

English Language Growth - Teaching Staff Resource

Executive Summary

This resource is the outcome of a project to assist international university students whose first language is not English with their own ongoing English language development, and to assist staff in understanding and addressing these students' linguistic and academic needs.

The project was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and has involved five Australian universities: Monash University, The University of Melbourne and Deakin University in Melbourne, Edith Cowan University in Perth, and Macquarie University in Sydney.

With consideration of academic workloads, this teaching resource has been designed as a quick reference list for scanning and possibly implementing. The full report can be downloaded from our website www.elg.edu.au/dvd/. The website also provides an extensive resource for students.

Background

There has been ongoing concern at universities across Australia about the English language proficiency of many international students. This concern is linked not only to the entry levels of proficiency but also to the exit levels. These concerns therefore also impact in the broader workforce community. Even though Australia enjoys a high standing internationally in education provision and Australian universities are increasingly embracing globalisation and recognising the importance of satisfied graduates as effective ambassadors of their institutions, many negative experiences of international students continue to attract the attention of the media, which regularly publishes signs of the growing dissatisfaction of this student cohort.

Australian universities, or private providers aligned with them, generally offer preparatory English courses to bring international students' language skills up to a level where they can adjust rapidly to the heavy literacy demands of their academic study. Not every student however will have the time, inclination, or financial resources to attend such classes and many will enter university unaware of the further English language growth that is required in order to achieve in their studies.

It is acknowledged that international students' dissatisfaction with their learning experience in Australia is influenced, to a significant degree, by socio-cultural and language factors, as well as educational issues. Nonetheless, given our ethical responsibility to provide all students with equitable education outcomes, this project sought to investigate how international students can improve their English language competence, and whether there are particular learning strategies that place students 'at risk' or others that can enhance their opportunities for academic success.

Data for this study were gathered by way of a set of online questionnaires which were accessed through a dedicated website. Students were asked to provide responses to questions about their language and education background, how they felt about their language learning experience, and what sorts of things they did to practise and improve their English, and to achieve. The questionnaire also provided opportunities for students to relate their experiences more freely in open-ended questions. Quantitative data from the survey was then correlated with students' Grade Point Averages (or normalised equivalent measure from the other participating universities) to investigate any learning strategies which enhanced or hindered linguistic and academic development. The students also provided extensive responses to the open-ended questions providing us with a rich body of qualitative data. Both the qualitative and quantitative findings, described extensively in the report for the ALTC, have provided the content for the student resource on the CD ROM.

The findings of our study have enabled us to make a number of recommendations which are available at the end of the report.

Similar to many studies that have investigated links between learning behaviours, attitudes and academic success, we did not find many significant relationships, and those we did find were at best, weak. As many others before us have found, academic success is linked to a plethora of variables, of which learning strategy use and affective variables represent just a few. Nonetheless, we are able to suggest some factors might be considered to enhance international students' experience and success at Australian universities.

At the same time we acknowledge that most universities are already responding to their international students' in ways that support our findings. Therefore for many teaching and support staff at universities the recommendations proposed here are nothing new. Nonetheless we hope that, as a result of this study, universities are able to refine their support for international students to address what may be a new focus or direction.

Key recommendations for teaching staff

- Provide a supportive learning environment
- Provide a range of resources and teaching activities to support learning
- Make students aware of what support is available and encourage them to seek it
- Model culturally-appropriate language production
- Model and encourage different learning strategies and approaches
- Help students to make links with what they already know
- Overall assist students to develop a deep level of understanding
- Encourage student attendance

Assisting Learning Strategy Development

Our findings show that many international students struggle to adapt to the academic literacy demands of their host universities – a finding that is strongly supported by the literature. The following table contains ideas as to what teaching staff at universities might do to help international students from non-English-speaking-backgrounds (NESB) to continue to develop their English, and in doing so, assist them to overcome this struggle. These suggestions have emerged directly from the findings of our research and/or from the literature we have reviewed (see sections 2, 4 and 5 of our report). They are intended as suggestions and are by no means exhaustive. Many will seem quite obvious and most, but not all staff, are doing these already. We encourage staff to build upon what we offer to develop a set of strategies that address the individual needs of today's diverse student cohorts and that are appropriate to their specific learning contexts.

