Modelling personal improvement: using a survey to shape linguistic and employment confidence in first-year international NESB students

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Abstract

The 2010 changes to Australia's immigration rules pose a potentially demoralising challenge to first-year international students from non-English speaking backgrounds (INESB), many of whom aim for permanent residence (PR). While most INESB students commence their studies with insufficient English and struggle to succeed, Government and employers now require seriously higher English skills. Since affect is a powerful factor in language learning, and language is central to membership of professional communities, confidence is central to achieving English proficiency and professional qualifications. This paper reports on gains in confidence and learning perceived by first-year INESB information technology (IT) students who took an English communications subject in their first semester. Their experiences have implications for shaping the experience of confidence, the roles of traditional academic writing and reflection and the deeper integration of academic and communicative learning into technologically saturated, practice-specific degree courses, with a view to designing for success.

Introduction

The paper investigates the perceptions of improvement in confidence, English skills and employability of a group of first year INESB students identified as needing support for successful study in English. The students were taking a communications subject as a core part of Information Technology (IT) and IT/Business degree courses at an Australian technological university. Most intended to seek PR on graduation. Inquiry was sparked by the 2010 changes to immigration rules, which significantly raised the level of English proficiency required from, and restricted the employment opportunities available to, INESB graduates wishing to stay in Australia. At the end of the semester, the students were surveyed to elicit their perceptions of gains in English communicative ability, the macroskills, future employability, and the relative helpfulness of subject activities.

The paper backgrounds the central role of English proficiency in academic, immigration and professional acceptance in Australia. It argues that guiding vulnerable students to construct and define a personal model of confidence that is independent of measured assessment fosters their academic learning and future employability and can inform subject design. Findings centre on the survey as a simple means of building confidence, the role of academic writing in improving overall communication skill and the need for further integration of English communicative support into technological courses past the first year.

The wider communications gap

Positive affect is a powerful factor in successful language learning (for example, Krashen, 1982; Tasnimi, 2009). In Australia, substantial research strongly indicates that INESB

university students experience frequent anxiety, failure, distress and graduate unemployment, principally because they commence their studies with insufficient English (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Birrell & Healy, 2008; Bretag, 2007; Dunworth, 2009; Hawthorne, 2007; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnes, 2005). In widening the gap between first year INESB students' actual and desirable English proficiencies, the new immigration rules and employer demands raise the prospect of further failure.

The Australian government now requires PR candidates to demonstrate International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Band 7 in each macroskill. Maximum PR points are now awarded only for Band 8, which is preferred by many graduate employers. At Band 8 a user has "fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies... Handles complex detailed argumentation well" (IELTS, 2009, p.4). Additionally, Graduate Careers Australia (2007, p.20) found 54.2 per cent of Australian and New Zealand graduate recruiters ranked communicative skills as most important in a list of selection criteria, while 43.9 per cent ranked the lack of them as second on a list of least desirable characteristics. Graduate employers require team-working ability and linguistic sophistication: clear writing; the ability to communicate technical matters to non-experts; business awareness; presentation, discussion, listening and negotiating skills; and, significantly, "intelligent conversations" (Nettleton, Litchfield & Taylor, 2008, p.246).

Band 7 is authoritatively seen as the minimum readiness for study (Ingram, 2005; Ingram & Bayliss, 2007) and undergraduates who enrol offshore must have Band 6 (some courses require higher). However, Barthel (2008, p.1) reports that between 60 and 85 per cent of INESB students enter Australia with lower proficiencies and enter university through preparatory pathways such as TAFE, private colleges, secondary schools, or foundation institutions associated with universities. Since the Australian Government does not require post-pathway IELTS testing, there can be no certainty that pathways students have university-ready English. Universities generally seek to address the problem through post-entry language assessment (PELA) and study support. Communications subjects embedded in degree courses can provide an important component of this support.

