



## Global English Corner: International conversations through Elluminate and WordPress

**Carolyn Woodley**

Faculty of Business and Law  
Victoria University, Melbourne.

**Lisa Curran**

Faculty of Business and Law  
Victoria University, Melbourne.

This paper reports on a pilot project undertaken by Victoria University (VU) with three partner universities in China (Sichuan University, Henan University and Liaoning University). The *Global English Corner* project uses online technologies to both encourage interactions between students in China and Melbourne and enhance the English language proficiency of international students for whom English is not a first language. The *Global English Corner* project also explores how technologies might achieve a greater comparability of the student experience on- and offshore in supporting the language development of international students. The *Global English Corner* pilot uses the online conferencing tool Elluminate together with a WordPress blog to conduct and support English conversations between business students in China and two student peers in Melbourne, Australia.

This paper presents findings extrapolated from weekly evaluations of the *Global English Corner* project provided by English teachers in China via email as well as data from an online survey completed by student participants in the project at the end of the project. The end-of-project survey provides important feedback from students about the value of conducting frequent online conversations and covers the popularity of various functions of Elluminate. Student and teacher views of the project, including the value of the project for developing language skills and cultural competencies, are extremely high with nearly 90% of students claiming they were more confident to speak English having been involved in the project and most of the students self-reporting an improvement in English proficiency. Beyond this small project, it is clear that other teaching and administrative uses of Elluminate could be supporting offshore teaching programs. Certainly, the project acknowledges that a more widespread *Global English Corner* program could aid the transition of international students to Australia and achieve a greater comparability of language support options and student engagement activities on- and offshore.

## Introduction

This paper reports on a project, *Global English Corner*, which was funded in a 2010 round of International Teaching and Learning Grants at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne. These grants specifically intend to support collaborative projects between VU teaching and support staff and VU partner institute staff in China, Malaysia and Hong Kong in the scholarship of learning and teaching. These projects require teaching and support staff on- and offshore to collaborate to improve the curriculum and pedagogy of international programs and to enhance the overall quality of the student experience.

International Teaching and Learning Grants try to achieve multiple outcomes: improvement of the student learning experience, professional development for teaching staff involved in the project, enhanced capacity to participate in the scholarship of learning and teaching for teaching staff and an enhanced relationship between VU staff in Melbourne and teaching staff in partner universities offshore. There has been much talk of developing an internationalised pedagogy at VU (Woodley & Pearce, 2007; Woodley, Simmons & Licciardi, 2010). An internationalised pedagogy is fundamentally a teaching approach in which the teacher is explicitly aware of both their own educational assumptions and students' learning preferences and educational traditions. Internationalised teaching approaches aim of not disadvantaging any student. VU's International Teaching and Learning projects offer a significant means to encourage a more internationalised teaching approach with a greater awareness of varying educational traditions and an increased appreciation of how cultural issues might impact on the learning experience.

In 2010, the International Teaching and Learning Grants stressed the importance of two themes: the collaboration between VU and VU partner institute teachers and the scholarship of learning and teaching. The *Global English Corner* has proven to be a highly collaborative and reciprocal project that has provided a model of support for a range of other collaborative activities between VU in Melbourne and partners offshore. It has also presented considerable information about cross-cultural interactions and using technology to support language learning.

## Background: Global English Corner

The *Global English Corner* project encourages the uptake of technologies to improve the student experience for students in China who are both learning English and undertaking VU degrees in English. The project uses technology to emphasise the societal aspects of learning – especially language learning. The *Global English Corner* pilot has explored how business students in Melbourne can provide peer support to business students in China. The principal aim of the project is to support international students to develop spoken English language skills in extracurricular activities. Students in Melbourne conducted semi-structured conversations with students in three different partner universities in China using the closed space of the Elluminate online classroom, 'an integrated set of online presentation tools' (Stevens, 2007: 2), together with the public space of a WordPress *Global English Corner* blog. These two programs together create a combination of private classroom and public discussion area that supports independent learners and speakers and writers of English wherever they are. Because *Global English Corner* combines synchronous and asynchronous communication, a particularly rich asynchronous learning experience can be achieved (Hrastinski, 2008) and students have great flexibility to access and contribute to the conversations in different ways and at different times.

