Bridging the 'English Gap': Achievements and Challenges of a Non-Award English Language Support Program

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Abstract

Australian universities are increasingly welcoming international non English speaking background (NESB) students with little consideration for the cultural, linguistic and institutional adjustments that the students must make. The substantial gap between the required English language proficiency for entrance and that expected on graduation remains a concern. This need for additional language support became evident in the Student Learning Centre (SLC) at Flinders University, where records indicated that NESB students seeking academic assistance were overrepresented. Consequently, the SLC created an English Language Support Program (ELSP) to enhance the communication skills of NESB students. Student feedback and improvements in ability showed that this program has been successful since its inception in 2015. However, it is only a first step in addressing the so-called 'English problem'. This paper discusses the advantages and constraints of this non-award program to assist NESB students to bridge the 'English gap' in higher education.

Keywords

Introduction: Dealing with the 'English problem'

The number of international non-English speaking background (NESB) students completing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Australia has increased substantially over recent decades. Most of these students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and also have divergent pedagogical experiences which might conflict with Australian higher education. In 2014, over half of the students starting a university degree in Australia had never studied in this country before and approximately a quarter had attended an English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) course (Caterall, Aitchison & Rolls, 2016). To study at a tertiary level, it is necessary to understand how knowledge is constructed and debated, as well as to be able to express oneself well in English (Wingate & Tribble, 2012). These are challenges facing all students, but many international students face additional issues, having to put aside their previous understandings about how knowledge is constructed and expressed and relearn according to Western expectations. For these reasons, despite fulfilling the language entry requirements, many international students struggle not only with communicating effectively in English but also with understanding and adopting Western academic conventions.

The debate around international students' limited English proficiency, commonly termed the 'English problem', has developed into a negative public discourse that includes generalisations and blame (Haugh, 2015). This results in a tendency to regard international students as a homogenous group that is often accused of lowering university standards because of inadequate levels of English (Benzie, 2010; Caterall, et al., 2016). This stereotyping is based on the false assumption that all international students share a common background, with the same pedagogical needs and similar professional goals after completing their degrees (Benzie, 2010). Recently, the substantial gap between their English language competency at entry and the required English communication skills on graduation has raised another significant concern for tertiary institutions, which reinforces the deficit discourse. A preoccupation with international graduates' level of English has coincided with an increase in students aiming to apply for permanent residency and employment after completion (Benzie, 2010). It is commonly assumed that an immersion context will automatically improve

students' English but a study showed that the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores of a cohort of international students applying for permanent residency had not improved by the completion of a university degree in Australia (Birrell, 2006). It seems apparent that ongoing English language support for NESB students during the course of their studies is needed, not only to ensure their academic success but also to satisfy the English standards expected from graduates.

Despite moves to internationalise the curriculum of Australian university programs, little consideration has been shown for the cultural, linguistic and institutional adjustments that many international students must make to succeed. Instead, students are expected to adapt to a novel academic environment, continue developing their English language skills and acclimatise to a foreign culture simply through their immersion. As Kell and Vogl (2007) noted, the academic success of overseas students in Australia is closely related to their sociocultural adjustment. However, these authors highlighted that the complexity of this adjustment is not only language related; this cohort is commonly confronted with many other challenges including isolation, lack of confidence, financial problems, and difficulty communicating effectively in Australia. These challenges negatively affect international students' confidence in their ability to socialise with locals and this, in turn, impedes the development of their English proficiency, at both professional and personal levels. Consequently, the 'English gap' is regarded in this paper as lack of knowledge that goes beyond language and includes other sociocultural factors. The paper presents an initiative implemented by the Student Learning Centre (SLC) at Flinders University to offer the English Language Support Program (ELSP) to assist NESB students throughout their studies. It also discusses the advantages and constraints of this program to assist NESB students to bridge the 'English gap' in higher education.