Integrating academic and work-related learning

The IT communications subject taken by the first-year INESB students who participated in our survey is based on early needs analysis, embedding in the discipline, targeted study support, introduction to the IT community and development of professional attributes. Needs analysis is conducted by PELA. Depending on diagnosis of a writing sample, students are streamed into three bands. Band 3 typically contains mostly INESB students with moderate to severe English difficulty. Band 3 tutorials contain a maximum of 20 students and are taught by tutors qualified in TESOL or Applied Linguistics. Band 3 students receive extensive explanation of assessment requirements, exercises in the navigation of academic and IT texts, writing support via modelling, deconstruction and reconstruction and practice and/or feedback before final submission or presentation.

Embedding academic study in the IT discipline accepts the theoretical view of language as sociocultural (Halliday, 1994). The Association of Academic Language and Learning asserts that communication strategies should be "visible, explicit and accessible" and embedded in core subjects, and that academic literacy is best developed within disciplinary concepts and embedded across the curriculum (AALL, 2008, p.9). Embedding also harmonises with the

Good Practice Principles, which seek integrated proficiency development, curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery (DEEWR, 2009).

Embedding within the discipline enables introduction of students to the academic and IT discourse communities. Kress (1985, p. 6) views language as located in communities that use systematic discourses, mastery of which confers "membership in a particular social institution". The notion of professesional partnership is integral: Wenger and Snyder (2000) describe specialized communities of practice as contributive groupings that share knowledge and enthusiasm. Jacobs (2000, p. 477) writes of students being "inducted" into their discourse communities by "modelling" themselves on "insiders". IT community introduction begins at an orientation lecture given by an Australian Computer Society (ACS) representative. Secondly, extensive research is required into all aspects of a particular IT career in preparation for interviewing a relevant IT professional—an "insider"—in the workplace. The academic community is entered through classwork and the formal study of texts on IT ethical issues. As "written instances of system" (Hyland, 2009, p. 25) the texts supply the interface between the academic and IT communities. Through them students begin to understand IT as an emerging profession needing moral and technological agreement (Gotterbarn (2004, p. 15) and learn the need for IT professionals to take independent responsibility for the personal ethical values on which they base professional decisions (Langford, 1995).

Integrated professional and academic learning tasks

The integration of professional and academic contexts in assessment tasks is shown in Table 1, below. All the tasks require considerable multi-skilling. Dale, Cable and Day, (2006) view multi-skilling that connects academic and professional skills as important in student success.

The group Careers/Vodcast project especially requires communication and multi-skilling in teams in academic and workplace environments and production of a variety of spoken and written texts in unfamiliar situations, including direct contact, negotiation and interaction with IT professionals in a videoed interview. Each group must present their findings about the career to an audience, using a Powerpoint format incorporating relevant clips from the video. This presentation is then edited into a Vodcast available online to all CITP students.

Table 1: integrated academic/communicative/work-related assessment tasks

Task	Requirements	Language/learning activities
Classwork (individual) 15 %	Tutorial attendance; active individual and group participation; homework; supporting fellow students; using feedback to improve communication skills.	• Speaking: asking and answering questions; discussing; • Presentation skills • Writing: individual paragraph-style. • Listening: understanding and using feedback

Writing Information search and evaluation (individual) 20%	Identify IT ethical/social issue or topic; locate 4 relevant articles from 2 databases; select 2 to summarise and evaluate for relevance to topic according to models and criteria discussed in class, in paragraph form and a table. Attach Harvard-style bibliography. (1200-1500 words, structure provided).	- Researching: online databases and journals; - Reading: skimming then reading for detail; comparing texts; evaluating claims and arguments. - Organising: selecting and ordering main points logically; putting information in table. - Writing: a simply structured text; retelling information in readings. - Academic referencing
Research & Comms. Careers/ Vodcast) (group) 30%	Investigate all aspects of an IT occupation, including interviewing an industry professional. Present findings to tutorial, including a vodcast or audio slideshow of the interview. Prepare final edited version of vodcast or slideshow for UTS Online.	- Research: library, newspapers, professional journals and online. - Reading: understanding and selecting relevant information - Speaking: group meetings; phone calls to arrange interview; organising recording equipment; conducting interview: share in presentation - Listening: phone calls, interview and other organisational activities. - Writing: note-taking; strategic questions for interview; slides; presentation script; letter of thanks to interviewee - Academic referencing - Workplace language development: organisation, interview, vodcast prep - Multimedia skills development: vodcast (video editing, captions) - Presentation skills - Group collaboration
Writing Research report (individual) 35%	More extensive research on task 2 topic; using at least 6 relevant texts identify main points re position; synthesise to develop argument; present as report. Attach Harvard-style reference list. (2200-2500 words, structure provided).	- Research: more extensive, more texts and databases - Reading: evaluation of wider range of information - Organisation: forming argument - Writing: introduction, synthesis and conclusion: business report format. - Academic referencing

