL or English as a second language teaching and learning practices.

There is also a plethora of evidence showing that adequate English language proficiency is essential to be successful in the Australian job market as Arkoudis et al (2009) have discussed in their report. Also see Roshid & Chowdhury, (2013) and Pandey & Pandey (2014) for some relevant discussion. Most professional registration authorities require Australian graduates from EALD backgrounds and skilled graduates from overseas to demonstrate prescribed English language proficiency levels for obtaining professional registration. Lockwood & Raquel (2019) and Manias & McNamara (2016) provide specific discussions around this.

It is in this midst and from an EALD perspective that the case of EALD Indigenous students must be viewed. The hypothesis for this research is based on this very understanding that like their fellow Australians and international counterparts from EALD backgrounds, the EALD Indigenous students would also need adequate English and academic language proficiency to successfully access education at Australian universities where English is the only medium of instruction and where English is also critical for a successful entry into the job market.

However, these Indigenous students are treated like mainstream Australian students from anglophone backgrounds. The system does not differentiate Indigenous students based on their language backgrounds, especially their EALD backgrounds. Since Australian students educated at Australian schools are presumed to have acquired English and academic language proficiencies, it is assumed that they come to University with adequate English and academic language capabilities. Subsequently the EALD Indigenous students become obscure and invisible in this midst; the system does not require them to confirm if they have adequate English proficiency to study at Australian universities.

The Hypothesis

All Indigenous students would have had access to Australian school education, but this does not change the fact that EALD Indigenous students neither speak English as their first language nor do they speak English as a main language at home. Therefore, these students could reach universities with inherent handicaps of not having appropriate control over the medium of instruction like other international students from EALD backgrounds and could have limitations with required proficiency in academic language and literacy to undertake university education. Concurring this, Stewart and Shalley (2017) had noted that inadequate English language skills prevents Indigenous students from progressing beyond Certificate III qualification in the vocational education sector. Therefore, it is hypothesised that EALD Indigenous students will have the same or similar difficulties and barriers in accessing Australian university education like other students whose primary language is not English. Since a lack of English and academic language competencies impedes their success at universities and in the job markets, it significantly disadvantages EALD Indigenous students.

To verify this hypothesis, an in-depth investigation must be conducted. Given the complexity of this context and the lack of previous similar studies, no existing, comparable or compatible research framework was readily available for this research. This necessitated the designing of a research framework inclusive of research methodologies and methods that support the proposed investigation, data collection, analysis and the findings.

As discussed earlier, this inquiry was about significantly invisible language barriers EALD Indigenous students encounter at Australian universities and is situated in a myriad of historical, socioeconomic and academic complexities. Therefore, the best way to get closer to the problem was to get closer to the Indigenous students who could be at the coalface of the barrier.

Since the research input would entirely depend on the insights and experiences of EALD Indigenous students, a grounded approach became the natural choice for this research. Since the barriers would be directly experienced by the EALD Indigenous students, a phenomenological investigation into the lived experiences of the research participants contained in a case study framework was designed. This blended investigation framework helped

the researcher cover the key bases of the problem and its context and further, a social justice perspective would be employed in the analysis of the data to ensure a human touch to the research outcomes.

The preliminary step in designing the framework of investigation for this research was to identify and confirm the key reference points. This was relatively easy, taking the experiential perspective of the EALD Indigenous university students into consideration. At the university, these students interact with three groups of facilitators namely, the academics who teach them, the Indigenous support staff, and the tutors who provide tutorial support to the students who need it.

It is understood that there are three key groups of university staff who had a direct say in the lives of EALD Indigenous students at the university. The insight of these three cohorts of university staff into the potential problems around English and academic language barriers experienced by the EALD Indigenous students under their care informed and guided this investigation.
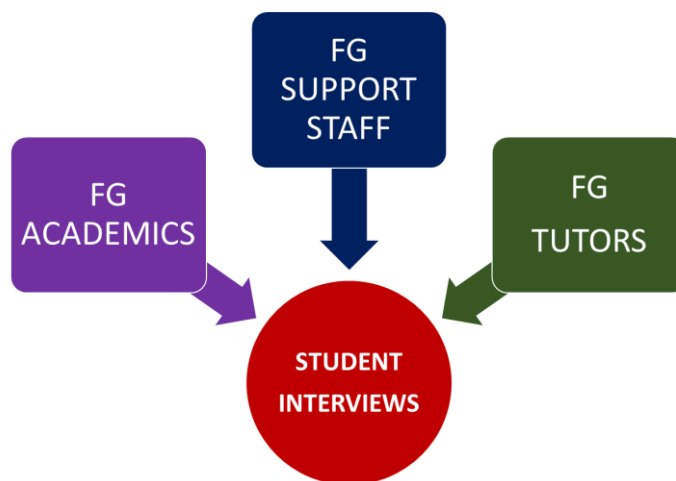