Background to the program

Like most universities in Australia, Flinders University provides services to support students academically through their studies. The SLC services at Flinders University include a drop-in writing and numeracy support centre, a range of eighty study guides

on English language, numeracy, general study skills and academic writing and referencing, as well as extended individual appointments with students when warranted. The catalyst for requesting institutional funding to set up the ELSP was the recognition that the current levels and styles of English language support did not address the language gap experienced by many NESB students. However, in a tertiary environment increasingly driven by economic imperatives, a persuasive quantifiable basis for the introduction of a new English language support program was expected. For this reason, the proposal needed to include not only information about the program's aims and pedagogy but also a numeric evidence-based rationale created as a compelling argument for funding.

This rationale consisted of two parts. Firstly, demonstrated quantitative evidence for dedicated English language assistance was provided by enrolment data (Flinders University, 2017). The number of international students studying onshore remained relatively consistent throughout the period 2011-2014 (approximately 2600 students at any given time, or 11.5% of total student population). Thus, there was clearly a significant number of students who would potentially benefit from a program designed to improve academic English proficiency. More tellingly, in 2014, 18% of students who attended Flinders University onshore used a language other than English at home. This represented 4,429 students. Given the difficulties often faced by students in this large pool, and their substantial investment in time and finances, the University has an ethical responsibility to ensure they are appropriately supported to achieve their academic goals in terms of equity.

The second imperative for the rationale was to examine whether this substantial section of the University community demonstrated a need consistent with the student body as a whole. This was assessed through an analysis of the SLC academic assistance records. Presentation at the drop-in academic assistance centre is voluntary and can be used as an indicator of students' perceived need for help. The data demonstrated that international students, who made up 11.5% of the University population in 2014, were responsible for 45% of the SLC visits. Even more telling was the fact that 55% of the visits were from students who did not consider English their main language. It is thus

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clear that international students, specifically those for whom English is a second language, were overrepresented in terms of the amount of assistance sought at the drop-in academic assistance centre. The identification of this issue provided both an informed direction for our endeavours and a quantifiable rationale for funding. Funding was granted and, in Semester 1 of 2015, a one-year pilot project for the ELSP was initiated.

The pilot project

The ELSP was conceived as a free, optional and not-for-credit English language program open to all NESB students within Flinders University, both domestic and international. A key factor in its content design was to provide an English language focus rather than duplicate academic support available in the other SLC services. Drawing on the traditional pedagogical division of language macro-skills and models of English language support programs in other universities, it was decided to initially offer four modules, based on the English language skills students struggle with initially at university: *Listening and Discussion for University, Reading Academic Texts, Grammar and Academic Vocabulary,* and *Academic Writing.*

Each module had a central focus and consisted of six sequential weekly two-hour workshops. In order to maintain consistent delivery of the modules, a set of teaching and learning resources was developed for each of the six sessions. *Listening and Discussion for University* tackled the language and communication conventions used in tutorial discussions, expressing informed opinions, note-taking strategies and oral presentations. The module also contained one workshop designed to introduce those who had recently arrived in the country to Australian English and non-formal communication. *Reading Academic Texts* focused on reading academic texts effectively and quickly locating key information. *Grammar and Academic Vocabulary* dealt with the most common ESL grammatical issues seen in tertiary student writing, explained key grammar and syntax concepts for effective sentence construction, self-editing and proofreading, and included vocabulary building exercises based on the resources used in class. Finally, *Academic Writing* addressed the importance of structure, analysing assessment tasks, paraphrasing and summarising.

In response to the unexpectedly high proportion of postgraduate students (87 of 127) enrolled in the program in Semester 1, the module *ELSP for Postgraduates* was created in the second semester of 2015 to address this cohort's specific pedagogical needs. The workshops included a variety of skills required at a postgraduate level such as summarising and synthesising, advanced proofreading and editing strategies, and effective academic presentation skills. As this module was aimed at improving the clarity and presentation of student work both verbally and in written form, completing *Academic Writing* and *Grammar and Academic Vocabulary* modules was set as a prerequisite. In summary, after the first year, the ELSP consisted of five modules providing English language support for NESB students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, with qualified and experienced ESL tutors.