Research rationale, participants and methodology

Research focused on 40 first-year INESB students from Asia and the Middle East, 70 per cent of whom planned to seek PR. The highest proficiency was IELTS 6.5. Only five students entered university on the basis of an offshore IELTS test: 30 came through pathways, two completed the NSW HSC; two came from other universities; one had gained the International Baccalaureate. Of those with offshore IELTS, only one supplied the score, 6.5. Thirteen had taken an IELTS test pre-pathway. Of these, one had 6.5, two had 6.0, three had 5.5 and one had 5.0. Of the two from other universities, one had 5.0, the other did not disclose the score. Of the two with HSC, one had 6.0, the other did not disclose. For all but the offshore IELTS entrants, significant time elapsed between IELTS tests and university entry.

Phenomenological methodology was adopted to inquire into perceptions of learning. Inquiry into perception is valuable, because, as "lived experiences" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 5), perceptions offer insight into learning that cannot be obtained from external results. The view of confidence as important in language learning is informed by Krashen's (1982) theory that anxiety is a powerful affective factor that can lead to fossilisation. Fossilisation is a period of serious difficulty in reaching "native speaker" level, or, here, a level that allows effective participation in a discourse community. Einfalt & Turley's (2009) inquiry into an embedded intervention found improvements in students' self-perceptions of confidence, knowledge and understanding of academic and information literacy skills relevant to an assessment task.

The survey was administered at the end of semester. It employed Likerts scale ranking, yes-no questions and open questions using student-friendly terminology (*not at all*, *a little*, *quite a bit*, *a lot* and *hugely*). Responses were analysed for perceptions of improvement in communication and the macroskills, the most helpful activities, and employability.

**Findings**

Perceptions of communicative improvement

Of the 40 students, 15 indicated low English confidence at the beginning of the semester. Typical comments: "Horrible, can't communicate properly", "Pretty bad, messay (sic) lack of vocabs, not understandable", "Just enough to talk", "Poor", "I'm thing (sic) very bad", "very difficult", "Hard" and "Really hard". In this low group, seven students were from pathways and one had entered with IELTS 6.5. Others recognized their difficulties but were less negative, for example; "I did not feel comfortable when speaking to the class", "It is just ok but if someone use more complex or academic words I do not know the meaning" and "My communication is not very good". Two perceived their proficiency as "average", two as "so so", four as "ok" or "okay" and five as "good", compared with nine other perceptions of "not good", and three of "unconfident", "not confident" and "not really confident".

Only two negative post-semester perceptions were expressed. However, these were attached to positive comments, for example, "I feel still my English is not enough to satisfy but I think it has improved a lot." There were eight mentions of confidence, eight of improvement in communications such as speaking, group work and presentation, and four of writing improvement. Two students who had previously assessed their skills as "good" felt "slightly more confident" and "Better than before" Ten described "improvement" and eight being "better". One student wrote pre-semester, "I needed some catalyst to push myself forward,"

and post, "I quiet (sic) confident of communicating with others. Became more enjoy communicating with local students. Even though my grammar skill is not good enough."

