

Identifying academic language needs through diagnostic assessment

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Abstract

The increasing linguistic diversity among both international and domestic students in English-medium universities creates new challenges for the institutions in addressing the students' needs in the area of academic literacy. In order to identify students with such needs, a major New Zealand university has implemented the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) programme, which is now a requirement for all first-year undergraduate students, regardless of their language background. The results of the assessment are used to guide students to appropriate forms of academic language support where applicable. This article examines the rationale for the assessment programme, which takes account of some specific provisions governing university admission in New Zealand law. Then, drawing on the test validation network by Read and Chapelle [Read, J., & Chapelle, C. A. (2001). A framework for second language vocabulary assessment. *Language Testing*, 18, 1–32] the article considers in some detail: 1) the way in which DELNA is presented to staff and students of the university, and 2) the procedures for reporting the results. It also considers the criteria by which the programme should be evaluated.

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1. Introduction

The internationalisation of education in the major English-speaking countries has long created the need to provide various forms of academic language support for those international students who have been admitted to the institution, but whose proficiency is still not fully adequate to meet the language demands of their degree studies. Language support most often takes the form of English for academic purposes (EAP) courses targeting specific skills such as writing or listening, but it can also include adjunct language classes linked to a particular content course, writing clinics, peer editing programmes, self-access centres, and so on. A typical strategy is to require incoming international students to take an in-house placement test, the results of which are used either to exempt individuals from the EAP programme or to direct them into the appropriate courses to address their needs. Accounts of tests designed broadly for this purpose at various universities can be found in Brown (1993), Fox (2004), Fulcher (1997), and Wall, Clapham, and Alderson (1994).

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At the same time, it is now well recognised that many students who are not on student visas also have academic language needs. This may result from the success of policies to recruit students from indigenous ethnic or linguistic minority groups which have traditionally been underrepresented in tertiary education. Another major category consists of relatively recent migrants or refugees, who have received much if not all of their secondary education in the host country and thus have met the academic requirements for university admission, but who still experience difficulties with academic reading and writing in particular (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999). The term Generation 1.5 has been coined in the US to refer to the fact that these students are separated from the country of their birth but often not fully integrated — linguistically, educationally or culturally — into their new society. Beyond these two identifiable categories, there is a broader continuum of academic literacy needs within the student body in the contemporary English-medium university, including many students who are monolingual in English.

Although various forms of language support may be available to these domestic students on campus, the issue is how to identify the ones who need such support and to what extent they should be *required* to take advantage of it. There can be legal or ethical constraints on directing students into language support on the basis of their language background or other demographic characteristics. It may also be counterproductive to make it obligatory for students to participate in a support programme when they have no wish to be set apart from their peers and are reluctant to acknowledge that they have language needs. One way to address the situation is to introduce some form of diagnostic assessment, comparable to the in-house placement tests for international students. In fact, one of the tests cited above (Fulcher, 1997) was designed to be administered at the University of Surrey in the UK to all incoming students, regardless of their immigration status or language background. A similar solution is emerging at the university which is the subject of the present article.

Having regard for these various considerations, it is necessary to give some careful thought to the development of an assessment procedure for this purpose. There are technical issues, such as how to assess native and non-native speakers by means of a common metric and how to reliably identify those with no need of language support within the minimum amount of testing time. However, the focus of this discussion will be on the need to present the assessment to the students and to the university community in a manner that will achieve its desired goals while at the same time avoiding unnecessary compulsion.

2. The context

The particular case to be considered here is a programme called Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA), which has been implemented at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. The programme was introduced to address concerns that developed through the 1990s with the influx of students who are now collectively identified as having English as an additional language (EAL). During that decade New Zealand tertiary institutions vigorously recruited international students, particularly from East Asia. These students were required to demonstrate their proficiency in English as a condition of admission. However, the typical requirement for undergraduates of Band 6.0 in IELTS came to be recognised as a relatively modest level of English proficiency, particularly for students whose cultural background and previous educational experience made it difficult to meet the academic expectations of their lecturers and tutors (Read & Hayes, 2003). In the absence of any moves to raise the minimum English requirement for entry, then, the University of Auckland — like other New Zealand universities and polytechnics — needed to provide various forms of ongoing language support for international students.

The liberalisation of immigration policy in the late 1980s also opened up opportunities for skilled migrants and business investors to migrate to New Zealand with their families. This led to an inflow of new immigrants from Taiwan, China, South Korea, India and Hong Kong, peaking in 1995 but continuing at lower levels to this day. The vast majority of the new immigrants settled in the Auckland metropolitan area and in time these communities produced substantial numbers of students for tertiary institutions in the region, and for the University of Auckland in particular. The students from these communities had quite similar linguistic, educational and cultural profiles to international students; many students in both categories had attended a New Zealand secondary school for one, two or more years before entering the university. However, there was one crucial difference. Under New Zealand law (the Education Act 1989), permanent residents are classified as domestic students for the purpose of university admission and cannot be subjected to any entry requirement that is not also imposed on citizens of the country. This means specifically that new migrants cannot be targeted to take an English proficiency test or enrol in ESL classes as a condition of being admitted into a university.

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