Clothing the emperor

Addressing the issue of English language proficiency in Australian universities

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The English language proficiency levels of students in Australian higher education who have English as an additional language (EAL) has become an increasingly prominent issue, particularly as it relates to international students. In 2009 this resulted in the publication of a set of good practice principles for the sector. This paper argues that there are fundamental issues about the nature, measurement and development of student English language proficiency that need to be addressed if universities are to build on those principles for good practice to make systemic and sustainable progress in this area.

Introduction

When it is argued that the English produced by university students 'is often disgracefully shoddy in the fundamentals of language, abusing everything from spelling to grammar, syntax and proper usage', the style in which the observation is expressed may betray its antiquity (it was authored by Theodore Morrison in 1941), but the gist of its content has hardly wavered across the generations. Surveys and interviews with university academics continue to find that respondents believe students lack the English language skills to communicate at an appropriate level for tertiary study. (More recent examples include Bretag 2007; Sawir 2005; Jamieson *et al*. 2000; Coley 1999; McDowell and Merrrylees 1998).

What has changed since the 1940s is the nature of the population against whom such criticism is levelled. While overall concerns about English language use in an academic context do continue to be expressed, there is now a considerable body of literature in Australia that relates specifically to the English language proficiency levels of students who have English as an additional language (EAL), most of whom are international students. For example, in an article with the provocative title The emperor's new clothes: 'Yes, there is a link between English competence and academic standards', Bretag (2007, p. 15), explains that 'all 14 respondents [in interviews with academic staff] stated that international EAL students generally have inadequate English communication skills for study at the tertiary level in Australia'.

Concerns about student English language proficiency are not restricted to university staff. A recent review of the *Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act* reported that students themselves 'raised concerns about English language standards being too low and the lack of opportunities to improve their English language skills' (Baird 2010, p. 10); and an investigation into the employment outcomes of international students found that English language proficiency 'represents a key issue for both graduate job access, and for subsequent mobility within work' (Arkoudis *et al*. 2009, p.12). The conclusion reached by many as a consequence of these widespread concerns is that English language entry scores may be too low (Baird 2010; Bretag 2007).

Prompted by the publication of a high-profile report on the English language levels of overseas students graduating from Australian universities (Birrell 2006),

the Australian Government took action, and in 2007 the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) convened a national symposium, attended by representatives from all Australian universities. This led to a set of recommendations for action (IEAA, 2007), and in 2009 the *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for International Students in Australian universities* were developed, a set of ten guidelines for universities that emerged from a project convened by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) and approved by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). The *Good Practice Principles*, published on the Department's website (DEEWR, 2009), are now in the process of being developed into a set of draft standards for higher education.

Their introduction has, at a generic level, encouraged the debate within universities to progress from an argument that focuses primarily on using gate-keeping devices to restrict access to higher education courses to a more nuanced view that also incorporates the responsibility of universities to address their students' language development needs over the course of their studies. Even with the *Good Practice Principles*, however, there remain some fundamental questions to be addressed: about the nature of tertiary level language proficiency, the measurement of language proficiency and the ways in which language proficiency should be developed. Without clear positions on these issues, universities will find it difficult to introduce substantial changes that are systemic, positive and sustainable. Drawing on data obtained from a range of research studies and the experience gained by the author in managing a two-year institution-wide project at one university to promote student English language proficiency, this paper examines the problems that these three fundamental questions pose, and proposes ways in which it may be possible to move forward.

The nature of English language proficiency

The first issue is that 'English language proficiency' does not necessarily have a shared meaning at a cross-institutional, intra-institutional or even intra-disciplinary level, either in terms of the construct itself or of the level of the construct that is appropriate for any year of tertiary study, *pace* the ubiquity of institutional references to particular IELTS scores. For example, Dunworth (2001) found that in 45 interviews with aca-

demic staff in a single institution, interviewees varied widely on their interpretations, leading to 'a series of unit-level microcosms in which a sufficient level of language proficiency is determined… using criteria of which the evaluated are largely unapprised' (Dunworth 2001, p. 148). Positive outcomes are difficult to achieve when the desired standards are neither openly articulated nor communally implied. It is incumbent on universities, particularly in view of the fact that they have actively sought out enrolments from international EAL students, to adopt and disseminate information about the nature of language proficiency and the levels that they believe are appropriate for their courses, so that both academic staff and students are able to move towards a common and consistent understanding of the construct and the standards that are required at graduation as well as at entry.

Defining English language proficiency in terms of the bands, grades or scores that students obtain on entry, or with reference to the broad general descriptors compiled by the instrument developers, is clearly inadequate if there is no institutional process to link the measures that universities accept to the lived experience of the tertiary classroom and if there is no rigorous examination of the instruments that are accepted. The first step towards a solution, therefore, is that the construct of language proficiency, and what constitutes an appropriate level in any given academic context, needs to be clearly defined, understood and communicated among all those affected by it. This may well differ between institutions, disciplines or cohorts, of course, not only because within the outwardly homogenous environment of academia the forms of language used vary considerably across discipline areas and discourse types, but also because graduate language needs may differ.

