

Missed Opportunities: EAL students reflect on their first-year language experiences at an English-medium university

It is not where you start, but where you finish. (Study participant)

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The language issues facing international students in English-medium universities worldwide have prompted a number of initiatives, such as language support programmes. Amongst first-year students, however, the uptake of such programmes is often disappointing. This paper reports on two consecutive studies looking at students' views of language support. The earlier study shows that, despite struggling with language issues in their first year, students made limited use of the support offered, while the later study suggests that, in hindsight, they would have placed more emphasis on improving their academic language from the first year. We conclude that, although the first year is a critical period for language enrichment, EAL (English as an Additional Language) students, particularly those of limited proficiency, may not fully appreciate this situation or be prepared to take on extra language study; and therefore the university community has an essential role in promoting the value of early and consistent work on language skills.

Introduction

Since the 1990s The University of Auckland, like other English-medium universities, has been obliged to address the language needs of an increasingly diverse student body. While language may be only one of a range of contributing factors in the academic success of EAL students overall, those with seriously limited language skills may be particularly at risk. A series of studies (Banerjee, 2003; Cripner & Davies, 1993; Elder, 1993; Elder & von Radow, 2003; Graham, 1987) has shown that there is a threshold of language proficiency below which students are likely to fail courses. Above this threshold students with limited language skills may struggle but eventually succeed; below this point lack of language skills becomes a crucial factor in predicting failure. For this reason DELNA (Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment) was introduced in 2002 at the University to identify and provide follow-up for such at-risk first-year students. Administered post-entry, this assessment informs students of their language needs for academic study and offers advice on how to access suitable support within the University: ESOL credit courses, course-related language tutorials, the English Language Self Access Centre (ELSAC) and the Student Learning Centre (SLC). However, the increasing number of students who are being required to take the assessment and the largely voluntary nature of the uptake of advice mean that it is important to investigate to what extent students respond to these suggestions and what factors discourage them from doing so. In 2004 and 2007 two studies were carried out as part of a longitudinal research project to monitor DELNA's effectiveness. Although the main focus was language, and

specifically the uptake of DELNA advice, the effect of limited language proficiency on the quality of the first-year experience became an increasingly significant aspect of these studies.

First Study

At the end of each semester, in order to collect student feedback on DELNA and its consequences, all students who have taken part in the diagnosis earlier that semester receive an email invitation to answer an anonymous questionnaire online on the assessment itself and their uptake of language support. With the purpose of making a closer analysis of student response, a small-scale interview study was begun in 2003. The 18 students who took part were from the group of 240 students who had completed the online evaluation that year. The naturalistic data gained from these interviews provided “the participants’ perspective in their own words” (Lynch, 1996) and gave some idea of the extent to which language proficiency affected the quality of their experience.

The group of participants comprised ten undergraduates and eight postgraduates. Of these, three were NZ citizens, ten permanent residents and five international students. A variety of languages was represented including English (two speakers). Their DELNA Bands covered the range from 5 to 8. Students in Bands 4 and 5 are at risk of failing university courses, those in Band 6 are in need of further English instruction, those in Band 7 may need to work independently on their language skills, while the language skills of high scoring students (Bands 8 and 9) are “unlikely to hamper their academic progress” (Elder, 2003).

Findings

The first two research questions dealt with students’ response to their DELNA Bands, the explicit advice on their DELNA profiles and whether they had responded to that advice constructively. The findings show that, while 12 of the 18 agreed with the DELNA assessment, most were frustrated by the advice, with only 3 of the 15 advised to take up language enrichment doing so. Although most did something to address their language needs, it often did not accord with the advice given and was in many cases sporadic and unfocused, and unlikely to address their real needs in terms of academic language proficiency. For example, four of the students were doing courses dealing with English literature but not English academic language.

Time and workload were cited as deterrents to seeking language enrichment by almost all the students. Most specified reading and preparation of assignments and some pointed out that family commitments left no time for extra English. Others, overwhelmed by the information they were receiving from all quarters at the beginning of the university year, did not know where to access the support, as the recommendation had not been followed up by personal advice from DELNA. Of those who did find ELSAC and the SLC, only three used their facilities regularly. While one ESB (English-Speaking Background) participant found the writing courses at the SLC invaluable, the majority of EAL participants did not find their expectations met at ELSAC or the SLC and therefore paid only fleeting visits. One student thought that a very short course, “just a few weeks, as simple as that”, at ELSAC was all that was needed. Students were critical of the use of language support tutors whose first language was not English, they felt they could not profit from working with other EAL students, and they were disappointed that the tutors would not correct their work. What they were looking for was proofreading, one-on-one tuition, and on one occasion what amounted to a “magic bullet” just prior to examinations.