Figure 2. Focus groups enabled framing of questions to student participants

Since these groups play influential roles in the life of every Indigenous student at the University, their professional perceptions could provide valuable insight into the manifestation of potential English and academic language barriers encountered by these students. This insight would provide the investigational framework to understand the student standpoint about the language barriers they face, the implications, and the potential solutions.

The Assumable

While developing the research methodology framework, a few assumptions were made based on the researcher's academic background, professional practices and experiences as a lecturer who has taught EALD Indigenous students for many years.

Of the three key points of contact for EALD Indigenous students at the University, the most important is the interaction, face to face or online, between students and their lectures. This could also happen through the discussion boards where students interact with their lecturers and their peers. The second point of contact for these students is the Indigenous student support centre wherein the support staff and support lecturers meet students who approach them and provide support and guidance to seek solutions for both academic and personal issues. It is these support staff who help students apply for scholarships, provide support with enrolments and assist in every other important matter related to their University education. The support provided also includes provision of additional tutorial support to students facing difficulties with learning. The third and the final key cohort of contact for EALD Indigenous students are the tutors who work with them usually on a one-on-one basis. These tutors help unpack the content of the course and help the students understand the assessments and task requirements. They also assist students in finding appropriate resources and in planning and submission of assignments on time. These tutors therefore have the most authentic and intimate understanding of difficulties and barriers faced by their students.

These three groups of university staff play very distinct but vital roles in the university life, university experience and hence, success of EALD Indigenous students at Australian universities. Therefore, their

perspectives about the role played by English and academic language proficiencies in the lives of these students were used to scaffold the inquiry into student experiences and perspectives. The insights gained from separate focus groups of these three cohorts helped design the warm-up questionnaire and in-depth interview questions used with the study participants who were exclusively EALD Indigenous students.

The researcher had expectations that these groups would have a clear understanding of the role of English language in the transactions related to teaching and learning at the university, but the focus groups brought in the realisation that not everyone would have a clear concept and understanding of the challenges encountered by people at English medium universities with limited English and academic language and literacies. A reason for this apparent insufficient perception could be the fact that a vast majority of university teaching staff are not necessarily trained in ESL pedagogies and therefore may not have adequate awareness of the issues their EALD students face.

To gain an empirical insight into realistic barriers and difficulties encountered by EALD Indigenous students, it was thus necessary to ensure that these three reference groups had an opportunity to understand the context and the focus of this research in relation to the importance of English and academic language proficiencies at Australian universities. Towards this objective, the focus groups were briefed about the research and research context and a plain language statement was provided to each participant.

As per this design and as per the research terms and conditions approved by the University Human Ethics Committee at CDU, all efforts were made to ensure that the participants of the focus groups clearly understood their roles and expectations in the context of the research. In addition to providing the plain language statement and research synopsis, formal written consent was obtained from every participant.

During the focus group discussions, the participants were guided towards potential language related difficulties and struggles encountered by Indigenous students during their interactions at the University. They were encouraged to share their experiences of having to deal with situations or issues faced by Indigenous students wherein English and academic language had an important role to play. General aspects of teaching and learning, participation and assessments as well as students' ability to understand and articulate the key concepts taught in the class in prescribed academic formats like essays, presentations and reports were kept in clear focus.

The Inferable

The three focus groups provided valuable insights into English and academic language related issues face by EALD Indigenous students and the insights thus gained where used in framing the interview questions and the preliminary questionnaire for the student participants.

Due to the complex and broader context of the use of English as the sole language of teaching and assessment of EALD Indigenous students at Australian universities and given that there were almost no previous relevant investigations into this aspect, a considerable number of questions seeking clarity around the potential complexities emerged. Every one of these questions was relevant and crucial for the research and could not be excluded so, containing them within a manageable timeframe emerged as a challenge.