At the same time, if universities were to set entry or exit requirements for EAL students at a level at which they were genuinely able to operate in all academic and professional discourse environments at a level commensurate with their Australian counterparts who have English as a first language, then far fewer international or migrant EAL students would ever obtain an Australian degree. We need to recognise that most EAL students 'will never draw level with native speakers in their control of English' (Ballard & Clanchy 1997:29) in its standard form. In consideration of an appropriate description and level of English language proficiency, cognisance needs to be taken of the role of English in the world today.

With the ubiquity of English as a medium of international communication, benchmarks against the 'educated native speaker' are giving way to constructs such as English as an international language (EIL) that may ultimately be 'easier for speakers of other languages to learn and use' (Yano 2001, p. 130), or English as a lingua franca (ELF) which acknowledges the importance of the language as a communication tool between non-native speakers (Mauranen, Hynninen & Ranta 2010). It may be time to review the forms of English language deemed as acceptable within the walls of Australia's tertiary institutions, particularly within those which claim in their mission statements to have engaged in a process of 'internationalisation' and which accept onto their campuses students from around the world, many of whom do not subsequently become permanent residents in Australia. This, it is acknowledged, would be a difficult undertaking. 'Uncoupling any language from its native speakers is... a challenging idea that will require a considerable effort of adjustment of attitudes and long-established concepts of just what a language is' (Seidlhofer, Breiteneder & Pitzl 2006, p. 24).

It is also important to take into consideration that language proficiency, like academic literacy, is not a binary state. Rather, it is best viewed as a contextually-specific continuum, along which language users move at varying rates. The student body in Australian universities is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. Widening participation policies, internationalisation, technological developments, a broadening of academic entry requirements, a rise in occupations requiring tertiary qualifications and changes in the demographics of Australia's population (see, for example, Australian Education International [AEI] 2009; Access Economics 2008; Birrell *et al.* 2008; Scott 2008) have resulted in enrolments of students with diverse educational, linguistic and cultural backgrounds. We can no longer expect any student, regardless of background, to arrive at university replete with the requisite 'graduate' level of English language proficiency. Many students experience difficulty with academic literacy practices (Lea & Street 2006); EAL students simply face a wider range of challenges. English language entry levels should therefore be viewed as just that: the point on the continuum at which it is believed that students can commence their studies and cope with the initial demands of their course.

If this argument is accepted, then it follows that a level of English language proficiency that has been set for beginning students is unlikely to be an appropriate indicator of students' capacity to participate effectively in subsequent years of study. Unfortunately, this position is not consistent with the numerous processes in place whereby students are awarded exemption from completion in Australia of components of their degree, for example through a system of recognition of prior learning (RPL). This system is itself fraught with its own complexities (e.g. Fox 2005; Cantwell & Scevak 2004); but the concern for this paper is that it means students may commence their studies at an Australian university part-way through their degree course, while their levels of English language proficiency, if they are measured at all, are not required to be correspondingly more developed than those undertaking the course in full. This also applies to some transnational students when they transfer to Australia to complete their degree, as their prior tertiary learning environments may include a lack of exposure to English outside the classroom or, sometimes, even within it (Victoria University 2005). In short, with the complex range of enrolment practices that now exist in Australia's universities, it is not sufficient to set a single standard for entry level proficiency. If we are to be confident that students have the language resources to participate effectively in their studies, then we need to provide indicators of the required levels of proficiency at key points along the road towards degree completion.

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Measuring English language proficiency

The second issue is how entry-level English language proficiency is to be measured. Universities now accept numerous means by which entry requirements can be met (Leask, Ciccarelli & Benzie 2003), with some universities recording over fifty different, incommensurable, measures (Curtin University of Technology 2009; Coley 1999). If institutions define a sufficient level of proficiency in terms of a particular score on one of those measures, and then use those same scores without further investigation to claim that students who

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attain them are sufficiently competent in English, then they have surrendered their autonomy and control of the construct to the organisations that produce the approved instruments. Acceptance at face value of any given score goes against the advice, it should be added, of the publishers of the two most prominent international English tests used in Australia, IELTS and TOEFL. The IELTS guide for stakeholders (n.d.) states, for example, that 'the level of English needed for a candidate to perform effectively in study, work or training varies from one situation to another. That is why each individual organisation can set its own minimum IELTS score for applicants, depending on specific requirements' (p. 8). TOEFL documentation states that 'using test scores appropriately to make decisions with positive consequences is the joint responsibility of the test user and the test publisher' (ETS 2008, p. 10). Both these test publishers make available a range of materials to assist end-users with their decision-making on entry scores or bands.

Yet it is not clear at a generic level how any process or instrument gains a place on a university's list of approved measures. There are indications from the literature that scores are sometimes simply set by reference to the policies of other institutions (Feast 2002; Boldt & Courtney 1997), a process which, without intervention, can lead to a kind of passive downward drift. Coley (1999, p. 13) concludes that 'the various grades, levels and scores in relation to these tests and other entry measures are the results of decisions of an administrative nature which are based on available university places and not on students' language ability for university study'. It has certainly been extensively documented (most recently by Baird 2010, p. 10) that no university in Australia follows the guidelines published by IELTS on appropriate entry scores for a range of discipline areas.