As part of the second research question the students were asked what further help the University could have offered. The expectation came through clearly that the DELNA profiles should have been followed up by more personalised advice in a one-on-one session, with departments following up the DELNA results by providing appropriate language support. In regard to writing, there were also clear expectations of the department's role. Students felt that lecturers should take time to make clear what was expected for assignments and for examination answers. They also found that academic staff were not always helpful or supportive, although they were in a good position when marking assignments to look at students' needs and direct them to services available within the department or wider university.

The third research question was broken down into three parts. The first part asked whether English language ability had been a factor in their academic progress, and responses mirrored the prediction of their DELNA scores. While the linguistically stronger students felt that language limitations had had little effect on their progress, this was not the case with students in Bands 5 and 6. Their dilemma, as they described it, was that the extra time taken to prepare and complete assignments did not allow them to take up the DELNA advice.

The second part asked about their most challenging or difficult experience during their studies and, while most cited challenges in the academic context, two related their challenges to everyday living. In the academic context the greatest challenges were in speaking and writing. Many found speaking to their classmates and taking part in tutorials and presentations a daunting and embarrassing experience, with limited language influencing their contribution or lack of contribution to tutorials and their ability to make contact with New Zealand students. Others cited writing, particularly with reference to assignments and examinations, and reading, partly because of vocabulary, which in turn affected the time needed for required readings: one student suggested that it took him three times as long as his ESB peers to complete a reading. Two of the students described aspects of everyday living as a challenge. Examples of this were dealing with the rapid speech of bus drivers and shop assistants and coping with difficult landlords, which all added to the stress of trying to survive in a new society.

The final part in this research question asked the participants what metaphor they would choose to describe their first-year experience at an English-medium university. The metaphors chosen by students with higher-level language skills suggested that they recognised and accepted the extended process of academic language acquisition.

My comparison would be similar to exercise because you don't need to speak perfect English to do uni work or interact with someone, but it would be better if you can speak better English, so you can speak more efficiently and effectively. Exactly the same thing; you don't have to exercise and daily living is good enough, but if you go to the gym your body is better for sure.

It's like looking after a plant I didn't notice any progress ... but little by little and after two months, I've got huge progress.

Those with limited language proficiency, on the other hand, invoked images of desperation: drowning, struggling in water, or being buried alive, while others were searching for light at the end of the tunnel, trudging wearily uphill and pushing weights.

If my English is not good enough, I have to be buried in the ground. Yes, to be buried underground. I am lonely, no friends around, no support people. No people can understand me. I am buried. I am trying my best to stand out and to stretch my life and to breathe the fresh air and to feel joy in my new life here.

I am fighting with the water all the time. I need to survive.... I can spend all of my energy, all of my time [to reach the surface] but sometimes it doesn't really help. There is more worry and more fear

Second Study

The follow-up study was undertaken at the end of 2006 to discover whether the participants' subsequent experience had influenced their perspectives on the language proficiency and language support needed for university study. By this time only 13 of the original 18 participants could be contacted. Having graduated, they were now in full- or part-time employment, either in NZ (nine) or overseas (four).

Findings

Asked in the first research question to what they attributed any improvement in English language skills during their years of university study, all participants acknowledged that their language proficiency had improved over this time. Learning within the contexts of their courses was seen as the main impetus for this improvement while help from classmates and the University language support services played an ancillary role.

The second research question looked at how the University and future students might benefit from the experiences of the participants by asking what they would have done differently and what advice they would give to first-year students in their situation. The findings in brief show that on reflection they would have focused more on writing and speaking skills; and this concern is reflected in their advice to first-year students to identify weaknesses in their language use and get early advice so that they can work consciously, continuously and independently to improve their skills in the best way possible.

Responses in this section also addressed some of the wider language issues such as the ease with which courses requiring good language skills could be avoided, and the common practice for EAL students to mix almost exclusively with students from their own culture. Pointing out the disadvantages of these attitudes, they advised first-year students not to exclude language-rich courses from their programme of study, and to take the initiative in mixing with local English speakers. Identifying language strengths and weaknesses through DELNA and then, with the advice of the DELNA Academic Language Adviser, seeking support through faculty-specific and university-wide support services was advocated as a positive alternative to such avoidance techniques. The advice emphasised the need for students to work on their language skills consistently from the beginning of their studies and throughout the following years.