The *Global English Corner*, albeit in a small way, begins important interactions between domestic and international interactions. Through Elluminate and the *Global English Corner* blog, a pair of student peers in Melbourne conducts semi-structured conversations with groups of students offshore. In Elluminate, students can both hear and see each other – and they can simultaneously txt chat, share documents, images and websites and use the collaborative whiteboard function of Elluminate. Every week for 8 weeks in semester 1, 2011, the two students in Melbourne spoke to three separate groups of students in China at Sichuan University, Henan University and Liaoning University. Each week, there was a scheduled time in which these different groups met in Elluminate to discuss a range of themes that had been partially determined by student requests either the week before or as noted on the *Global English Corner* blog. This project, then, was keen to explore how online technologies might encourage student-driven interactions between students in China and Melbourne, enhance English language proficiency for international students for whom English is not a first language and suggest other creative ways that technologies might be used to teach, evaluate teaching, support and connect learners. The project also supported all participants – students and staff – in developing communication skills, including intercultural communication skills and technological skills, to enable global conversations.

## Learning English in China

English proficiency is vital for Chinese students who intend to study an English-language degree either in China or in an English-speaking country. English proficiency is also important to enhance these students' employability prospects, especially if they intend to work globally or for a global company in China. Given the lack of English speaking opportunities for most Chinese students of English in China, the phenomenon of the English Corner has emerged to provide a forum for speaking, listening and using English. The English Corner is 'a characteristically Chinese approach to informal practice' (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002: 60) that helps students learning English in a foreign context to develop and extend their aural and oral English language proficiency. English Corners can be student- or teacher-driven English conversation sessions. They are usually informal and extra-curricular and they might be conducted in a park, a university library or other public space. English Corners are a cheap, grassroots means of providing practice to English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in China (Gao, 2009). The capacity of Elluminate to capture the social language learning so evident in the English Corner phenomena makes this technological approach a sustainable and affordable language support option for Australian universities with educational programs offshore. Furthermore, Elluminate sessions can be recorded and conversations can be used by learners as an additional resource. Research in English examining the English Corner and its eLearning variations is emerging (Bull, McCarten & Beck, 2009) and the *Global English Corner* project provides a small but positive contribution to this growing online phenomenon.

The English language proficiency of international students both in Melbourne and offshore has been identified as a key quality concern for Australian educational programs (Birrell, 2006). Poor English literacy is also both an equity issue and student welfare concern (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2007). Poor English damages students' chances of transitioning effectively and negatively impacts on academic performance (Bretag, 2007). Socially, too, problems with students' English proficiency – either self-perceived or actual – can serve to isolate. Ethically, universities must do more to support language learning and there is certainly a range of support units, programs and curriculum approaches that attempt to address students' literacy needs (Arkoudis, 2006). It is clear that language learning ideally 'requires the types of interactivity dialogue generates' (Lehmann & Chamberlin, 2009: 11). It is this capacity for interaction that makes Elluminate and other similarly dynamic programs such a positive medium for international students offshore. The synchronous nature of the exercise ensures that students are pressured to communicate in real time. The chaos of real conversations in real time might prove distracting for students – but Elluminate has texting as well as drawing and emoticon options that serve to support language learners. Images can be shown so that visual texts can aid aural and oral activities and students can ask questions without interrupting the flow of conversation.

Ironically, international students offshore tend not to have the same range of language support opportunities offered to international students onshore such as individual appointments with academic learning support staff, conversation sessions or group workshops. Additional resources are developed for offshore students and learning support staff use email, Skype and Blackboard to better support students in a range of locations. Teachers also try to embed language and learning support into offshore curriculum. Even so, many students arrive in Melbourne from China and are shocked at their inability to make themselves understood or to understand others. This rather poignant comment from a student reflection (used with permission) succinctly notes: '*I found it was quite difficult to communicate and catch up with the local students though I had learned English for nearly 10 years. What a big joke! I always remained mute when the group members spoke to me with perfect LOCAL accent*' (Woodley, 2010). Students' unpreparedness for living, studying and possibly working in an English-speaking context cannot be overstated and comprehensive research has noted the impact of English proficiency on students' ability to participate and enjoy university life (Sawir *et al.*, 2007).

