The growing internationalisation of Australian universities has seen a great deal of attention directed to overseas students’ language skills, or lack thereof. This paper describes a project undertaken at a regional campus in New South Wales where some courses now have 50% or more international students, mainly from China. The project is innovative in two ways. First, it focuses not on written language but on spoken communication. Second, it takes a “two-way” approach, working not only with international students, but also with English-speaking lecturers, administrative staff and students.

The project started with an online survey of English-speaking and non-English-speaking background (ESB and NESB) students and staff, to find what aspects of intercultural spoken communication were already working well, and where assistance might usefully be offered. This showed that, despite obvious goodwill on both sides, a degree of mutual misunderstanding between ESB and NESB interlocutors was evident. A series of interviews was conducted to explore some themes from the survey in more depth. The paper discusses the findings, and argues that developing the intercultural speaking and listening skills of local people, as well as being valuable in its own right, can offers a cost-effective way to help improve international students’ English.

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