The solution was to separate questions that needed in-depth answers, practically creating two sets of questions. The first set with 30 questions was labelled as the Preliminary Questionnaire and included preparatory simple and basic questions about the importance of English and the day to day experiences of using it at the university. This worked as a set of warm up questions and helped orient the students towards the more focussed discussion of the role of English as a bridge or a barrier in their experience and success at the university. The second set had eight key questions for an in-depth exploration of English related student experiences of the EALD Indigenous participants.

For the first set with a wide range of short answer questions, the Likert scale was employed to seek graded answers and understand the general trends. The second set of eight questions was used to generate deeper and elaborate discussions with the EALD Indigenous students to capture their standpoint. It also sought their attitude towards the use of English at universities along with potential solutions they could suggest.

The outcome of these questionnaires was that it provided a logical and structured research instrument enabling engaging conversations with each of the eight student participants. It also helped elicit responses about an exhaustive aspect of the use of English and academic language in accessing university education, resulting in

rich data with considerable depth of student experiences and an unambiguous articulation of their standpoints. The data thus collected had provided for the key findings, but the researcher felt something further was missing. After much deliberation and debriefing with the principal supervisor, it emerged that the research would become completely meaningful only with the input from Indigenous students who in the past would have achieved significant success and achievement in the academy. Thus, the framework was improved with the inclusion of the perspectives of Indigenous leadership in Australian universities as they represent successful Indigenous students and are role models for the current and future students.
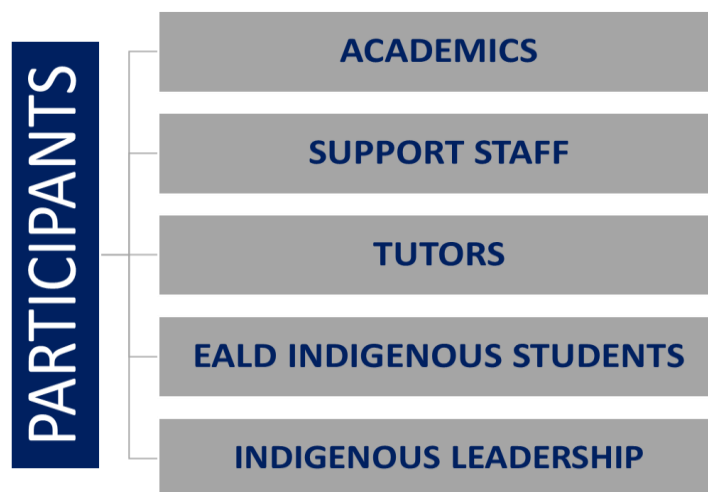

Figure 3. Key stakeholders in the research context

The researcher approached senior Indigenous academics at a few universities and three participants supported the research and agreed to contribute to the research. These Indigenous leaders were currently serving at various higher education institutions at the level of pro-vice chancellor or above. With their willing participation, the research became inclusive of the five key stakeholders integral to the context of the research, the problem and the possible solutions.

The insight from the Indigenous leadership in the academy provided both authentic and official points of view and helped the research become future-relevant as it included the aspirations articulated from a strong Indigenous standpoint.

Collectively, the focus groups provided guidance and concurrence to the preliminary questionnaire and the in-depth student interview questions. Later, the student contributions helped formulate the questions for the short interviews with Indigenous leaders in the academy.
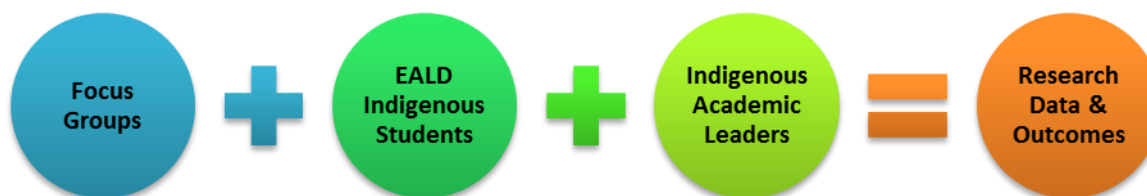

Figure 4. Research participants and data output process

Thus, the focus groups, the EALD Indigenous students and the Indigenous leaders made coherent and cohesive contributions as respective representatives of the recent past, the contemporary present and the imminent future. It also enabled a 360° analysis of the hypothesis through an elaborate investigation with an exhaustive focus on all relevant aspects, big or small.

Only a qualitative and grounded approach could have enabled the blending of phenomenology and case study methods while the critical race theory instilled the Indigenous standpoint into the research which brings out empirical insights about an extremely significant and yet, systemically invisible barrier the EALD Indigenous students could be facing at the English-only Australian universities.

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