## Internationalising the Curriculum and Transnational Quality

The internationalisation of Australian universities has been achieved primarily through the delivery of Australian educational programs offshore and increased numbers of international students onshore. Internationalisation in education includes global movements of teachers, researchers and students, offshore teaching programs, offshore campuses, international students onshore, study tours for students and teachers, student exchanges and international benchmarking of programs. The assurance of quality in international teaching activities has been a particular focus of Australian Education International as well as quality agencies since 2005 (AEI, 2005). An apparent lack of English competence of international students has been singled out as perhaps the greatest quality concern in the education sector. Certainly, English language proficiency of international students has been an ongoing issue in Australian higher education with 'discrepancies between

[students'] expectations and the experience of university study contribut[ing] to student dissatisfaction' (Ransom, Larcombe & Baik, 2008). A further concern for international students has been social and involves the lack of interaction between international and domestic students – whether they are offshore or in Australia. *Global English Corner* provides a way to 'promote interaction between students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds' (Arkoudis et al., 2010). Such dynamic interactions offer one way of achieving an internationalised curriculum. Distinct from an internationalised university, an internationalised curriculum, aims to develop students with an international focus, an awareness of culture as well as an appreciation of their own cultural values. An internationalised curriculum requires a conceptual rather than a geographic shift. An internationalised curriculum does not necessarily involve international students, global student exchanges or international study or work placements, although certainly in the case of the *Global English Corner*, it does centre on international students.

An internationalised curriculum is internationally orientated in terms of content and resources. It aims to prepare students for life in a globalised world. A commonly cited OECD discussion of internationalised curriculum includes curriculum that prepares students 'for defined international professions' (cited in Rivzi & Walsh, 1998). An internationalised curriculum aims to develop students with intercultural skills and international perspectives. VU's Toolkit for Internationalising the Curriculum defines an internationalised curriculum as including both local contexts and students. VU's Principles for Internationalisation of the Curriculum were developed in collaboration with offshore partner staff and include the idea that an internationalised curriculum aims to prepare students to perform professionally and socially in global and multicultural contexts, develops and assesses intercultural communications skills and critical thinking and is achieved through collaboration (Woodley & Pearce, 2007).

VU's vision of an internationalised curriculum is that which develops international perspectives, fosters intercultural communication skills and increases a knowledge and awareness of a range of cultures and geographic regions, including indigenous cultures. However, the communicative teaching approach adopted in many classes in Australian universities poses a challenge to many international students and English proficiency can impact on the development of internationalised perspectives and intercultural skills. There is a general acceptance that the IELTS 6 required to enter many Australian undergraduate degree programs is insufficient to successfully participate in academic discourse: 'IELTS six is competent English. It is not a high professional level' (Andrews, 2006; see also Lewthwaite, 2006). Many students studying in VU programs in China may not have attempted IELTS; so, although they would have undertaken some language testing, the language levels are far from consistent.

All students at VU in Melbourne have access to a range of language and learning support services. Students can attend individual appointments with Learning Support academics or attend academic skills workshops. They can also attend peer support sessions for some subjects. International students in the Faculty of Business and Law can participate in centrally-delivered conversation classes to practise English and develop confidence to speak English in class discussions and for assessment tasks such as oral presentations. Students can also participate in the Faculty initiative, 'Have a Chat' (see Woodley & Meredith, 2011) which involves domestic students engaging with international and Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students in weekly two-hour sessions that aim to introduce international students to aspects of Australian culture and offer them a safe environment to practise English. Offshore students, ironically, have fewer dynamic language support options.

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) project, *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities*, recognises that: 'it can no longer be assumed that students enter their university study with the level of academic language proficiency required to participate effectively in their studies' (AUQA, 2009: 2). The *Good Practice Principles* project emphasises that both students and universities are responsible for evaluating, monitoring and further developing English language competencies. The *Good Practice Principles* were developed from considerable research on the levels of English competency in Australian degrees (AUQA, 2009). Universities' methods of developing English language competencies are many and varied but they often smack of remedialism, not fun (Higbee, Lundell, Duranczyk & Banerjee-Stevens, 2001; Smidt, 2005). Alongside the need to implement a range of programs, resources and curriculum initiatives to enhance the English proficiency of international students undertaking Australian degrees, a further quality requisite of Australian education demands comparability between on- and offshore programs. The *Transnational Quality Strategy* requires that educational programs on- and offshore provide students with a comparable learning experience (AEI, 2005). Given the relative lack of English speaking opportunities available to students undertaking VU programs offshore, VU must provide a richer English language context for our offshore cohort. The *Global English Corner* project has begun to explore how

online conferencing technologies, like Elluminate, might help achieve this end.