Major gains in confidence in the macroskills

Almost all students reported significant gains (that is, more than "a little") in confidence in the macroskills, as shown in Figure 1, below.
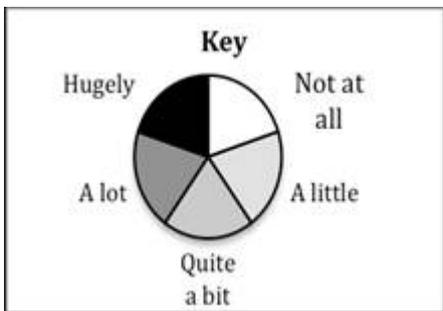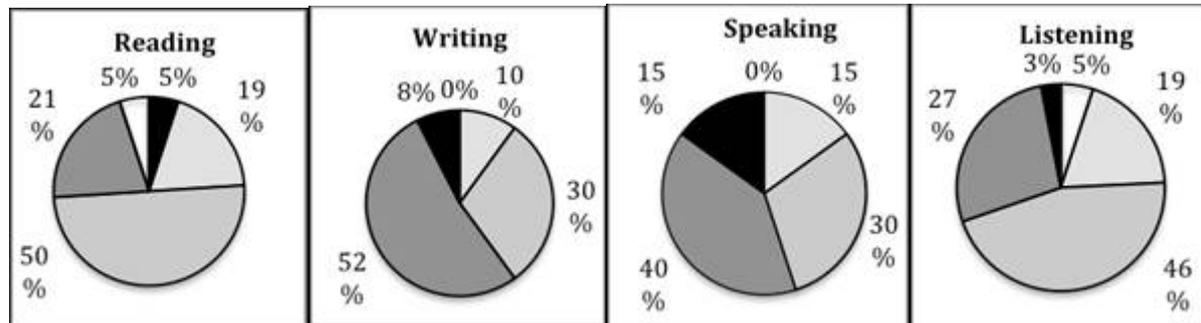
Figure 1: Perceived improvements in macroskills

More than 75 per cent of participants experienced significant gains in reading, 90 per cent in writing, 75 per cent in listening, and 85 per cent in speaking. No-one reported no improvement in writing or speaking. Only five per cent found none in reading or listening.

Strong gains in confidence in professional communicative skills

Significant gains in confidence for the professional skills of Report Writing, Presentation and Multimedia Communication are shown in Figure 2, below.
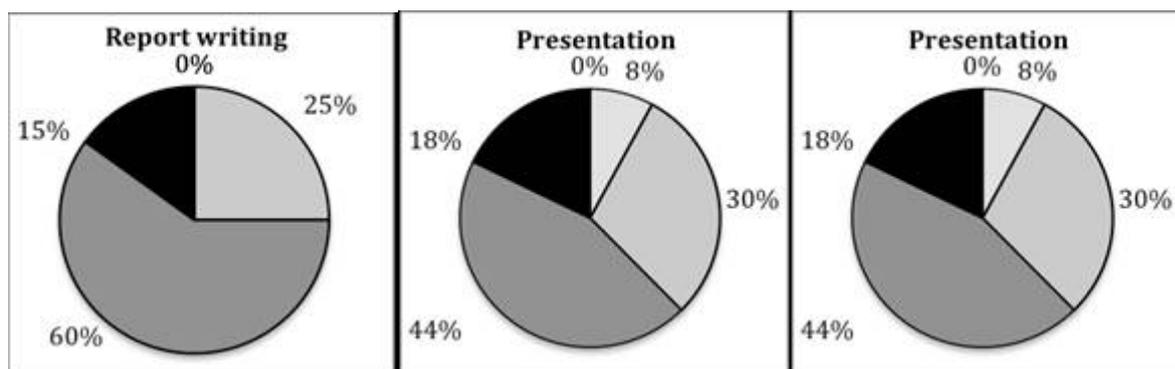

Figure 2: Perceived improvements in professional communication skills

In Report Writing, 100 per cent of the respondents reported significant gains, in Presentation, 62 per cent and in Multimedia 57 per cent. No-one reported no improvement, possibly because most began with little or no experience in these skills. The highest perceptions of Presentation improvements were experienced by an IELTS 6.5 offshore entrant and six pathways students, two of whom had previously taken IELTS tests (6.5 and score not

disclosed). Perhaps this occurred because four started from a very low base (and tried hard) and the others, through practising for IELTS, had speaking skills they could build on.

