

The English Language Growth Project

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International students from non-English speaking backgrounds dominate our tertiary sector. What do we really know about them and their English language learning needs?

The English Language Growth (ELG) Project, was conducted in five Australian universities in 2008-09 to address the on-going English language development of international students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Using an online survey inviting both qualitative and quantitative responses, 798 international students provided a rich source of data. Students provided information on their attitudes, motivation and beliefs about language learning, their strategies for improving their language skills, and their strategies for academic learning. These data were correlated with the participating students' grade point averages or similar academic measures. Many participants took considerable time and effort in responding to the survey's open-ended questions, and a small number volunteered to be interviewed.

Demographic profile

A summary profile of the participants who completed the questionnaire is described below:

- There was a relatively even distribution of students from the five participating universities: Monash (n=189), Edith Cowan (n=161), Macquarie (n=156), Melbourne (n=154) and Deakin (n=138).
- The sample was relatively young (around 80 per cent aged between 21-30 years).
- There was some bias toward female respondents in the sample (61 per cent).
- Many of the participants had a Chinese ethnic back-

ground (52 per cent had a Chinese dialect as their first language).

- The top five countries of birth were China 37.6 per cent, Malaysia 9.0 per cent, Indonesia 7.5 per cent, Hong Kong 6.1 per cent and India 4.8 per cent.
- There was a relatively even balance between undergraduate (47 per cent) and postgraduate (53 per cent) participants.
- The sample was dominated by students enrolled in Commerce/Business Studies (57 per cent). The next largest disciplinary groupings were in Society & Culture (includes media, linguistics and languages) (10 per cent), Health (9.3 per cent) and Education (includes TESOL) (5 per cent), with the remaining 19 per cent spread across 6 other discipline areas.
- 67.7 per cent had been required to produce an IELTS score for visa entry to Australia, however only 50.6 per cent used IELTS for course entry and just 44 per cent of the latter students (n=178) provided us with details of their IELTS scores.
- The bulk of students (62 per cent) were in their second or third year of study in Australia; 22.3 per cent were in their fourth or fifth year; 7.8 per cent were in their first year; and 7.9 per cent had been studying here for 6 years or more.

Findings

Our study shows that students employ a considerable range of academic and language learning strategies to

improve their English. Of the academic learning strategies we have noted evidence of social strategies, such as creating or joining study groups and participating in tutorial discussions. However this positive feedback was tempered by many references to the debilitating effects of shyness, fear of ridicule, and a sense of intolerance, which suggests that our universities are not always offering comfortable and secure learning environments.

Numerous cognitive learning strategies were offered by our participants, ranging from simply making lists and learning by rote, to reading as widely as possible and preparing for classes. Memorisation was both supported and rejected in the feedback from our students suggesting that the range of learning strategies among international students is as varied as those among local students.

The metacognitive strategies of organisation, planning, and self-evaluation were less frequent in our qualitative data which suggests a need to promote these strategies within university support services and within faculties.

Advice both from the many international students who completed our survey, and from the decades of research on language learning emphasises the importance of affective variables. Confidence, for example, is important. Learners need to overcome any fear of making mistakes, that is, to keep trying and taking risks, and to expect that they will need a period of adjustment to become comfortable with a new language and a new learning environment. On-going motivation and positive thinking are also fundamental, as learning another language is a life-changing experience.

As the old adage goes: Practice makes Perfect, so English should be used often and widely. For international students this will mean moving out of their comfort zones—even their first language living arrangements—in order to think, speak and live in English. Social immersion in an English-speaking environment is important, whether created at home, at university, at work or in the community. Many students noted that their English language development has involved understanding the cultural conventions and linguistic subtleties of the host country, many of which can only be learnt by communicating with native speakers.