## The Global Context

Elluminate conversations are supported by the *Global English Corner* blog. This blog has a space for each participating university and students post comments before and after Elluminate sessions. The blog uses the polling feature available in WordPress to gauge what students in China would like to discuss so student peers in Melbourne can prepare – though suggestions in postings have worked just as well for this. The purpose of the *Global English Corner* project is not to merely support students in China in their English language learning, although that is a key aspect of the activity. Nor does the project aim to only tell students in China about Australia in ‘broadcast’ mode (Arena & Jefferson, 2008). What has been attempted, especially through the involvement of a Chinese student in Australia and an English ‘foreign’ teacher based in China, is to develop a ‘contrapuntal’ understanding of the whole learning activity. This approach requires a simultaneous awareness both of metropolitan histories and of those subjected and concealed histories (Said 1993: 59); so the project requires an awareness of both Western and Chinese discourses. It also requires an awareness of how each of these cultures is represented – by and to each other. In short, a contrapuntal reading involves a mutual consideration of what could be quite disparate social, cultural and political groups. This juxtaposition of students in Melbourne and students in China demands a contrapuntal reading if it is to be mutually sensitive of the powers inherent in the relationship, especially in terms of language, ownership of the technology and the fact that students in Melbourne are paid to conduct the sessions. Through these developing sensitivities, it is expected that an internationalised curriculum will be encouraged.

## Methodology

The funding *Global English Corner* pilot began with 3 partner universities in China (Sichuan University, Chengdu; Henan University, Kaifeng; Liaoning University, Shenyang) in March 2011. A pair of student peers with some mentoring training and experience in Melbourne (one international student from China and one domestic student) was selected to conduct 4 different one-hour, semi-structured conversations with groups of 8 students offshore that would be supervised by a teacher in China over an 8-week period. The numbers of students in China increased due to demand for the program. While numbers each week changed, a total of 30 offshore students were involved in the program. The Chinese English teachers involved provided constructive and detailed feedback after each weekly Elluminate session via email. The discussion also draws on comments from the blog and data available through WordPress to gauge the usage of the site. An online survey was administered via the WordPress site and email. Twenty respondents from 3 universities in China completed the online survey; so 66% of student participants in the entire project of 30 contributed to the survey. Most of those students were from Henan University. Online questions ranged from closed questions asking if respondents participated in the project through Elluminate, the blog or both and 4-point Likert-type questions asking students to rank their self-perceptions of improved confidence to speak English or their self-perceptions of improved English proficiency (No improvement; Neutral; Some improvement; Much improvement). There were also open-ended questions asking respondents “What did you like about Elluminate?” and “What did you not like about Elluminate?” Students were asked to indicate from a list of Elluminate tools (chat, whiteboard, audio, video) what they had used. Student and teacher comments from the online survey, weekly feedback or blog have been used with permission. Any quotations from staff or students that are verbatim are in italics and quotation marks.

## Findings

The project team expected that online interactions via Elluminate and the *Global English Corner* blog would aid the transition of international students to Australia should they choose that option for further study. Certainly, many discussions covered living, working and studying in Melbourne. It was also expected that the project would demonstrate an easy, cost effective means of how technologies like Elluminate can increase opportunities for international students to dynamically practise English in real time with those mythical beings, so-called ‘native speakers’ (Davies, 2003). Some technological challenges were anticipated – such as noise problems and inconsistent internet connections – and in the first couple of weeks this was the case. It was also expected that time would be a difficulty as students and teaching staff in China have very full timetables in addition to a 2-hour time difference – or even a 3-hour difference with daylight savings. Student peers also needed to be briefed



on what sites hosting user-generated content, such as YouTube and Flickr, will not permeate the Great Firewall of China (Branigan, 2010). Our student peers in Melbourne and e-learning staff were willing to work late, Chinese students and staff were prepared to make time, and this issue of timing was overcome.