Many international NESB students feel nervous or uncomfortable using English in class.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a supportive environment for students by ensuring their contributions in class are valued – even if you disagree or don't completely understand what they say, thank them for 'having a go'.• Be approachable – students report that asking their lecturers for help is an important strategy for them to use – make this easier for them to do.• HOWEVER, also be aware that student silence does not necessarily equate to reticence: In many cultures silence is part of communication and can actually be a sign of respect, reflection or even disagreement.
Many NESB students struggle to make sense of what they hear or read in class.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide adequate support to ensure that students truly are 'getting' the intended meaning of what they hear and read. For instance, set up situations where they must share and negotiate meaning with others in a non-threatening way. This can be done using discussion boards, Wikis, informal peer mentoring (either face to face or online) or through information gap or jigsaw¹ pair or group work activities.• In pair/group work situations set up situations where students who need to develop their English are the 'experts' (because they are the holders of the key information) and their partner or other group members are the 'novices'. This encourages their active participation in class and helps them to make connections with their background knowledge.• Also ensure that all the key information is available – preferably in a

¹ Information gap and jigsaw activities come from ESL teaching methodology approaches, but work equally as well with universities students from a English as well as non-English speaking backgrounds. They involve setting up tasks where each member of a pair or group has some, but not all the information to be conveyed. Each member has slightly different information (eg. in a group of 4 there will be version A, B, C and D) – only when all bits are conveyed can the full version be put together – hence the name 'jigsaw' task.

variety of forms (e.g., on Blackboard, in text books, on powerpoint and handouts). International students who have the opportunity to prepare before class, will get more out of what they hear/read in class.

- Variety is important to cater for different learning styles and to prevent boredom (see note below – “Death by Powerpoint”)
- Make key concepts clear and give several different examples to make the point.
- Provide good quality, clear and informative powerpoint slides or handouts to scaffold the students’ understanding.
- Avoid the use of jargon or introduce and explain or provide a definition of key terms in your unit material.
- Use frequent discourse markers (e.g., Next I will talk about...; Now the second important point is...; Finally we need to think about...).
- Make it clear when you are changing topic – in that split second the student may miss the transition.
- Explain analogies and metaphors.
- Allow all students time to process and develop understanding – simply telling someone something doesn’t automatically translate to understanding. Break up long ‘input sessions’ with activities, videos, etc., that reinforce what is said.
- Set guide questions that assist students to process information and read with a specific focus during their out of class study.
- Provide a model for reading effectively. For example, explore set readings together and examine issues, such as the difference between fact and opinion (culturally this can differ); examine the way a text is constructed, i.e., to persuade, to critique, to evaluate, etc; look at the vocabulary used and how it reflects both the discipline area, prepare a glossary of difficult terms to speed up students’ reading.
- Encourage students’ use of reading strategies such as: making notes; underlining and highlighting important information; writing questions and notes in the margin in order to better understand the text (glossing); transferring key points into diagrams, charts or figures (e.g., concept maps); and evaluating the usefulness of the text they are reading against some negotiated or established criteria. This could be done by providing ‘tips’ on your unit outline or on Blackboard. Don’t assume that all students will know how to do these things – many ‘poor readers’ are simply unaware of such strategies.

Many students struggle with listening to the accents of teaching staff (Australian and non-Australian accents).

- Ensure that important information is available in a variety of forms.
- Be sensitive to newly arrived students – remember what it feels like when you visit places where different languages are used – even the same language spoken with a different accent can throw even the most accomplished travellers.

- If you are aware that you speak quickly – slow down a bit – but not unnaturally so (because it is important that students become used to the pattern of Australian English).
- Speak clearly and open your mouth (it is surprising the number of university teaching staff who fail to project their voices).
- Try to avoid shouting (they have English as a second/additional language, they are not hearing impaired!)
- Frequently check student understanding – but don't just ask "Do you understand?" or "Do you follow?" – students will agree to avoid loss of face. Instead ask questions so that you can monitor their understanding.
- Make your objectives for each class very clear at the start and throughout your delivery and repeat and summarise frequently.
- Encourage students to interact with Australian English speakers outside of class: studies have shown how beneficial this can be (Yamada, 2003). On your unit outline/Blackboard information provide the name/s and contact details of another staff member to whom the students can talk if they have a problem communicating with you

Many students struggle with the use of colloquial language and Australian terms.