The findings from our study strongly suggest the following:

- Learning environments should be supportive of students. For this to happen we recommend that both teaching and support staff work to cater for the needs and interests of all students through being cognisant of the students' backgrounds, opportunities, skills and understandings and by providing appropriate teaching and learning resources. Teaching and support staff should develop and provide learning opportunities and provide adequate and appropriate resources (in a timely manner) so that this can be achieved.
- The value of the daily use of English by international students cannot be overestimated. However, students need opportunities for this to occur. Our study shows that many students are so overwhelmed with their academic workload that they are unable to take on this additional, yet effective, learning opportunity. Moreover, many courses do not allow time for students to integrate.
- Tutorial classes should be used to enhance communication between students, over and above the traditional format of discussing subject content. Numerous ice-breaking games and interaction tasks can be remodelled to enhance content learning and communication and which can help interlocutors to relax and develop friendships. Some examples might be activities where students match terminology and definitions, activities where student groups recreate topic sentences or a new title from a reading in their own words, or where students work together on concept maps thereby developing their language as they negotiate and contribute to the creation of a map.
- The value of social support groups and functions for international students is critical. At the university level, it is important that funding continues for these activities. It is important that students are encouraged to join such groups where they can overcome anxiety with regard to speaking. Lecturers and tutors should be informed of social activities on their campuses and encourage their international students to attend. Social activities involving small unit enrolments are also an option. A list of clubs and societies and recommendations for membership can be part of the unit guide. Social activities can be advertised on the unit or course website and students can be advised on the value of social learning strategies.
- Unit coordinators should make a serious attempt at embedding academic support into their units. This can be done by working closely with academic skills development staff and with teaching and learning development staff at the curriculum development stage.

- Students need to understand about learning, what strategies suit them, what strategies are available, and what strategies other students are using. This is a further role for learning advisors, but also one that can be taken on board by academic staff.
- Meta-learning knowledge (or metacognitive strategies) should be developed. This can be done with information on and/or links to learning strategy advice on unit or course websites and in unit guides. It can also be the subject of discussion in an early tutorial.
- Preparation is critical. Unsurprisingly, preparation before classes/lectures and attendance at classes/lectures was linked to academic success in our study. There is a need for staff to carefully construct their material so that students can adequately prepare before class, and that they construct their classes in such a way that students are motivated and understand the need to attend.
- Cultural knowledge is critical to English improvement. International students in our study recognised the importance of learning about Australian culture in order to understand and operate in Australian English and society. At the same time, many would like to have their own cultural experience and expertise acknowledged. We suggest that internationalisation of the curriculum involves a two-way process whereby academics explicitly demonstrate and compare the cultural components of their discipline areas on a local and on a global scale. Academic staff should provide explicit ways for international students to connect the new knowledge of their units with their prior cultural experiences.
- Affective variables are critical in student learning. From the data, several beliefs showed some small relationship with academic success, the importance of cultural understanding for improved English, and the belief that one's speaking should not be hindered by making mistakes.
- Lecturers should be attentive to students' listening skills. Students expressed concern about their listening abilities, particularly in the face of the range of accents they meet in an Australian higher education context. It is the obligation of the lecturer to make him/herself understood. This responsibility can be enhanced through the use of resources such as lecture notes, recorded/videoed lectures, podcasts and online powerpoints, and visuals. Lecturers should take steps to ensure that students understand the content of the lectures. This can be done by speak-

ing clearly and at a pace whereby notes can be taken, avoiding colloquial speech, explaining analogies and metaphoric expressions, providing objectives and alerting students to each objective as it is addressed, and using directive discourse markers. It is also beneficial to provide rest points at approximately 20 minute intervals.

- Students' English should be graded. The data shows a significant relationship (although weak) between academic achievement and receiving marks for good English in assignments. Obviously good English expression will enhance any grading of a written assignment, but this result suggests that if students' awareness of the value of their English is judged, then better results will occur. We are aware that many academic staff are reluctant to judge the quality of English in their students' assignment, feeling untrained to do so. However, the combination of clear organisation, affective cohesion and coherent argumentation will render a better mark regardless of the assessor's skills and it seems that knowing this has a relationship with students' efforts.
- The relationship between reading and subsequent writing is important. Without adequate reading skill development we create in students an instant dependence on the very words of a written text i.e., we set them up to plagiarise. Our research highlights the advantages of developing students' reading to the point where they have the ability and confidence to infer meaning from the context. Many students are arriving at university with an ongoing reliance on dictionary use which makes reading and writing time-consuming and often inexact. It is recommended that students are introduced to terminology in context rather than simple word lists/glossaries, although lists of content terminology should be readily available as part of the course materials.

International students contribute significantly to the Australian higher education sector in a number of ways, not least of all financially. The development of English language skills is critical to their success while they are studying and for subsequent employment. Without a clear understanding of the English language learning needs of international students we abrogate our responsibilities as educators.

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