The online Diagnostic Academic English Language Test (DAELT): enhancing Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) First Year (FY) students' access to English language support mechanisms

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This Nuts & Bolts Workshop will present an online resource for assessing academic English language proficiency.

Designed for CLD learners, the online DAELT enables participants to self diagnose their English language competency soon after commencing their degree program. Test results direct students to sessions that are specifically designed to support the development of relevant academic English skills.

This workshop will commence with a brief background to, and rationale for the development of the DAELT. We will then provide an outline of its core elements and structure, and an overview of the stages involved in creating the resource. We will demonstrate each online component, focusing on: design aspects, navigation, text instructions, result competency bands and feedback sections.

At the end of the workshop, we will seek comments regarding the effectiveness of the resource as a way to enhance commencing CLD FY students' access to English language support mechanisms and discuss improvements that might be considered for its future development.

Background

As increasing numbers of CLD international students enrol in Australian universities, the issue of enhancing the provision and quality of English language support is a significant one. This is particularly highlighted in a recent report entitled, *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities,* released by the Australian University Quality Agency in March, 2009. The report indicates that assessing academic English language proficiency and providing access to English language support mechanisms facilitate students' chances of achieving academic success.

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The University of Newcastle (UoN) has been proactive in its commitment to addressing the English language support needs of its CLD FY students. As part of best practice, UoN's Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) has developed a post-entrance online DAELT.

As a post-entrance language assessment (PELA), the DAELT is an innovative online resource that enables FY students to self-diagnose their level of English language competency soon after commencing their degree program. After each component is completed, students are provided with online feedback and results. Test results also direct students to sessions that are specifically designed to support the development of relevant academic English language skills.

The resource's core elements and structure

Closely simulating University learning experiences, DAELT consists of four academic components: reading, listening, writing and speaking. These components are interconnected by a common theme.

The four components of the resource can be summarised as follows:

1. The reading component: presents an authentic academic text whereby students' knowledge of vocabulary and comprehension are assessed.
2. The listening component: replicates a lecture presentation and tutorial discussion assessing the student's ability to understand the meaning behind expressions communicated.
3. The writing component: requires students to reflect upon the ideas generated by the previous components and relate this to their real-life experience.
4. The speaking component: provides students with information about how to register for a face-to-face speaking assessment session with an English language learning adviser. Students' communication ability is then assessed by a trained language examiner in a relaxed small-group setting.

Test results and feedback are provided online instantaneously after each component and students receive information regarding the relevant workshops applicable to their level of proficiency. Test participants gain feedback both on a concluding screen after each component during the DAELT and also via an automatic email. This is sent to students in an effort to motivate participation in post-assessment follow-up English language sessions.

There is also a section at the end of the four components where students can provide detailed feedback online about their experience during the assessment. The data are analysed and steps are taken to improve and enhance the resource.

Stages of the resource's development

The planning for and development of the DAELT covers the following ten stages:

1. Researching. We first reviewed the literature related to post-entrance diagnostic academic English language testing procedures currently taking place within the sector.
2. Conceptualising. A comprehensive framework was created outlining the core elements and structure of the diagnostic test.

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3. Paper-based developing and testing. A paper-based version of the DAELT was produced and piloted. Further refinements, improvements and modifications were made.
4. Online developing. The paper-based DAELT was transferred over to the online environment. A detailed design document and storyboard was created and the writing and re-writing of text was carried out.
5. Online testing and evaluating. Three pilot tests were conducted. Groups of CLD learners were tested in computer labs and their interaction with the assessment was observed and evaluated.
6. Enhancing and reviewing. The assessment was further reviewed and improved by analysing the results and student evaluation forms.
7. Advertising and marketing. In this stage, collaboration took place with faculty staff and FY coordinators and the resource was advertised to CLD students within FY cohorts.
8. Implementing. Implementation details with the faculties were coordinated and internal and external testing occurred.
9. Following up with support workshops. In this stage, English language support sessions and workshops were designed, programmed and offered to students.
10. Monitoring. This stage involves the systematic monitoring of students' academic progress, particularly students deemed 'at risk' or those with score results within the lowest two competency band levels.

Design features of the online DAELT

Online DAELT has been designed to model sound learning practice. Cross-team collaboration has enhanced the design and development of the resource, so that the design features are:

1. It is a web-based resource to increase its accessibility to students and to enable students to gain instantaneous feedback and information about the level of English language support most appropriate for them.
2. It utilises multimedia features such as audio files and it models principles and strategies for effective use of online technology.
3. It incorporates easy to follow, user-friendly and step-by step instructions enabling participants to effectively complete the resource in the online environment.
4. Its navigation and design aspects allow each component of the assessment to be timed and controlled for accurate testing to take place.
5. It is designed to be user-friendly, engaging and interactive.

Future directions

With close CTL-faculty collaboration currently occurring, DAELT is being implemented within the UoN in a staged approach. While we are targeting FY cohorts in semester 1, 2009, we are aiming to allow all CLD students access to this resource, irrespective of their year level. We are currently implementing the resource internally within computer labs. However, in the near future, we will enable the resource to be accessible to students externally within their own learning environment (e.g. at home). This will also provide UoN with the opportunity to implement the resource off-shore in Singapore and on other campuses. Finally, while the resource is essentially a University-wide resource, relevant to all students in each of the five faculties, our long-

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term goal is to produce five online DAELT assessments with discipline-specific content areas.

Discussion

In the discussion section of this Nuts and Bolts Workshop, we will share and reflect on what we have learned during the stages of creating and developing this online resource and focus on aspects that participants find interesting or useful. We will facilitate discussion by seeking comments from participants regarding ways to further improve the resource and suggestions for its future directions. In addition, we will discuss the effectiveness of the online DAELT as a way to enhance CLD FY students' access to English language support mechanisms soon after they commence university. Finally, we will invite participants to comment on other post-entrance language assessment initiatives currently taking place within the sector.

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