- Provide a gloss if you use colloquial language or unusual terms – remember we don't all come with the same background knowledge.
- Set up an informal and fun system where throughout the semester international students can compile a list of the 'Australian terms' you use in class or that they will come across in their case studies or readings (e.g., newspaper business pages) – this can be educative for both you and them (and for your other students to develop their awareness). There are many websites that contain lists colloquial expressions and their meanings.

A number of students feel too intimidated to ask questions when they don't understand something.

- Providing a supportive environment is vital.
- Make sure your students are aware of the university support personnel who are available to help them. Invite them to your classes so the students can learn about what they offer and can make connections with them.
- If possible, set up informal peer tutoring groups (enabling this with tasks that require them to interact with local students or other international students – preferably from a different language background). In this way links may be developed - someone they can talk to, phone, text or email their questions.
- However, be cautious about setting up assessment tasks where groups are put together in such a way that local students MUST work with international students and then required to produce a joint assignment. This can also be intimidating for the international students and may lead to resentment from the local students when they placed in a situation of

redrafting the product into an acceptable English level.

- Set aside time for question and answer sessions in the last part of the class: More confident students are likely to ask questions that a number of students may be puzzling about; it also models the interactive style of teaching/learning in Australia – a style that may be new to some international students. Introduce “quesdiscussions” [http://www.uwo.ca/tsc/tlc/lc_part3c.html#02].

Students are uncomfortable participating in discussions – they feel shy and worry about loss of face (if they make a mistake).

- Be aware that many international students come from an educational background that has not encouraged verbal expression but has focused on the written product and grammatical correctness.
- Also be aware that speaking anxiety and fear of subsequent negative evaluation by others have detrimental effects on learners and therefore instructors should make a point of easing tension in the classroom and creating a supportive learning context where students’ fears of rejection can be alleviated (Woodrow & Chapman, 2002a; Aida, 1994)
- Provide a supportive environment which may mean that, at least in the initial months, international students simply may be allowed to listen, rather than be expected to talk.
- Work to develop ‘an atmosphere of cooperative interactions and consensus—a sense of working together to achieve a common goal’ (Rounds, 1987)
- Encourage risk-taking by being supportive and encouraging of students’ responses and their attempts to participate in discussions.
- Allocate roles in a discussion group – perhaps those too shy to speak in the first weeks can record the discussion points rather than actually participate in the discussion itself.
- Undertaking discussions in group situations (even at first in pairs) is less intimidating than talking in whole class situations.
- Sometimes grouping international students together for group discussions (especially when they come from a variety of language backgrounds) is a better situation to foster discussion and to enable them to develop confidence.
- Be careful with your use of humour – it may be misinterpreted by some students (however, if done carefully it can encourage a positive atmosphere – it may also provide a useful stepping off point for a discussion about cross cultural differences/Australian culture). Light-hearted moments are preferable to jokes.

Participating, even in groups, can be difficult for international NESB students.

- Provide contextual support for group work. Again information gap or jigsaw tasks (see footnote, page 1) are useful. With key terms/appropriate vocabulary already provided on the task sheets students’ ‘cognitive load’ is lessened. This helps students to not have to struggle with the language and can really focus on making meaning.
- Also clearly indicate to students the purpose of group work – the

literature contains many examples where students have negative perceptions about such a teaching approach.

- Encourage students to interact socially – either in university activities or outside activities.

Students feel uncomfortable writing in English.