Discussion

A range of factors appears to have led our participants to believe initially that they could ignore the DELNA advice to take up language enrichment. These factors are discussed below.

Firstly, one may in retrospect see the nature of DELNA itself as contributing to limited uptake of support services. At the time of the first study DELNA was in its second year and not widely recognised or understood by staff or students. At this time, too, the language used to explain the results may not have been immediately comprehensible, as anecdotal evidence suggests, and it is now continually edited to improve clarity. Further while DELNA Bands 4–9 do not relate to IELTS Bands, International students may have interpreted them in this way. So where a DELNA Band 6 actually signalled a need for further English instruction, some equated it with IELTS 6 which gave entry to university and the implied assurance of an adequate language level for university study. In addition, the DELNA diagnosis was followed

only by an emailed language profile with advice on the appropriate language enrichment. Thus there was no personal advice after DELNA, nor in most faculties was there any follow-up or mentoring of identified at-risk students. Such factors may have reduced the significance of DELNA results in the eyes of students and therefore the uptake of the suggested language enrichment. The positive response of participants in the later study to the establishment of a DELNA adviser underlines this point.

A second factor is students' understanding of how long it takes to acquire a proficient level of academic language and where they are positioned in this process. Thus the participants in this study may well have overestimated their language skills and felt quite secure in not taking up the DELNA advice. Further, those International students who gained university entry with an IELTS score of 6.0 or 6.5 may have assumed that acceptance meant their English language skills were appropriate for academia (an assumption that students have mentioned in conversations with the DELNA adviser). However, such IELTS scores do not mean that students are well prepared for university study (Barthel, 2007; Elder & Erlam, 2001; Read & Hayes, 2003): EAL students entering at this level will certainly need to increase their general and academic proficiency in order to keep up with their study programme. A similar misunderstanding may have applied to EAL Permanent Resident students who had come through the New Zealand school system and entered university under the assumption that they were equipped for the linguistic challenges of university. Good social skills and a reasonable level of oral proficiency, for example, may have encouraged such students to overestimate their written language proficiency. Responses in the later study, on the other hand, suggest that the participants now accept that there is no "quick fix" for language acquisition and see the value of embarking on language improvements as early as possible and continuing through and beyond study into the workplace.

Another significant reason for the limited uptake of DELNA advice appears to be the mismatch of expectations, based on cultural assumptions on both sides. Many of the participants saw the responsibility for their language improvement as residing in the University, especially their department or faculty. So they expected their teachers to provide direction, for example, through comments on their language use and suggestions on how to improve it. When such comments were not forthcoming it was often assumed that there was no real problem. But from their perspective as graduates, the participants stressed the need for first-year students to take on that responsibility themselves and their comments underlined the benefits of this kind of action for, as Read explains, academic language support will be more effective if students recognise for themselves the extent of their language needs and make a commitment to attend to them (in press).

Cultural views of the teacher-student relationship also caused a mismatch of expectation in approaches to learning and the concept of learner autonomy. Taking responsibility for one's language development and working on it independently would have been difficult to realise for many first-year EAL students, coming from a society where this kind of independence is not necessarily a feature of the educational culture (Ballard and Clanchy, 1984; Berno and Ward, 2004). Teaching staff on the other hand might assume an autonomous approach on the part of their students, unaware perhaps of any cultural divide. Such cultural assumptions about the respective roles of teacher and student appeared to play a part in students' failure to take up language enrichment.

Another problematic aspect was students' expectations that their language would improve through interaction with local students, an assumption which proved difficult in practice.

International EAL students often cannot easily make friends with New Zealand students who are focused on their own studies and “lack the patience required for discourse with international students”(Backhouse, 2007), a situation common to English-medium universities worldwide (von Radow, 2005). Moreover, as Miller (2006) points out, from the moment they arrive in Auckland, Asian students in particular find themselves members of a large compatriot community and they do not have to engage with the English language in any meaningful way outside the university setting. Thus opportunities for language use with native speakers are limited and it is not surprising that eventually international students seek out the company of their compatriots, so restricting their exposure to English.

Cultural factors also played a part in the wider social context of everyday life. Culture shock and cross-cultural challenges described by the study participants, such as dealing with bus drivers, shop assistants and landlords, were all barriers to be overcome and the accompanying stress had a flow-on effect into their university life (Bright, 2002; Chang, 2006; Kirkness, 2003).

