

Connecting Students Around the World to Improve Foreign Language Skills

In 2010, Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia, developed a program called Global English Corner. Using Blackboard Collaborate™ software, VU formed a partnership with three universities in China to create an online learning community emphasizing interaction and collaboration between Australian students and Chinese counterparts who study English as a second language (ESL). The project facilitates English-language learning by using online collaboration in an immersive, social context. The high level of personal interactivity also allows the university to meet another stated goal of the program: to increase the cross-cultural awareness and knowledge of students in both countries.

Victoria University serves the higher education and vocational education sectors with excellence in teaching, research and scholarship. It offers certificate, undergraduate and post-graduate courses to more than 50,000 students in the western suburbs of Melbourne, in Melbourne's city centre, and at partner locations in Asia and Europe. VU's international students hail from 90 countries across the globe. Global English Corner brings together VU students with their Chinese counterparts at Sichuan University, Henan University and Liaoning University.

Blackboard Collaborate is an integrated set of online presentation tools including video, text chat, polling, a collaborative whiteboard function, shared documents, images and websites. Using Blackboard Collaborate's web conferencing tools, Global English Corner enables groups of students in Melbourne to lead semi-structured conversations with Chinese ELS students, within a learning management system (LMS) and through an online blog. Victoria University's Dr. Carolyn Woodley, Senior Lecturer in the Curriculum Development Unit of the Centre for Work Learning and Teaching, explains, "Through a technologically innovative and pedagogically sound approach, we succeeded in providing a rich, reliable forum for students to develop language skills, global awareness and intercultural skills."



IMPORTANT STATS ABOUT GLOBAL ENGLISH CORNER

At the end of the Global English Corner pilot project, a group of participating students provided some eye-opening feedback.

- 88% of students said that their confidence in speaking English had improved
- 53% reported "some improvement" in their English communication skills
- 35% reported "much improvement" in their English communication skills

The Problem: Language Barriers for Chinese Students Studying in Australia

Proficiency in English is an important skill for Chinese students pursuing an English-language degree in China or in an English-speaking country such as Australia. English language skills are also important for those seeking employment at a global company or a Chinese enterprise with international vendors, clients, and markets. For Chinese students studying at English-speaking universities, fluency can make the difference between academic success and failure. Those same English skills play an equally large role in students' ability to join the social and cultural life of a modern campus.

The relative lack of native English speakers in China is additionally problematic to any opportunity to practice conversational and writing skills. One solution that has emerged is the phenomenon of the "English Corner." English Corners are informal, face-to-face gatherings where learners can listen to, speak, and interact in English. These conversation sessions can be teacher or peer-led, and usually take place in public spaces such as libraries and parks.

Blackboard Collaborate allows VU to extend that opportunity across national and continental borders. Global English Corner is part of VU's commitment to an international curriculum, which aims to prepare students for life in a globalised world. That preparation occurs on both the academic and interpersonal levels. As one Chinese student in the Global English Corner program put it, "When I prepare for a new topic, I can learn a lot of new words. And this communication provides us an opportunity to share our life each week. We not only learn a lot, but also strengthen our friendship."

The Solution: Using collaborative tools to address student needs and make language instruction easier

Once a week for eight weeks, pairs of VU students (one Australian and one international student from China) meet for an hour with groups of students who do not speak English as their first language at the three partner universities in China. Some

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Lisa Curran
Manager - Web Based Learning
Victoria University, Melbourne



topics are requested during the previous week, and others come about spontaneously. Web conferencing is at the core of the Blackboard Collaborate platform and offers VU students the ability to see and hear each other as if they were in a traditional classroom. It is a live and engaging education tool that features an interactive whiteboard, breakout rooms, and session recording capabilities, as well as voice over IP (VoIP) audio functionality. Simultaneously, educators and students can engage in text chat and share content including documents, websites, and sound and video files.

In any human culture, different students learn in different ways. Some learn more effectively through formal classroom instruction, while others excel through less structured interaction. While listening to lectures or conversation works for many, visual images and text work better for others. The Global English Corner effectively addresses this need for varied teaching modes. Real-time chat is offered in text and audio-visual formats. Blogging and comment areas allow for more planned, precise communication. Lisa Curran, Victoria University's Manager of Web Based Learning, summarises the benefits of this layered strategy. "Blackboard Collaborate neatly sidesteps the oppositional debate of synchronous versus asynchronous teaching because it combines the best of both approaches."



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