In any consideration of gatekeeping measures of English language proficiency, we should always bear in mind 'that what is being measured is that most flexible, multidimensional, fugitive, and complex of human abilities, the ability to use language' (Spolsky 1995, p. 39). It would appear from this that it is in the interests of flexibility that the higher education sector has not been reduced to relying on a single test (although there is a tendency to classify the range of measures as 'equiva-

lent' to IELTS, implying not only that this latter test is a synonym for proficiency, but also that equivalence is not only possible but has been established). However, the benefits of flexibility are lost if the instruments themselves have not been validated by an institution as suitable for entry to its programs, or subjected to any disinterested and publicly available analytical process. Universities have a responsibility when evaluating applicants' entry levels of language proficiency to ensure that students are not being exploited; this requires an understanding of what the various measures actually mean in practice.

To sum up, we need to bring to the debate a more sophisticated understanding of how we measure entry-level language proficiency and students' capacity for language development. It is therefore important that universities should be able to present academically defensible criteria for accepting any given measure of English language proficiency, and that they should be able to demonstrate how the efficacy of those measures that they accept are monitored.

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Developing student English language proficiency

The third issue is how student English language proficiency is to be developed and progress assessed. It is by no means clear that there is consensus among academic staff or university hierarchies as to whose responsibility the development of high levels of language proficiency should be. Australian universities provide lists of the generic graduate attributes that they expect their students to develop within their courses of study, almost all of which include some variation on 'high level communication skills' (which, it may be argued, of necessity incorporate a degree of language proficiency).

However, the process of integrating the graduate attributes into the academic curriculum has been far from unproblematic. Issues have ranged from staff resentment towards a superimposed agenda (Sumison & Goodfellow 2004) and the lack of conceptual clarity of the attributes (Moore & Hough 2005) to complicating environmental factors such as casualisation of the academic workforce and the growth in student numbers (Green, Hammer & Star 2009). It cannot therefore

be assumed that academic staff are willing, able and prepared to take responsibility for the development and assessment of post-entry student English language proficiency, in spite of the fact that language and content are inextricably linked.

Generic English language development workshops, seminars and individual consultations provided by university learning centres provide a valuable service for some students, although there is agreement in the literature that attendance rates, when activities are voluntary, tend to be low (e.g. Arkoudis & Starfield 2007; Hirsh 2007). Research in this area tends to be more supportive of the provision of language, communication skills and academic literacy development from within discipline areas, particularly when it is managed collegially by both discipline-based staff and academic language and learning colleagues (e.g. Andrade 2006; Crosling & Wilson 2005; Barrie & Jones 1999; Skillen *et al.* 1998; Johns 1997; Bonanno & Jones 1996).

There are various models of such initiatives that appear to have been successful. Beasley and Pearson (1999), for example, describe a program where additional, optional, study time was provided within an 'organisation and management development' unit for students who had been identified by an early diagnostic writing assignment as requiring assistance. The program was successful in that it attracted high numbers of attendees, and there was a reduction in the failure rates on the unit. Key elements of the program included the attendance of the discipline-based coordinator at the extra sessions, the experiential nature of the language workshops (tasks being related to the unit of study), and the 'progressive redesigning of the management course curriculum, in terms of the nature and timing of the various assessment tasks' (Beasley & Pearson 1999 p. 310). A summary of case studies of this and similar programs with positive outcomes in terms of student grades and/or student feedback is described in Arkoudis and Starfield (2007, pp. 19-23), most of which include a framework of early diagnosis, a development strategy that involves either adaptation of a discipline-based unit or an appended program that is strongly connected with the disciplinary content, extensive staff collaboration, and, in some cases, the awarding of credit and the training of discipline-based staff in working more effectively with EAL students.

Ultimately, the precise nature of the most suitable language development approaches and activities will need to vary according to the circumstances and beliefs of an individual institution or area, as the

Good Practice Principles (DEEWR 2009) imply. What is important is that language development should be fully integrated into teaching and learning curricula, and resourced accordingly. So long as English language development is seen as an adjunct to tertiary education rather than an essential component of the educative process, it is unlikely that students will be offered optimally effective ways of improving their language proficiency, and the status quo will remain.

Conclusion

Increased student mobility in a globalised world, along with other factors, has transformed higher education in many ways; tertiary English language use has become a highly prominent subject as a result. The quotation at the beginning of this paper suggests an endless loop of dissatisfaction within the academy with students' language use.

Morrison's concerns may seem quaint at a distance of more than half a century because his arguments rest on unexamined assumptions about the 'proper usage' of language. If we wish to avoid falling into the same trap, universities need to articulate communal and defensible understandings of the nature of language proficiency and the levels that are appropriate for tertiary study, ensure that they have the procedures in place to assess those levels over the duration of courses of study and provide the resources to integrate the facilitation of students' language growth into the tertiary education process. Then we will have laid the foundations for a workable system; one in which the weak will not be left to sink or swim, but also one in which the hardworking and talented will have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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