- Make sure your international students are fully aware of what support is available at your university – it might seem repetitive to remind them, but we found that many students were simply unaware that support was there for them.
- Do set writing tasks! Many courses do not give international students time and opportunities to practice writing in English - many courses use multiple choice formats for assessment, so students do not need to produce sustained writing with many reporting that their English actually regresses during their studies (personal communication Neomy Storch 2009). Very often students don't have to write at length until their final exam, so continual writing tasks. Many students only ever write at length using a computer and are at a disadvantage when writing by hand in an exam. Provide opportunities for writing in tutorials by setting short answer questions.
- If you set writing tasks, provide a clear outline of what you expect. Provide a marking key that indicates the sections required and how many points each part attracts (it helps students provide the appropriate focus for their writing). Provide in class time (e.g., during a tutorial) for students to map/plan and discuss their written assignments.
- If possible provide models of what is appropriate (and what is not). This includes making very clear what plagiarism is and what should be done in its stead (see Appendix 4 of main report).
- Be aware that many of our international students come from cultures where writing conventions differ markedly (see Appendix 4 of main report for a discussion of this issue).
- Set collaborative writing tasks as part of your in-class activities – it helps students both with their content knowledge (discussing key information) as well as focussing their attention on the form of written English (see Storch (2005) for a description of this activity).
- There are a number of writing resources available – list these in your course outlines and on Blackboard² or the particular Learning Management System used at your university, for example Sakai, Moodle, etc). John Bitchener's recent book, although written for Applied Linguistics students, provides wonderful direction for all post-graduate students writing a dissertation or thesis.
- Bitchener, J. (2010) Writing an Applied Linguistics Thesis or

² Blackboard is used throughout this document as a generic term throughout this document to represent all learning management systems.

Many international NESB students are not using English a great deal in their day-to-day communications.

- Be explicit – tell students that their English will improve if they use it more. English should be used in all its forms – reading (texts, magazines, newspapers), writing (discussion boards, keeping journals, writing home to friends in English), listening (to radio, to TV and movies), speaking (to different audiences) and even electronic forms of English (see main report p.34 of the main report for a discussion about texting and use of SMS).
- We found that students who have part-time jobs use English more – so show support for them doing this or for engaging in extra-curricular where English is required.
- Be encouraging about their use of English outside university and explain the need to ‘have a go’ even when uncomfortable. The very successful students whom we interviewed often used the strategy of seeking out new conversational partners (be it in a queue at a supermarket, in a café or on the bus).
- At the same time be explicit about cultural differences in what is appropriate and what is not in Australia (this may be aligned to the topic you are covering in class, most especially if you are in the social science/humanities areas).
- If it is possible within your discipline area, set up tasks that require students to interact in English outside of class. For instance, in a marketing course a lecturer could have them ask three people they come into contact with outside class why they have chosen a certain product (type of beer, model of car, type of takeaway food).
- In smaller classes and tutorials, allow a short-time for a discussion about topics of interest, about what they are doing/did outside class (this will lead to students perceiving the class environment to be friendly, which in turn helps develop their confidence to ‘have a go’).
- Again use them as the ‘expert’ – many international students bring a wealth of information to their studies in Australia (e.g., about cultural differences) and diverse experiences. That is to say international students can be used as a resource in your teaching. As one of our participants explained “*We are actually pretty interesting as long as we have opportunity to show you western people!*” However, be careful not to appear to ‘pick on’ these students.
- As with writing – many courses are not requiring students to produce oral English (e.g., using multiple choice for assessment). Try and set tasks that require students to interact in and to produce spoken English – this does not mean that they must give a formal talk (although this could be done if relevant), but rather setting up group work tasks that require sharing of information (e.g., see again Footnote 1). An alternative to a formal presentation can be a digital story whereby the student assembles a series of digital photos relating to an assignment/lab/ field trip/case study etc., and tells the class about them.

This promotes spontaneous speech and the visuals take the focus off the speaker.

- Be aware of the impact of affective variables on student understanding and ultimate success in English (for example, if they do not believe they will be successful English speakers, they are unlikely to be willing to communicate and which will impact on how well they do academically and in developing their English).

Many international students feel isolated, lonely and homesick, and these feelings impact on their ability to function well at university.