In recognition of the extra time many NESB students require to read and write for university, it was decided that the ELSP modules should not involve out-of-class work, lest they jeopardise students' commitment to their credit-bearing topics. Classes were capped at fifteen students to encourage participation and dialogue. The response to this long overdue initiative was immediate and classes filled quickly. Modules commenced in Week 3 to allow students to settle into university and become aware of their own needs plus sufficient time to administer the program. Students who attended 80% of workshops in a module were granted a certificate of attendance for that module. These were awarded in a formal presentation, which acknowledged and commended the students for their efforts and commitment to the program. In 2015, of 282 enrolled students, 136 completed at least one module, and, in total, 275 certificates were granted. *Academic Writing* and *Grammar and Academic Vocabulary* were the most popular modules, with 83 and 76 completions respectively, followed by *Reading Academic Texts* and *Listening and Discussion for University*, with 52 and 48 completions each. Certificates were awarded to 16 students in the *ELSP for Postgraduates* module.

Through appraisal of the workshop exercises, tutors were able to assess the changes occurring across the time students spent in the course. It was generally identified that students became more competent and confident in their abilities to negotiate the challenges of learning in an English-speaking environment. In

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combination with positive student feedback, this finding was used to support a bid to continue the program. As a result, after the successful one-year pilot project, the ELSP has been approved as an on-going feature in the suite of student learning support strategies offered by the SLC.

Further development of the program

In response to formal feedback from both students and tutors, a thorough revision of the program was undertaken at the beginning of 2016. As a result, several modifications were put into place: all modules were extended to eight workshops; further modules were added; the *Grammar and Academic Vocabulary* module was redesigned; and supplementary online materials were created in the ELSP Flinders Learning Online (FLO) site. A common request from the evaluation forms was to increase the number of workshops, as six were deemed insufficient for students to develop their skills as far as they wished. The content of these two additional workshops for each module was developed by individual tutors to better address the specific needs of each class, allowing some flexibility to adapt lesson content as necessary to further explain or practise aspects of the module that would benefit the class. This change, which provides more customisation in terms of content, level of instruction and teaching pace, was well received by both tutors and students. The feedback also showed that starting the series of eight workshops in the third week of semester allowed students to settle into new topics before they commence ELSP classes, and freed up time at the end of semester to devote to exams or final assignments.

In Semester 1 2016, the ELSP also launched two new modules: *Pronunciation* and *Oral Presentation Skills (Practical)*. *Pronunciation* was aimed at students who lack confidence or whose spoken English is not easily understood. The skills covered include six features highly rated in IELTS testing when assessing pronunciation: chunking, stress, rhythm, intonation, sounds and speech rate (Yates, Zielinski & Pryor, 2008, p. 15). *Oral Presentation Skills (Practical)* was designed with postgraduate research students in mind and aimed to provide extra opportunities to practise formal presentations related to their research (for example, a research proposal) and obtain constructive feedback on their delivery. Interested students were expected both to

present their own work and act as critical audience for the presentations of others. While *Pronunciation* was in high demand and continues in the ELSP, the *Oral Presentation Skills (Practical)* module did not attract its intended audience. Although many students expressed interest in enrolling, most were undergraduates or coursework students who were not required to present a formal proposal. Therefore, *Oral Presentation Skills (Practical)* was not offered, as postgraduate research student enrolments were insufficient.

Following revision of all workshop content, the only module which underwent significant changes was *Grammar and Academic Vocabulary*. Teacher feedback indicated that many students were unfamiliar with the key grammar concepts required for effective academic writing. In response, it was decided that the module would concentrate exclusively on grammar issues. Thus, the revised module, renamed *Grammar*, was fully redesigned to consolidate prior knowledge and raise awareness of the specific grammatical features characteristic of academic writing.