Even after just a week, a comment that one student left on the blog was encouraging: *'I think this program is interesting; it can improve my English speaking skill'* – which is precisely what was hoped for. Blogging between student peers in Melbourne and students in China was popular both to anticipate the Elluminate sessions and to debrief and clarify points raised in the conversations. Given that the blog was not part of the initial project plan, this has been a vital finding in terms of using Elluminate in future activities. Synchronous platforms like Elluminate must be supported by asynchronous communication – whether it is a blog, a discussion board or group emails. The blog offers a useful statistics function. In just 3 weeks, with 30 students in the program, there were over 1200 visits to the site, 79 comments made and Henan University students were the most active users of the offshore cohort. In addition to blogging, Elluminate provided participants with a range of means on participating – from using icons and emoticons, text, images, audio and video (Stevens, 2007) and it was reported that students in China particularly enjoyed the whiteboard and they clearly made good use of the ability to upload PowerPoint for more formal presentations.

Some 20 respondents from 3 universities in China completed an online survey after the 8-week program had finished. 83% of student participants in the entire project of 30 completed the survey. 65% of those students were from Henan University. Overwhelmingly, the majority of respondents felt that they had improved their confidence to speak English over the course of the project and explicitly attributed their increased confidence to speak English to their participation in the project.

All students (100%) participated in the project using Elluminate through speaking, texting, using the whiteboard, listening to others speak and showing documents or pictures, including PowerPoint. Asked what they liked about Elluminate in open-ended responses, students wrote primarily about Elluminate's capacity to improve English through providing opportunities and reasons to practise speaking and learning English. They also mentioned making friends and learning about other cultures:

- *It can improve our English speaking and also help...to establish friendship.*
- *It's a platform for me to speak English. It also broadens my eyesight and makes me know much about different culture and different lives.*
- *It has improved my English speaking and... I learned about many different cultures in Australia.*
- *You can chat with people from the globe wherever they are.*
- *[It is] a new way to practise English and learn western culture*
- *When i prepare for a new topic, i can learn a lot of new words. And this communication provides us who come from different grades and countries an opportunity to share our life each week. We not only learn a lot, but also strengthen our friendship through it, so I like it.*

Asked what they did not like about Elluminate, respondents focused on technical issues rather than the learning experience. They commented, then, on difficulties encountered with slow internet speed, with audio dropping, feedback and background noise. Asked if students would like to use Elluminate more to speak to students in Australia, there was an overwhelming response of 100% of students responding in the affirmative.

Fewer students participated in the project by participating in the blog. The blog was mainly used to read information provided by the student peers. Compared to 100% of respondents participating via Elluminate, only 65% used the blog. 40% of students posted questions, commented on other postings and used the polling feature to vote on weekly topics. Mostly students participated by reading information provided by others; arguably, quite a passive means of participation.

When asked to comment on what they learnt from being involved in the project, the following key themes can be identified in students' responses: cultural knowledge, confidence, communication skills, including listening skills and knowledge about university life in Australia. Some student comments include:

- *We learnt how to communicate with people by trying to understand.*
- *I learn more about foreign culture...This is a good way to give me...opportunities to speak English and make me know much about how to organise sentences in a short time to express myself.*
- *I spoke a lot. I think I have gained a lot of self confidence.*

Students added to the 'further comments' question that they would like to continue participating in the program next semester and would like to see the use of Elluminate expanded into other areas of their study.

- *Everything is quite good. I really want to have chances to join this next semester.*

### **Views from Sichuan**

The teacher facilitating the sessions from Sichuan University is a 'foreign teacher'. Although she has lived in China for 10 years and speaks Mandarin, her first language is English. Her contrapuntal vision (Said, 2003) of the project has provided a valuable insight. In the first session with student peers in Melbourne, the teacher noted that her students '*had their first culture shock - that not all Australians are blonde-haired, blue-eyed - they carried on asking me about hair colour for 5 minutes afterwards*'. This teacher also reports that '*the students really seem to like*' the Elluminate sessions. Her evaluation of the first Elluminate session predictably includes technical issues (sound delay, volume and echo problems and Java issues). Specifically, she observed that students '*liked the idea of having pictures, chat and talk*', that pictures were especially useful in motivating chat and that students' demonstrated the ability to multitask: while '*listening [students] were learning how to paste pictures etc (hence the cat and its new makeup)*'. Students also had too many questions and the blog was essential to supplement limited Elluminate sessions. It was also reported that students liked the icons and emoticons. The teacher was surprised at the levels of excitement of the students: '*They were actually more excited than I thought as they are used to computers and chat - but [with the first conversation] they were...so excited*'. She also reported that some students said: '*It was the first time [they got] to talk to another country and would never forget it*'.