- Explicitly outline to your students that all learners have different needs – many first year students of all backgrounds are unaware that they are 'not the only one'. This is especially the case for international students. As one of our participants suggested "... *educate local students about what international students going through while they are here far from their homeland, friends and their family. They are really desperate to find friends.* "
- Make sure all students are aware of the student support options available to them.
- Make sure students are aware of and encouraged to participate in campus activities where they can mix with English speakers'. (We found a weak but positive correlation with their GPAs when they do this).

Dictionaries should be used in a careful and balanced way.

- Allow, even encourage, students to use dictionaries. At the same time, however, be careful that they do not develop an over-reliance: Encourage risk-taking and a 'have a go' approach through the use of explicit statements to the same effect, and through the establishment of a supportive environment. Set boundaries or timeslots when dictionaries can and cannot be used.
- Make students aware that whilst the use dictionaries may help their vocabulary, their comprehension may not be dramatically increased and their speed of reading will be decreased (Knight, 1994).
- Make students aware that they need a dictionary that gives them the use of a word/phrase in a example sentence – many English words are used in different ways in different contexts. Recommend a Learner's Dictionary (some come with CDs complete with meaning and pronunciation) and provide access to a dictionary of terms for your discipline area.

Language support and development can come from a number of sources.

- Add a list of language support resources to your unit references e.g., from the learning or academic skills unit in your university, or from numerous online resources provided by universities worldwide. Here are some examples from the universities which participated in our study:

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lonline/>

<http://www.ecu.edu.au/CLT/tips/>

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/>

<http://www.international.mq.edu.au/student-services/studysupport/online>

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/study-support/study-skills/handouts/index.php>

- Encourage students to consult reliable sources to help with their English production. For instance, we found some students looked back at their old 'grammar books' and found these useful.

Reflecting on and knowing about the rules of English enhances English language development.

- Encourage students to keep a journal of the problems they encounter and achievements they experience when using English – remember awareness is the first step!
- Encourage students to write something every day – no matter how trivial.
- Direct students and encourage them to make use of student support services, and also mentoring programs that are available at many universities so that they can discuss their English development, as well as other personal and content knowledge understandings (or problems).
- Consider setting up "buddy-pairs" within your unit (virtual or real). These will need to be monitored if online. Buddy groups can also meet with you every few weeks to talk about their experiences and any problems.

There is a need for international NESB students to develop cultural awareness and understanding about Australia.

- Incorporate explicit cross cultural comparisons as part of your class activities. For example, the form/function discussion in an architectural course could be integrated into a group task examining the different life styles of various cultures; in a business communication course comparisons can be made about the different way meetings are conducted in different countries; in an education course comparisons can be undertaken about learning styles and what is valued in education in different cultures (e.g., problem solving, rote learning, active learning etc). If direct comparisons are made with Australian culture, it may allow students to enhance their awareness.
- It is important that you do not assume that all your students share the same background knowledge
- Use real life Australian examples – videos, multi-media etc. Make explicit reference to aspects of cultural difference (this can heighten awareness not just of international students – the notion that we all come to our learning with a different world view is new to many students!)
- Provide a list of appropriate Australian cultural/language resources e.g., Tell students about igoogle – their own home page with automatic links to their choice of news headlines, top stories, entertainment etc.

The literature shows that international students may struggle with culturally different **teaching and learning experiences**.

- Set up tasks and group situations that encourage students from various backgrounds to interact. As Volet and Ang (1998) show “after a successful experience of culturally mixed group work, students realize that cultural differences may not be as important as having similar goals and a mutual commitment to invest time and energy in the task” (ibid, p20)
- Be explicit about what is being done, for what reason and what is expected from them.
- At the same time, be flexible: We all learn in different ways and at different rates. Allow students opportunities to undertake learning in ways that best suit their learning style by setting up learning tasks and assessments that can be approached in different ways. You might raise students’ awareness of learning styles by using Felder’s questionnaire in an early tutorial [<http://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html>]. Be aware however that the idea of students having one particular learning style is much debated in the literature. It is possible that students evoke a range of learning styles depending on the task. But it’s still useful for them to know about them.
- Provide models and information about ways of doing things (writing assignments, searching data bases, finding appropriate sources of information).
- Make sure students are aware of any orientation courses offered by student support personnel, libraries, IT support etc.
- Encourage students to make links with what they know and understand – this is what the deep learner does (Biggs, 1987)
- Also encourage students to test out or apply learning to new situations (Kolb, 1975). For instance, ask them to apply new understandings from their course to their workplace, or to consider with what they observe happens outside university (with their friends, on the news etc) with what they learn from their study.
- The literature also suggests that studying in a language in which you lack confidence affects your approach to learning and may lead to the use of rote learning (Watkins, Biggs and Regmi, 1991). Clearly there is a need to set up tasks in which students can work confidently in English (again use ‘expert’ and ‘novice’ pair work or information/jigsaw tasks that scaffold student learning)