The online materials were devised to reinforce module content and provide further opportunities for students who wished to continue developing their English skills outside the classroom. A research project aimed at investigating ELSP students' perceptions and preferences for learning English online is underway. Development of further online resources will be guided by the outcomes of this project.

In 2017, a series of administrative changes were made to address the labour-intensive ELSP process. Initially, the ELSP offered two intakes per semester, but in 2017 it was decided to offer only one intake per semester to reduce pressure on the limited staff, minimise the administrative workload (timetabling, manual enrolments, room bookings etc.), and reduce the need to produce new promotional materials frequently. Promotion has proven difficult and time-intensive because of continuing changes in staff across faculties and departments, combined with higher level restructuring across the University. Another important change implemented in 2017 has been to limit enrolment to two modules per semester for several reasons: to reduce over-commitment and subsequent poor attendance; to allow students enough time to apply

the generic academic skills learnt in each module within their respective discipline-specific tasks, and to enable more equitable access to modules.

ELSP course design remains an iterative process, reflecting input from students, administrative staff and academics. Figure 1 demonstrates the final model for 2017, showing the number of workshops offered in each module:

Days		Tuesdays		Wednesdays		Thursdays		Fridays	
Modules		Reading Academic Texts	Pronunciation	Academic Writing	Listening & Discussion	Grammar	ELSP For Postgrads	Academic Writing (Repeat)	Grammar *(Repeat)*
Available workshop options	10am-12pm	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	1-3pm *(Repeat)*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	5-7pm *(Repeat)*	✓		✓	✓	✓			

Figure 1. ELSP timetable for Semester 1 2017

Lessons from the experience

After running the ELSP for two consecutive years, it can be concluded that this university-wide strategy to provide support to NESB students has numerous advantages. The most valuable contribution of the program is that it offers English language support to all onshore NESB students, regardless of course of study or financial ability. In discipline specific topics, teaching staff often feel that they do not have the knowledge, or time, to explain specific language-related concepts (Benzie, 2010). For this reason, a major benefit of the ELSP modules, specifically designed for NESB students and taught by ESL specialists, is that they provide the opportunity for tutors and NESB students to engage in lengthy class discussions around academic expectations, conventions and practical tasks. This intercultural dialogue between tutors and students is especially

important as it allows the students to make valued contributions based on their prior linguistic, pedagogical and cultural experiences. In turn, these conversations promote a better understanding of Western academic conventions and expectations, in what Lillis calls "making language visible" (2006, p. 34). Each two-hour ELSP workshop provides a forum for discussion, an important educational experience not possible in most credit-bearing topics.

The opportunities for interaction in the ELSP workshops enable students to express themselves in English in a supportive atmosphere, without embarrassment or fear of derision from native speakers. This friendly environment is instrumental in improving their self-efficacy in using English in an academic context, with the added benefit of anecdotal reports of friendships being forged as a result of attending ELSP modules. In addition, this interaction has proven invaluable in the promotion of explicit and supportive discussion about students' perceptions of how others' actions and attitudes have negatively impacted on them, together with self-identification of difficulties (Haugh, 2016). As Haugh (2016, p. 730) remarked, such "complaints and troubles" talk is important in shaping the identities of NESB students and strengthening the feelings of belonging to a wider support community essential to academic success.

Student evaluations of the program have been very useful, not only for determining how the ELSP could be developed to address students' pedagogical needs, but also to ascertain the impact on their academic life. In addition to improvement of English language skills, students' comments highlight several other outcomes from the program that contribute to bridging the 'English gap', such as *"I become more confident when talking to the local people and other native English speakers"* and *"This is good to develop our English skills and also good to make new friends"*. Thus, the ELSP also assists in overcoming some of the difficulties associated with studying in a foreign country. Other comments highlighted the transferability of skills, in particular, that the academic writing module was *"very practical and straightforward to the real tasks in university"*. Similarly, another student commented positively about the usefulness of the ELSP workshops in their credit-bearing topics: *"I have started to apply some skills that I learned from this class in my classroom and it worked for me"*. Several students

have also remarked on the advantage of having access to a complimentary extra-curricular program: *"ELSP provides very good ways for international students to learning English and it is free!!!"* In general, students seem very happy and grateful for the program and have asked for its continuation: "*I believe this program really assists many international students who are studying at Flinders University, therefore we wish ELSP continues to develop the program and exist constantly"*.