Collaboration and negotiation tasks were most valued

Figure 3 below shows that in terms of the highest ranking (dark grey) Classwork and the Career/Vodcast were seen as more helpful than Writing and Presentation tasks by the 30 out of 40 participants who responded in this section. At first glance, the Careers/Vodcast seems the most highly valued activity, ranked highest by 36 per cent of respondents.
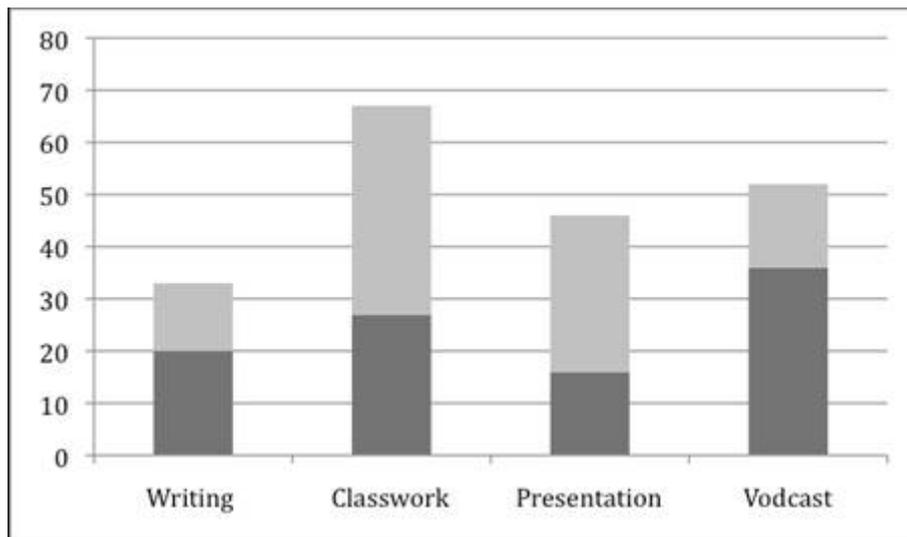

**Figure 3: Activities perceived as of greatest usefulness
indicated by two highest rankings combined**

However, when the second highest ranking (light grey) is added, Classwork is shown to be the most valued activity. Classwork was ranked second highest by 40 per cent of participants and highest by 26 per cent. Only 20 per cent found class work least helpful. Presentations were ranked highest by 16 per cent, and lowest by 23 per cent. That Presentation was not as valued as Classwork and the Vodcast is not surprising. Presentation requires individual speaking to an audience, can be confronting for INESB students with low English confidence even after rehearsals, and benefits are perhaps not realised until the next time.

Perceptions of helpfulness for the Careers/Vodcast project and Presentation were not greatly different when the two highest rankings were combined. The Careers/Vodcast was ranked highest by 36 per cent, next highest by 16 per cent and third highest by 36 per cent, so was seen as helpful by 90 per cent of respondents. No other activity received such support. Yet in many ways the Careers/Vodcast was the most difficult task. Requiring independent pursuit of individual tasks allocated within groups, containing complex language tasks and demanding collaboration, organisation and negotiation between students as team members and between students and IT professionals in the workplace (Table 1), this task was emotionally, psychologically and linguistically challenging for all first-year students, especially INESB students. The perception by 85 per cent of INESB students of greater speaking confidence reflects the variety of spoken texts in class work, presentation and the Careers/Vodcast.

