



Language specialists' views on academic language and learning support mechanisms for EAL postgraduate coursework students: The case for adjunct tutorials



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ABSTRACT

Large numbers of international students are enrolled in postgraduate coursework degrees in English Medium of Instruction (EMI) destinations such as Australia and the UK (AUSSE Research Briefing, 2011; HEFCE, 2014), most of whom have English as an Additional Language (EAL). However, there is a dearth of literature on the types of academic language and learning (ALL) support that best suit this cohort, and few accounts of sustained strategies implemented specifically for them, particularly university-wide. This paper is an account of one university's attempt to fill this gap in terms of both research and practice. The institution's senior executive commissioned a survey of the views of higher education ALL practitioners across Australia ($n = 42$) on the potential effectiveness of nine archetypal ALL support mechanisms for postgraduate EAL coursework students. Findings took the form of a quantitative rating of the nine mechanisms as well as qualitative comments on pro and con factors. As the paper describes, this data fed into the formation of an executively mandated academic language enhancement strategy for postgraduate coursework EAL students in the form of a two-year trial of adjunct tutorials within core coursework units.

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1. Introduction

In 2012, four and a half million students were enrolled in tertiary institutions outside of their country of citizenship (OECD, 2014). Australia has the largest percentage of international students among tertiary enrolments globally and is the fifth most popular destination of international students after the US, the UK, Germany and France (OECD, 2013). Over the last two decades, Australia has seen “historical rates of growth” (Chaney, 2013, p.2) and by 2011 the average percentage of international students enrolled in Australian universities was 21.3 per cent (Chaney, 2013). Because English is an additional language (EAL) for the majority of these students, their academic language and learning (ALL) abilities have come under scrutiny. In Australia, this focus is evidenced by the publication of the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities* (AUQA, 2009) and the *English Language Standards for Higher Education* (AUQA, 2012). National symposia have been convened to highlight related matters (AEI, 2007; IEAA, 2013) and

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the national regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), has flagged attention in this area (TEQSA, 2013).

A large number of international students are postgraduates. Nearly one third of all international students in Australian higher education are enrolled in postgraduate¹ coursework degrees (AUSSE Research Briefing, 2011). Numbers are similarly high in other English Medium of Instruction (EMI) contexts. In the UK, postgraduate masters courses are increasingly reliant on international entrants and, in the period 2012–3, 74 per cent came from other countries (HEFCE, 2014). New Zealand saw an 11 per cent increase in postgraduate international students between 2012 and 2013 (Expatform, 2014) and the US is also experiencing an increase in postgraduate international enrolments, mainly from India (HEFCE, 2014). Research into postgraduate student trends is forecasting increased bilateral flows, especially from India and China, with the US alone expected to host over 400,000 postgraduate students in the next decade, and Australia and China expected to have the highest annual average growth in inbound postgraduate mobility by 2024 (British Council, 2014).

2. Context

The current study was undertaken at a comprehensive multi-campus university in Queensland, Australia, where one quarter of the student population is international with English as an additional language (EAL), and around half of these EALs are postgraduate coursework students. As well as the national focus on academic language and learning matters noted above, institutional concerns had prompted the implementation in 2008 of a whole-of-university approach to supporting EAL students. This institutional strategy is consistent with a growing call for university-wide approaches (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2014; Dunworth, Drury, Kralik, & Moore, 2014; Gunn, Hearne, & Sibthorpe, 2011; Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010; Murray & Nallaya, 2014; Sheridan, 2011; Wingate, 2006). Dunworth et al. (2014), for example, report “an overwhelming sense that a whole of institution approach was the most effective way of achieving progress” (p.11) while Arkoudis and Doughney (2014) cite it as critical to make ALL support the core business of university teaching and learning to assure graduates’ English language proficiency outcomes.

Despite the comprehensive nature of this institutional strategy, postgraduate coursework EAL students had not been fully catered for in its first iteration. In order to make evidence-based decisions with the imprimatur of the University Executive, the authors were therefore tasked by the University’s English Language Working Party (ELWP) with identifying an effective mechanism for supporting them. The working party was chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) and comprised senior discipline academics, administrative managers, and ALL experts. Three strands of research were commissioned: (i) post-entry language testing of a sample of EAL postgraduate coursework students, (ii) interviewing discipline academics on their perceptions of EAL students’ ALL needs, and (iii) surveying ALL expert practitioners nationally on their perceptions of effective support for this cohort. Together the triangulated data from this mixed methods design would offer a rich picture to aid decision-making (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The literature suggests that consultation with experts is a key ingredient for success in planning an all-of-university approach (Dunworth et al., 2014) and it is for this reason that the views of situated ALL experts who have worked extensively on such matters were solicited and constitute the focus of this paper.

It is within this context that the present paper seeks to determine effective mechanisms for supporting the academic language and learning of EAL postgraduate coursework students from the perspective of the ALL expert.

3. Support for postgraduate coursework students in the literature

The unique needs of postgraduate EAL students remain under-researched. The limited literature suggests that the discipline-specific critical writing and reading skills that underpin postgraduate study are not always issues of language (Abasi & Graves, 2008; Handa & Fallon, 2006; McCulloch, 2013; Melles, 2008; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Reid, 2011; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011; Woodrow, 2006), because postgraduate students need to develop strategies to develop critical thinking and appraisal skills that evidence the higher cognitive objectives expected of them (Arambewela & Maringe, 2010; Storch & Tapper, 2009; Tran, 2008). The transitional challenges that EAL postgraduates face have also been highlighted (Guilfoyle, 2005, 2006; Novera, 2004; Singh & Armstrong, 2006; Tian & Low, 2012; Zhou & Todman, 2009). The literature also suggests that developing language and academic literacies is a long-term approach which needs to be considered within an overall framework of development and support across the curriculum.

There are only piecemeal examples in the literature of instructional support specifically for EAL postgraduates. These have usually only been trialled within one course, program or faculty (Boughton, Halliday, & Brown, 2010; Harris & Ashton, 2011; Jones, Farrell, & Goldsmith, 2009; Melles, 2008; Stratilas, 2011; Storch & Tapper, 2009), or only delivered for one or two semesters (Baik & Greig, 2009), and there are relatively few case studies that evidence an integrated/embedded approach at the postgraduate level. Moreover, the perceived effectiveness of support mechanisms specifically for postgraduates has received little attention.

¹ The term “postgraduate” has varying connotations in different educational contexts. In this paper, we are referring to Master’s level programs, in which the degree is awarded after successful completion of components that are solely or predominantly coursework courses/units, i.e. we are *not* concerned with learning support provided for Master’s dissertations/theses.

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