Whilst the ELSP has proven to have many advantages, a number of issues remain unresolved. As the ELSP classes are filled based on demand and not on English proficiency or discipline, a major challenge facing tutors is accommodating students' disparate language levels, needs and expectations. In the same ELSP class, there may be PhD students, students in the first semester of an undergraduate degree, and others at intermediate stages. The two additional workshops have been helpful in addressing students' specific needs in each class, but in the future the program could be further developed to include different levels of proficiency and students could be classified accordingly. Additionally, the administrative load of implementing the program is, at times, overwhelming and frustrating, as students often have timetable clashes and change their workshop times. Enrolment processes are still being refined to reduce the load on staff. Staff are also working on addressing student attrition and fall-off in attendance at key assessment times, because non-attending students take spaces others could have filled. Since the workshops are designed as a series of related lessons, not attending one or two key workshops can result in students missing important content and feeling left behind in class, or even discouraged from returning to the module at all.

Student retention and perceived relevance to the discipline are potentially entwined. Dropout rates may be due to students placing a higher value on discipline specific programs than on generic programs (as discussed by Baik & Greig, 2009). Alternatively, dropouts may be a reflection of the fact that, because of time constraints, students prioritise their main fee-paying studies over an add-on language program for which they are not assessed. To address this possibility, a discipline-focused, credit-bearing Master's topic focussing on academic English has been developed` in response to a request from a specific school within the University.

Although the feedback received from students who complete the modules is predominantly positive, we are yet to collect feedback from students who withdrew or enrolled but never attended the ELSP workshops. From anecdotal accounts, we can anticipate the following causes of attrition in the program: intense workload in their topics; a tendency to underestimate the time required for their studies; lack of time management skills; inappropriate levels of ELSP instruction (too easy or too hard); personal circumstances; sickness; and differing expectations of the ELSP content. Regardless, for tutors and those students who attend regularly, it can be disheartening when attendance becomes so low that class discussion relies on just a few students and group exercises become untenable. On the positive side, low attendance does give those who attend greater opportunity to raise their language questions and receive more tutor attention.

Conclusion

In summary, the ELSP has been successful in filling a gap in services by addressing some of the cultural, linguistic and institutional needs of NESB students at Flinders University, a measure that was long overdue. The enthusiasm for enrolment in the program is testament to the fact that many NESB students believe they need language support and are willing to invest extra time to develop their language skills. It has proven important to curb many students' enthusiasm for enrolling in all the modules prior to commencing their studies, as they are usually unaware how culturally and linguistically ill-prepared they are for their studies in Australia, and consequently under-estimate how much time they will require for their fee-paying programs. Many of the faculty staff who are aware of the ELSP are keen for their students to participate, but wider promotion across the university to reach both staff and students is needed. Anecdotally, word-of-mouth among students appears to be a strong element in the level of student uptake.

Designing, developing and implementing the pilot program was very intensive, undertaken in less than three months over the summer break. There is potential for developing further modules to cover other aspects of academic English (for example, different genres of academic writing, vocabulary development and independent

language learning skills), and to address differing levels of proficiency. However, the extensive time and workload required to create new modules is currently prohibited by insufficient resources and funding. Overall, however, the positive feedback from students, ELSP tutors and some faculty staff highlights the contribution of generic programs like the ELSP to facilitate international students' linguistic, academic and sociocultural adjustment. In these ways, the ELSP at Flinders University addresses the call for services to deal with the recognised 'English gap' among NESB students.

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