Emotional reactions to the first year at university, a significant period of adjustment for all students, and especially for EAL students (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Banerjee, 2003; Berno & Ward, 2004; Burke & Wyatt-Smith, 1996; Chang, 2006; Kirkness, 2003), contributed significantly to failure to access language services. Some of the metaphors that were chosen to describe the participants’ first year give a clear indication of how overwhelming they found their initial university experience and how painful their process of learning to fit in was. Chang (p.79) for example describes the students’ experience because of their lack of English skills when they arrive at their host institutions. Responses, such as shock, disorientation and a sense of powerlessness, which Chang describes, were both implicitly and explicitly mentioned by the participants. These and other emotional responses discouraged them from taking up the language support that could have eased their stress, and led on to a loss of self-esteem and confidence. Further emotional factors also played a part: embarrassment about their spoken English and speaking out in class (Kirkness, 2003); diffidence about seeking help from others; loss of face if they did take up the help offered; fear of losing their university place if they admitted a need for help with language (University Counselling Service, personal communication, 17 October, 2007). These responses however hindered their engagement with the learning community and influenced their academic progress. EAL students need to learn that there is no stigma attached to using support facilities (Burke and Wyatt-Smith 1996, p. 10). In fact it is important for them to be pro-active, even though circumstances make this no easy undertaking, and to realise that the sooner they access support, the better the quality of their university life will be.

Additionally, as the interviewees advanced through their courses, other factors emerged to discourage them from putting time and effort into language enrichment. Once thrown into their first year of study, they found themselves in a vicious cycle. Weak language skills meant that coursework became all-consuming and left no time to take up language enrichment, while lack of improvement in their language skills inevitably meant extra time spent on getting through coursework. In this way, workload and an ever-decreasing time resource made it difficult for these students to address both their coursework and language improvement. An adequate level of English language proficiency, however, is essential if students are to experience success in the academic mainstream (Kasper, 1995) but the overwhelming nature of the first-year university experience often meant that the participants failed to recognise the extent of their language needs and the value of working on them until later in their studies.

During the subsequent years of their degrees the students interviewed developed strategies to lessen their stress and to improve their language skills. They saw course-related learning as a principal cause of this improvement, as well as extra language help through ESOL credit courses and ELSAC and SLC workshops. Most importantly, however, all stressed that, given their time again, they would make much greater use of language services available and they strongly advised first-year students to take up the academic support services on campus (despite the fact that only three of these graduate respondents had done so themselves as first-year students). In the eyes of the interview group, the key to moving through the first year successfully lay in being pro-active and taking responsibility for one's own learning.

However the active participation of university staff is equally important for students' successful transition from school to university. EAL students need the support of their teachers who in turn must have a good understanding of both the linguistic and cultural challenges involved for their students. University teachers who understand the realities of language acquisition are in a better position to support their first-year EAL students at the most vulnerable stage of their studies. For example, once staff have an understanding of the language needs of the students they teach, they are in a position to adjust their teaching methods, making their lectures more interactive (Lynch, 1994), establishing small study groups (Kift, 2007; Tinto, 1998), initiating peer assisted learning (Cook & Freeman, 2001; Playford, Miller & Kelly, 2002) and modifying their presentation of online material, as well as alerting students to language support within the department or faculty or elsewhere on campus. Similarly, while learner autonomy is an essential feature in making progress in academic study, it cannot be taken for granted that first-year EAL students will be familiar with this concept, and many will need guidance, encouragement and patient understanding from their teachers as they cope with this unfamiliar approach to learning.

Conclusion

The longitudinal aspect of this research project provides an opportunity to reflect on the long-term impact of the first-year experience. It should be noted that not all the participants had a limited command of English, since among them were a native speaker and another who had spent much of his life in New Zealand, and their transition into the academic community was on the whole easier. But while more proficient students reported fewer trials and difficulties, the less proficient had a much more difficult experience. Limited academic language proficiency is, as Banerjee (2003) points out, a good predictor of the nature of the student's study experience and the severity of the "cost", and the experiences described here suggest that the emotional costs for some of the respondents were very high. So too were the academic costs. For three of the group it was the downgrading or eventual abandonment of their academic goals. For others, it meant that they did not reach their potential, contenting themselves with C and low B passes when they were probably capable of much better.

This leads us to conclude that the first year of university is when EAL students are especially vulnerable, and intervention to enhance their language skills is most needed. If language enrichment is not undertaken at this point, there are likely to be long-term academic, psychological and social impacts. Therefore the university, and academic staff in particular, have an essential part to play in supporting EAL students, helping them to understand the importance of taking up language support, and so guiding them to become independent and successful members of the academic community.

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