Writing tasks had unseen value

Writing tasks were seen as least helpful (Figure 3) but perceptions of improvement indicated them as highly effective. While only 20 per cent of respondents ranked writing tasks highest, the reported perceptions of increased writing ability (Figure 1 and Figure 2) support the emphasis on report and academic writing. No-one reported no macroskill improvement, 30 per cent reported "quite a bit", 52 per cent "a lot" and 7.5 per cent "hugely"—an increase overall of almost 90 per cent. In addition, perceptions of improvement in Report Writing began at "quite a bit", expressed by 24 per cent: 60 per cent reported "a lot" and 15 per cent "hugely". Perhaps such a mismatch in perceived value and resulting confidence reflects the preference for collaborative and communicative activities over writing's socially isolating and intellectually challenging demands of individual research, consideration and production. The students who expressed the greatest improvement in report writing were from pathways: two had pre-pathway IELTS scores of 5.0 and 5.5 and five had expressed significant pre-semester lack of confidence.

Students felt more employable

More than 75 per cent perceived enhanced employability. Two students credited their improvement in writing. The student who had written pre-semester, "Horrible, can't communicate" wrote, "It can help me in the future when I want to find a job because when we need to provide a report we know how to make a good report". Another directly related higher employability to greater communication skills. Two emphasised the importance of the multimedia task: "Careers Vodcast project helped me to actually feel what it's like in an Australian workplace environment." Seventy three per cent of participants said they valued the focus on the IT industry and would not prefer a more general or generic communications subject. Of those not perceiving an improvement in employability, eight came from pathways and one from another university. Seven had indicated their intention to apply for PR (one was a pre-pathways IELTS 5.5). None offered a comment on why they felt the subject had not helped them.

Conclusion

There is an evident connection between confidence, communicative improvement and subject activities. However, students, especially first year INESB students, even if they actually improve, may not perceive improvement or confidence if they find an activity difficult or receive poor marks. To gain confidence they need to construct a model of personal improvement. In the absence of a formal reflective writing task, and of the language for the task, an informal anonymous survey has something to offer. Such a survey is simple, cost-effective and non-stressful. Through strategic questions it can guide first-year INESB students to shape and reflect on personal models of confidence and to see themselves as potentially successful learners and employees at an early stage of their studies, despite their limited ability to think and write in English. There is also value in anonymity: when reflection is a marked assessment students (especially anxious students from non-Australian cultural backgrounds) have been known to write to please the teacher. Open questions in an anonymous survey produce frank comments that offer insight into student attitudes. A survey can also introduce first-year students to the reflective thinking process as an essential professional attribute.

The confidence survey also illuminated not only what the students *found* valuable but also into what was *actually* valuable. Research for this paper strongly confirmed the *actual* value of writing support for first-year INESB students in the development of employment skills, even though writing was *seen* as less useful than other activities. There is an important lesson in the sizable perception of academic writing tasks as least useful versus the almost total perception of macroskill writing improvement and the 100 per cent perception of report writing improvement. If INESB students are to appreciate the usefulness of writing tasks as well as experience the benefits, they require careful preparation for writing, including encouragement, plain explanations of task requirements, guidance in text construction, appropriate grammar and vocabulary development, sufficient time for feedback on drafts over an extended period, and perhaps face-to-face feedback on marked assessments.

The perceptions of these first year INESB students suggest the desirability of extending communicative study tasks and support to second- and third-year INESB students in technical or work-centred subjects. There is a need to more widely recognise writing tasks, work-focused projects such as the Vodcast and work placements as interlinking drivers of linguistic, academic and professional development that strengthen *actual* English competence as well as increasing *perceived* confidence. This would particularly be so for first-year INESB students whose progress stems from a low base and is consequently precarious. For example, a supported formal reflective writing task could be inserted into a second or third-semester technical assignment or work placement to reinforce first-semester communicative achievement.

Finally, the indications of enhanced confidence in our most vulnerable students were a source of substantial pleasure for their teachers and a strong indication that there is a place for the reflective survey in building first-year INESB student confidence and gaining deeper understanding of their anxieties. The survey is also a means of informing subject activity design. In particular, future inquiry might seek more information about negative writing experiences as a means towards ameliorating student undervaluation of writing tasks and ensuring effective task design.

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