

TALKING WITH ... VANESSA FORTYN

Yan Wei



Vanessa Fortyn began her ESL teaching career in 1998 and has taught across all levels of learners in different tertiary institutions in Japan, China and Australia. Since 2013, she has been Head of Studies of the Monash English Program at the Monash University English Language Centre, in Melbourne, Australia. She has been part of the team that has overseen the Language Centre through extraordinary change.

Vanessa was recently the Keynote Speaker at the June Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University Language Centre Symposium. Yan Wei caught up with her to enlighten ETiC readers with issues regarding Change Management in English language centres.

YOU HAVE BEEN HEAD OF STUDIES OF THE ENGLISH PROGRAM AT THE MONASH UNIVERSITY, MELBOURNE SINCE 2013, AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CENTRE THERE IS RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF THE LARGEST AND MOST PRESTIGIOUS UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE CENTERS IN AUSTRALIA. WHAT KIND OF CHANGES HAVE YOU SEEN THERE OVER TIME?

I've seen a huge amount of change since I've been here. We basically tripled in size so there has been a huge increase in student numbers and staffing. Just prior to my starting, we had a new director who came in with a very strong vision of what we should be. She introduced us to strategic planning ideas that would enable us to become a quality English language provider. We overhauled our curricula, bringing greater consistency and alignment in our programs to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and also looked at what the university

wanted from the students. Our assessments were made tighter, more reliable, and more valid, and then they were externally validated so they reach a high standard. We also created a lot of new roles and changed our workplace culture, attracting teachers who are really passionate about teaching. We did this by really creating a strong culture of Professional Development. We expanded our partnerships overseas with the institutions that deliver our programs and introduced teacher training programs such as CELTA. Our centre grew too big for the premises we were on so we had to relocate, which involved using external venues and moving people from one campus to another. Another significant change was the introduction of blended learning as a core component of our programmes. Blended Learning being the use of E-learning as a natural part of classroom teaching.

REGARDING THE BLENDED LEARNING, WERE THERE ANY DIFFICULTIES IN IMPLEMENTING IT?

Yes, it was very difficult because five years ago, we didn't have the infrastructure to support an online learning approach with technology being a natural part of classroom teaching. Back then we had a computer lab with these cranky, old desktop computers and students were scheduled only one or two hours a week in the lab. So it wasn't a natural part of everyday teaching but something additional. It was recognized throughout our industry in Australia that a move towards blended learning and incorporating E-learning more in the programmes was needed, but it was hard. How did we do it? We sat down and discussed the infrastructure needed to make these changes. Then we had to imbed the use of technology such as using Quizlet, Kahoot and Google Docs into our curriculum via Moodle, and trained our staff to ensure they are well supported to manage E-learning activities. We also had to make sure that it could be used in class seamlessly and at any time, so we needed students to bring their laptops to class every day and to ensure they would be used.

Unfortunately, we were not

strict enough in the beginning with the classroom usage and hardware specifications, and I can remember one student coming with a heavy laptop. We were still in the transition stage so teachers were not using it all the time, so unsurprisingly this student got very annoyed that the laptop was not being used. To make matters worse, some of these laptops had different kinds of operating systems. We had an IT department, but they couldn't read the operating system in different languages and struggled to try and work out how to help students when they had connection issues. Teachers would say, "I'm trying to do an activity and it's taking an hour to make sure that everyone's connected so what's the point?" You had to really make sure that both teachers and students were getting the support and that the infrastructure was sound. We solved the laptop incompatibility issue by stating the necessary laptop specifications in their enrolment document that students sign before they start studying with us.

The next step was to incorporate more E-learning into the curriculum. After implementing some small teaching activities, we realized that teachers needed to be trained more. It's difficult to get your head around technology if you are not used to it, and so you need a lot of support. With technology, you need dedicated people who really can inspire others and can help to promote it. We identified teachers who are E-learning savvy and got them to become E-learning co-ordinators. The more "buy-in" we had from staff, the more we could say "Alright now, let's go back and look at the curriculum and see how we can add more technology-based learning and teaching." We are pretty pleased with where we are now in that it is just a natural part of what we do; we have made it so much easier for teachers, and it is a part of the day-to-day of the class. So it was a painful beginning but yielded great rewards at the end. Some of the things our teachers are doing with the technology out there are fabulous and exciting.

I UNDERSTAND THAT THERE HAS BEEN A CULTURAL SHIFT TOWARDS GREATER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUR CENTRE. WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

It's so important for teachers to be stimulated at any stage of

their career. I think teachers are naturally curious and if you feed into that curiosity and provide opportunities to learn, you will get amazing returns. When we were a small school, we didn't really have a professional development programme, but there were teachers who really wanted to develop and were hungry for more information and ideas. So as part of our cultural shift, we gave them a platform and asked them to talk about their ideas. Like the snowball effect, more and more teachers became interested, and it became the interest of the majority. From there, it's really easy to manage, because everyone just thinks that's a natural part of what the school should be.

A lot of what we do is about encouraging teachers to do new and innovative things, present at conferences and do more learning, which makes people feel excited about their teaching. With these ideas bouncing around the staff room, you end up attracting new teachers who are passionate, because they hear that Monash teachers have many professional development opportunities and lots of new ideas and chances to innovate and explore. When new people come in, new ideas come in. That's really the key, and it benefits everybody. So this shift in how we view and promote professional development is a part of our teaching and learning culture, and it has been highly beneficial. However, it has to be sustained. If you do it once a year or once every six months, it is not enough. You've got to keep it going and encourage it as much as possible.