Students should be encouraged to focus on the ‘big picture’ to develop their understanding of content.

- Discourage students from making direct translations into the first language as this is a strategy that makes them focus on word level understanding and not a holistic global understanding of texts.
- All students should be made aware that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between languages, which is why translation is a

problematic strategy. (We found a small, but significant negative correlation between such a strategies and GPAs).

- Encourage both skim reading (to ascertain an overview) and then reflective reading (to develop deeper understanding). Advise students that even native speakers should go over their readings at least twice.
- Encourage students to make links to what they already know (there was a significant, though weak, positive correlation between this strategy and student GPAs in our research). Model how this can be done e.g., show how they can make links using diagrams, charts, tables, lists, concept maps, etc.
- Explicitly encourage students to read widely – getting information from a variety of sources.
- Model how this can be done e.g., show how they can make links using diagrams, charts, tables, lists etc.
- Explicitly encourage students to read widely – getting information from a variety of sources.
- Direct them to relevant journals and if appropriate, weekly newspapers (e.g., The Financial Review) along with texts and reference books. List these sources in your course outline and on Blackboard. Remind students throughout your course – telling students in week one does not guarantee that such information will be understood or acted upon.
- Let students know that studying only what they need to pass their course was found to be negatively correlated to success in our study.

Many students are unaware of international student support personnel and the services they provide and/or do not feel comfortable to access these services.

- Again, explicitly indicate that these services are available. If possible list the details in your course outline or on Blackboard.
- Invite student/academic support personnel to your class and let them explain what services are available (students may or may not have heard this at their orientation – but it is worthwhile repeating).
- Actively encourage ‘struggling’ students to make use of this service by indicating this on their assessments.

Incorporating marks for English production into assessments is helpful for assisting international students to develop their English.

- If at all possible, in designing your marking key for assessment, have a component for English language production. This heightens their awareness about your expectations for their English and may assist their development.

Students give a high level of attention to feedback about English production in assessments.

- Do provide students with written feedback, not just about the content of their work, but also the form it takes.
- Many errors are common, so develop an electronic proforma or use symbols or keys to indicate problematic areas (e.g., tense, punctuation

<p>etc).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage students to seek support.
<p>Following prepared lecture notes is related to student success.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have teaching/learning resources readily available to students. For example, have PowerPoint or lecture note outlines ready on Blackboard in plenty of time for students to download before class.
<p>Students doing assignments as soon as possible is also related to their success.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure all the details for required assignments are available at the beginning of semester. • Have all the resources necessary for the students to complete assigned work available as soon as possible.
<p>Attendance is related to success.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many students feel they can do well enough by simply reading the material, let them know that research shows this is NOT enough. • Be explicit – the best advice to almost all students according to the literature and to the staff we interviewed is simply “attend class!” • Make classes enjoyable and interesting so that students will be inspired to attend. Do this by keeping your material up to date; use multiple sources of materials (multimedia); be interactive; do not fall into the trap of “death by powerpoint”; provide challenges to your students.
<p>Being motivated to learn English assists learners with their development.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be explicit about what can be gained from continuing to develop their English (some students believe that once they gain entry to University they have a sufficient level): Describe the importance for their future (e.g., doing their job well/safely; the enjoyment they can get from interacting with others in English; English is fast becoming the lingua Franca in many situations worldwide). Also see p.43-5 of main report for a discussion on motivation and its impact on international students. • Motivation comes with success – compliment students on their development.
<p>Positive self-efficacy leads to success.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students to believe that they can continue developing their English