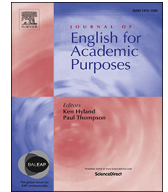


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On evaluating the effectiveness of university-wide credit-bearing English language enhancement courses

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing understanding that the development of academic language and learning (ALL) for students with English as an additional language (EAL) should be facilitated via coordinated, institution-wide, scalable provision. However, with large-scale curriculum reform comes increased accountability and expectation of visible learning outcomes. This paper outlines six mechanisms that can be utilised in the evaluation of institution-wide credit-bearing English language enhancement courses (ELECs): 1) English language proficiency, 2) academic outcomes, 3) academic integrity, 4) retention, 5) student evaluations, and 6) self-directed learning. It is argued that, as measurable gains are likely to be modest in the short term, multiple methods are advisable to garner evidence of cumulative value. The constraints and affordances of each mechanism are discussed and operationalised in relation to a suite of ELECs at a large Australian university. The findings demonstrate co-occurrence of a range of positive student outcomes when compared with students who did not undertake the ELECs.

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1. Introduction

The number of tertiary students enrolled outside their country of citizenship has grown from 0.8 million in the 1970s to 4.6 million more recently, and is anticipated to increase further (OECD, 2017). With the spread of English as a global language, it is not surprising that four of the top six higher education destinations are traditional Anglophone nations (OECD, 2016). Australia specifically has witnessed phenomenal growth in its tertiary international enrolments in the last two decades (Chaney, 2013; DET, 2016; Marginson, 2011) and with this growth has come increasing scrutiny of the outcomes of international students with English as an additional language (EAL). This was highlighted by a government-commissioned report which contended that the language levels of large numbers of EAL *graduates* were below degree commencement expectations (Birrell, Hawthorne, & Richardson, 2006), resulting in the publication of a set of ten good practice principles for international students in Australian universities (DEEWR, 2009), followed by six English Language Standards for Higher Education (AUQA, 2012).

There is an increasing understanding in Australia and other Anglophone countries that coordinated institution-wide approaches to the development of academic language and learning (ALL) are necessary to address the above concerns

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(Dunworth, Drury, Kralik, & Moore, 2014; Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010; Murray & Nallaya, 2014; Sheridan, 2011; Wingate, 2006). However, to date, such approaches are rare. In the US, there is a long tradition of providing Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) courses to all first year undergraduates, but one survey (Thaiss & Porter, 2010) estimates that only half of US universities have a WAC/WID course and that these are not necessarily institution-wide. Hall (2009) also points out that such courses are not designed specifically for EAL students. Elsewhere, institutional approaches have involved the creation of a communications framework against which skills can be benchmarked across degrees (Barrett-Lennard, Chalmers, & Longnecker, 2011; Harper, 2011). Overall, however, the available evidence suggests that academic literacy has tended to be addressed at the micro level, via learning and teaching strategies within specific courses or faculties. These may be effective, but the scale of implementation limits their impact.

The sustainability of any strategy, large or small, inevitably rests on demonstrable effectiveness. Arkoudis and Kelly (2015) suggest that, as a result of increasing accountability, “high impact practices” are needed as part of a quality assurance framework because “there is little evidence to demonstrate if or how institutions measure the effectiveness of current practices in relation to their impact on student learning” (p. 8). This echoes Hattie's (2015) comments that, while most interventions can show evidence of success, we need to “go beyond merely collecting data, creating reports, and asking students to fill in surveys” (p. 89) and become interpreters of the evidence. Hattie encourages university teachers to ‘know thy impact’ and to find evidence of ‘visible learning’ through scalable provision.

The purpose of this paper, then, is threefold: (a) to outline one way in which the academic language and learning of EAL students has been addressed on an institution-wide scale at a large multi-faculty university; (b) to propose a number of ways in which a whole-of-university approach, such as this one, can be evaluated in terms of visible learning; and (c) to present findings against these evaluation criteria to investigate the significance and impact of the institution-wide approach to ALL.

2. English language enhancement courses

The remit of an English language enhancement course (ELEC) is to develop the academic language and learning of EAL students in Anglophone higher education. At Griffith University, a large metropolitan Australian institution, EAL students comprise roughly 20% of the student body and ELECs have been implemented uniformly in all first-year undergraduate programs. Each ELEC is a one-semester credit-bearing course, situated within one of the University's four academic groups (faculties):

- Language and Communication for Business and Commerce
- Language and Communication for Health
- Language and Communication for Sciences
- Language and Communication for Arts and Social Sciences

For pragmatic reasons, the courses are field-specific, not discipline-specific. It was not viable to resource fully discipline-specific ELECs (e.g. for engineering, biology, environmental studies and information technology), but when combined as fields (e.g. sciences), financial constraints could be overcome.

Each course has a weekly two-hour interactive lecture, attended by all students, in which academic literacy skills, concepts, issues, and texts are discussed and practised within a field-specific context. This content is reinforced and operationalised in a smaller two-hour activity-driven tutorial. The following vignette illustrates a typical week:

The focus is oral presentations (OPs). As lecture preparation, students read one chapter of Garr Reynolds' book *Presentation Zen* (2008), which is both an authentic text (not written for language learners) and a source of ideas for quality OPs. The reading is collaboratively unpacked in the lecture, and key communication points for good presenting are discussed. Students then watch an edited video of real presentations by undergraduates in their faculty, which they critique for macro and micro genre and discourse features, using a guide. In the subsequent tutorial, students conduct further multiple analyses of video presentations, this time by previous students in their ELEC. They then form groups and study a rubric for grading OPs, which will be used as an assessment mechanism in the ELEC but is also representative of OP assessment in university courses. Additionally, each group receives a journal article relevant to their field, which they have to read (in their own time) and distil into a stimulating OP to be presented in future tutorials. All key vocabulary arising from the reading, lecture, videos and tutorial is made available to students in an online document for review.

ELECs are mandatory for EAL students who enter with an Overall IELTS score below 7.0 (or equivalent) or through an alternative entry pathway which precludes language proficiency testing. The courses are not open to students from English-speaking backgrounds, and are not taken by EAL students above the IELTS cut-off (although there is flexibility for exceptions). Undergraduate degree programs university-wide were modified so that ELECs could be undertaken in the first semester of study by the required cohort, who take one less elective to ensure degree length is unaffected.

Discipline specialists assisted applied linguists in the initial curriculum development phase (e.g. by supplying representative texts), but the ongoing administration and teaching of ELECs is done by academic language specialists alone. These staff are situated in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science (whose applied linguists deliver the lectures), and the

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