WHERE ARE MOST OF YOUR STUDENTS FROM? HAVE YOU NOTICED CHANGES IN THE MAKE-UP OF THEM? HAS THIS INFLUENCED YOUR TEACHING?

Most of our students are from China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, and Saudi Arabia. Of those, China contributes the greatest number of students. We have had more Chinese students over time, compared with when I first started in Monash in 2008. It's interesting having those different nationalities and cultures in the centre. Some cultures have a particular trait that is quite interesting for a teacher; for example, in Saudi Arabian culture, people have very strong oral traditions. They love to speak, and they tend to be very strong and confident speakers, but they quite often have difficulty in literacy. In

contrast, Chinese tend to be quite shy, so they might avoid speaking, but they might be quite strong in writing. So you've got these two different types of students you're balancing in class, which is always so interesting as a teacher. But regardless of their background, you always have to remember that every student is an individual, and as a teacher, you have to adapt to make sure you engage them in your class.

I HEARD THAT THERE WAS AN ANNUAL INCREASE OF 20% TO 40% IN STUDENT AND STAFF NUMBERS. HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH THIS?

Well, we were able to predict these large increases, so we were able to plan quite well for it. Our largest increase was in 2014 when, to meet the teacher demand, we had to bring in newly-graduated teachers who were young and inexperienced. I guess the challenge for us was to make sure that those teachers were well supported so they could deliver high-standard classes. We have a teacher development team who observed and encouraged them, and we made sure that we had other systems in place to support those new teachers.

They joined in with professional development activities and we also encouraged the young teachers to give us feedback, because many of them were a similar age to our students. It was an enlightening experience for us to hear their voices and experience their fresh take on the teaching and learning.

I HEARD THERE WAS A MAJOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT CHANGE IN YOUR CENTRE. WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES WITH THE NEW CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENTS? HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH THEM?

The biggest challenge was to follow through with that change and make sure that teachers were on board and that they understood and were actually making the change.

We had to really engage the teachers as much as possible in the initial stages and ensure they really understood the changes and reasons for them. Everyone agreed we should be aligning our programs to CEFR and becoming more valid to suit the needs of the students. The

momentum of any change needs to be maintained by continually reinforcing it and helping teachers to transition. It's also important to encourage them to communicate with each other, so they realise they are not alone. When you feel alone, it is easy to go back to your previous patterns, especially when you are taken out of your comfort zone.

There is a model that we used during our period of change, called ADKAR, which helps break down the aspects of change. A is for awareness, D is for desire, K is for knowledge, A is for ability, and R is for reinforcement. It is really about creating the Awareness of what the change is and the Desire to make sure people are motivated. You need to make sure teachers have the Knowledge to fulfill the requirements of the change that shows they have the Ability to actually do it once they are in this transition phase, and finally is the Reinforcement of making sure that you have the processes in place for it to continue. I like this model, because if you think about those different aspects, you can actually know when something isn't going well. For example, if a member of staff is struggling with a particular change in your organisation, it might be related to a lack of Awareness and you need to increase the understanding of why the change needs to take place.

YOU ALSO MENTIONED THAT YOU MOVED CAMPUSES. WHAT

HAPPENED AND WERE THERE ANY DIFFICULTIES?

We tend to have fluctuating student numbers, with huge peaks at certain times twice a year when we have lots of students, then at other times it is quieter. With all our programs expanding, pressure was put on our classroom availability, so we had to look for external venues where we could hold classes during these really busy times.

Because we are based in the city of Melbourne, we had to look for suitable office space where we could hold our classes, which we finally found. But obviously if you're moving staff and support services across to a different building and it's only going to be temporary, it's going to be a challenge. It's no longer your building so the facilities that you were used to are not there. It is a big change, so you have to support the people who are working in those new spaces, and then of course it's another change when they come back. Things that may appear to be minor changes, such as teachers moving desks, can be more distressing for staff than is realised. We consulted with the teachers and offered support, trying to do as much as possible to make everything right for people. It's important to have good communication with staff and then keep those communication channels open so people feel that they can say "Actually, I'm really not satisfied with the way my desk is," instead of just sitting there unhappily for ten weeks.

IN CONCLUSION, WHAT SUGGESTIONS DO YOU WANT TO GIVE TO LANGUAGE CENTERS THAT ARE UNDERGOING BIG CHANGES LIKE YOURS DID?

Well, I would say definitely use planning tools. There's a whole industry that's dedicated to Change Management which helps managers and staff to be aware of the stages of change. They help break it down into components, which can really help staff to overcome any difficulties.

It is also important to make sure that things that don't need to change, like the little routines, stay the same, to give people a sense of stability. For example, we offer professional development sessions nearly every week, and we have never changed the time and dates of that. We know how much teachers enjoy those, and it provides a little bit of stability.

THANKS A LOT FOR TALKING WITH US TODAY – I'M SURE READERS WHOSE INSTITUTIONS ARE GOING THROUGH CHANGES HAVE GAINED A LOT FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE.

You're very welcome.

FURTHER READING

Keesing-Styles, L., Nash, S. & Ayres, R. (2014). Managing curriculum change and 'ontological uncertainty' in tertiary education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(3), 496-509. doi: 10.1080/07294360.2013.841655

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Yan Wei has been teaching English since 2006 and she joined the Language Centre of XJTLU as an EAP tutor since 2016. Her academic interests include intercultural communication, Chinese overseas writings in English and Computer Assisted Language Learning.

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