### **Views from Henan**

After three sessions of Elluminate, Henan reported no more problems logging into the room and any problems, such as PowerPoints in China not displaying, were '*effectively tackled by sending those files to [student peers in Melbourne] and being given...moderator privileges*'. Overwhelmingly, teachers in China report that students' attitudes to the project are positive and that topics of discussion are relevant: '*Our students liked the debate about whether it is good to go abroad to study*'. Despite problems with headsets, one teacher in Henan reported: '*I did enjoy every minute of the students' ppt presentation and the two mentors' comment. Students' topics centred around cultural issues, ranging from Henan University, Henan Cuisine, Henan Opera to Hometowns (Zhengzhou, Xinyang, Yichang)*'. This comment highlights a shift from student peers doing most of the talking to students in China taking a key role during Elluminate sessions.

One of the students in Melbourne anticipated the change of direction and wrote on the blog:

*We are aware that we have done too much talking during the sessions, so from next week, we will give you much more opportunities to talk! I like Zita's idea on talking about practical things and real life events. Therefore, I would love to suggest you work together as a team to give us a vivid lecture on the culture of Henan next Thursday. I come from Shen Yang, so I am not too familiar with...customs and traditions in Henan and I would love to hear you give me some knowledge. I am sure that Cassie would be very interested, as she has never been to China.*

After students in Henan presented via Elluminate, the teacher asked if they liked the program and if it helped them learn English: '*They like today's debate and other conversations and acknowledged that they are more interested in the programme... There is a gradual increase in their speaking although not a big one. I could see that they are more confident now, and they are more at ease when they talk in English*'.

### **Views from Liaoning**

Teaching staff in Liaoning reported increasingly improved interactions with each session as technological issues were ironed out and as staff and students became used to the technology: '*The second session is better than the first one*'. More importantly, after concerns that student peers in Melbourne were doing most of the talking in the early sessions, after the third week a massive shift was reported: '*students changed their roles, they prepared some topics...[one student] introduced the LU campus and showed some pictures of buildings and the different functions, [another] talked about how to become an interpreter...[and] all of the students are interested in talking about the differences between Australian Uni and Chinese Uni*'. It was clear that an increasingly reciprocity was emerging.

## Challenges

The Faculty's Web-based Learning Officer was initially involved in some of the Elluminate sessions but the tone of the conversation and the behaviour of students seemed to be slightly guarded with the presence of a non-peer at the Melbourne end. Even so, a technologically savvy person is crucial to the success of the project in the initial phase although reports from teachers in China suggest that, after a couple of sessions, students troubleshoot and work problems out. After one or two sessions, all partners reported, as Stevens (2007) may have predicted, that 'Once connected, [Elluminate] generally works pretty well' (2). Elluminate is reasonably intuitive and other than one session where the internet was down, all sessions went ahead as scheduled. During one session that had severe internet problems, one student peer in Melbourne reported: '*there was not a big opportunity to have very in depth discussions; however, the conversations we did have were filled with laughter*'.

It was clear after one week that students in Melbourne needed more explicit instruction concerning the politics of language (Phillipson 1988 cited in Pennycook 1994). There was an assumed power evident in the role of peer conferred by a perceived English language proficiency as well as geographic location that was the result of an uncritical and naive approach to language teaching and a lack of induction from the project team. The dominant role occasionally adopted may have also stemmed from students in Melbourne simply feeling responsible for the session – technologically, socially and pedagogically. Whatever the cause, students in Melbourne sometimes took the lead in conversations in a way that limited the voices of students in China and which served to contain the talk mostly to VU and Melbourne. The students in Melbourne quickly realised the problem and wrote on their report: '*Near the end of the session [we] reminded students that next week we would like them to give us a small presentation on their local culture. We hope that this will enable them to speak more as [we] tend to dominate each of the conversations*'. Subsequent conversations were far more reciprocal with Chinese students taking a more equal responsibility for the sessions. Evenso, at the end of the project, a student in China complained that one of the students in Melbourne talked too much. Future work with students in Melbourne will better prepare them for their peer role.

Another point about students in Melbourne concerns the blog. The original *Global English Corner* project intended to use only Elluminate. While Elluminate can record sessions, the project did not use that function as the conversations were not initially appreciated as a learning resource. Future Elluminate sessions will consider recording but student permission will be required and training around confidentiality and other ethical considerations will be needed. Blogs automatically create a more permanent artefact. The ephemera of chat are secured in print – and not just other students read the material. Casual comments like 'Hey you guys...' and even spelling errors from students in Melbourne were noted and deemed inappropriate. Melbourne bloggers were asked to write more formally and carefully. They were advised that senior people in the universities in China may read the posts. Arena and Jefferson (2008) are positive about the fact that blogs promote a relationship with a broader audience and note: 'This can motivate more carefully written texts, including an expansion of new vocabulary to convey the ideas of the student bloggers precisely' (4). The *Global English Corner* project team hopes that well written blogs will improve all students' written English.

## Conclusion

For students learning English as a second language in a Foreign Context who may be contemplating travel and further study in English speaking countries, self-directed, synchronous learning could be vital to their success – especially in regards to transition to a new culture and a new learning environment. With the combination of both synchronous (Elluminate chat, audio and video communication) and asynchronous communication (blogging entries and replies), students experience both the pressure of real time discussion and the social benefits of a conversation that includes text, image and audio. The combination of blogging and Elluminate neatly sidesteps the oppositional debate of synchronous versus asynchronous teaching approaches (Hrastinski, 2008) because it combines the best of both approaches. Furthermore, the asynchronous aspects of the blog supports learners who are competing for time to speak during the Elluminate session as well as those who cannot make the specified chat time of Elluminate.

*Global English Corner* offers a rich and generally reliable forum for students to develop language skills, global awareness and intercultural skills. *Global English Corner* needs to sit alongside other resources and programs that aim to provide students in China with opportunities to improve their English language proficiency. *Global English Corner* can support the transition of students intending to study in Australia. This is interesting as the need to develop 'a responsive social environment, active orientation and transition programs' (Long,



Ferrier & Heagney, 2006) for international students onshore has been recognised for some time but effort in creating social situations for our offshore students has not been explored with the same energy. Whether Elluminate continues to be the platform for *Global English Corner* or whether other products will be trialled to ascertain if they offer fewer or similar glitches for free is yet to be determined. The trial has begun important conversations between eLearning Support Staff, teaching staff and students in Melbourne and China. *Global English Corner* offers ways to create small scale and highly social programs that may be important in improving students' English proficiency, confidence and intercultural communication skills.

Elluminate and similar programs have the capacity to profoundly impact on students learning and confidence. Responses from students surveyed at the end of the project clearly suggest that the internet, at its broadest, can stimulate connections and learning between students in Melbourne and China (Haythornthwaite, 2005). Despite some technical glitches and the perennial issue of slow internet at some offshore locations, *Global English Corner* participants – staff and students – have regarded the pilot as a great success. While some of the sessions were occasionally chaotic and the audio was not always of the best quality, students in China overall enjoyed both the technology and the chance to interact with students in Melbourne. Students in Melbourne learnt about China, about different Chinese universities, about communicating with Elluminate and using English in a way that helped others learn. As the teacher in Sichuan observed, the ability of students to see, hear, talk and simply interact is 'great for breaking down cultural barriers and [students'] preconceptions' – both in China and Melbourne. A key issue, given that the blog and the Elluminate sessions are extra-curricular, is sustainability. Arena and Jefferson (2008) are right to remind us that online conversations do not 'Simply Happen'. Without funding or a more strategic pedagogical reason to engage – such as assessment - they may not continue.

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**Author contact details:**

Carolyn Woodley [Carolyn.Woodley@vu.edu.au](mailto:Carolyn.Woodley@vu.edu.au)

Lisa Curran [Lisa.Curren@vu.edu.au](mailto:Lisa.Curren@vu.edu.au)

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