

**THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN
ACADEMIC SUCCESS: PERSPECTIVES FROM A NEW
ZEALAND UNIVERSITY**

Catherine Elder,

University of Melbourne

Colleen Bright and Sandra Bennett

University of Auckland¹

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Abstract

The paper reports on a 3-part investigation of the part played by language proficiency in the academic experiences and study outcomes of undergraduate students at an English-medium university with a linguistically and culturally diverse student population. The first part of the study was a predictive validity analysis of the relationship between performance on a post-entry diagnostic assessment (known as DELNA) and subsequent grade point average and fail rates of students from different disciplinary backgrounds after the first and second semesters of language study. The second part of the study uses samples of performance on the writing component of DELNA to elicit feedback from Faculty members, again from different disciplines, regarding the linguistic qualities of students' writing and its impact on the grades they assigned to their work. Finally, using a more qualitative approach, the role of the language is explored via detailed accounts of the study experience elicited from seven undergraduate students, all from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Findings reveal that English proficiency makes an important but complex contribution to the study experience but, for a range of reasons, this is not always reflected in academic outcomes.

Introduction

Higher education in all English-speaking countries has experienced a marked increase in international (or foreign or overseas) students in recent years, more particularly over the period 1995-2004. The influx in New Zealand at that time was such that new students might have waited months before being given the proficiency test (usually IELTS) they needed for admission. Accordingly, increasing numbers of students came to New Zealand to enrol in high schools with the dual purpose of improving their English and acquiring the qualifications for entry to university by the alternative route of the University Bursary

examinations (Bright, 2003). Official figures (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2003) show that in March 2002, when this study was conducted, there were 14,026 international students enrolled as full-fee paying (FFP) students in New Zealand state primary and secondary schools, an increase of 48.8% over the March 2001 figure of 9,429. The majority of these were in Years 12 and 13, that is, in senior classes, preparing for university entry examinations. In the tertiary sector, the leap in figures was equally startling. At 31 July 2001, the number of FFP students in New Zealand universities totalled 8246; within a year it stood at 13,373. Given New Zealand's small population/size, an influx of this order was very salient. Export education had become the country's fourth largest industry (Hoffmann, 2003), and a very significant factor in the New Zealand economy, on which universities increasingly depended for their survival.

Not all second-language students over this period were FFP students, however. The three main categories of second-language speakers in New Zealand were those whose families had gained New Zealand citizenship or permanent residency after immigrating to this country, those whose families resided in New Zealand but had not acquired permanent residence, and those individuals who had entered on a student visa. Of these three groups, only the second and third came into the category of FFP students (Bright, 2003). The first group constituted a larger proportion of the English as an additional language (EAL) population than may have sometimes been recognized.

Whether fee-paying or not, all EAL students present special linguistic and cultural challenges to their receiving institutions, not least at the university where a command of academic English is arguably more critical than at earlier stages of schooling. In a somewhat limited response to this situation, in 2004 regulations requiring higher English literacy standards for secondary students seeking university entry were established. Until that point, however, to achieve the Bursary Pass required for admission to the University one did not have to have

studied English or any other language-rich subject (such as history) at Bursary level, which meant that many learners (including native speakers of English) were able to enter the university with little idea of how to write an academic essay. Furthermore, the IELTS cut-off required for entry for visa students (Band 6) was widely perceived to be inadequate. A study by Pickering and Hunter (2002) conducted at the University of Canterbury puts such perceptions to the test. The authors compares the performance of international full-fee paying undergraduate students to full time undergraduate New Zealand citizens during their first year of academic study. They find a gap between the performance of the two groups, with the latter performing at consistently higher levels than the former. While they acknowledge that language proficiency may not be the only reason for these differences in academic attainment, a further analysis showed a higher level of performance amongst those international students who had taken one or more English-rich subjects (such as Agriculture, Biology, Classical Studies, Economics, English, Geography, History of Art) at Bursary compared to those who had not, confirming that a lack of experience studying school subjects which makes high demands on English puts EAL students at an disadvantage in their later studies.

A further study of the role of language in academic performance was undertaken by Loewen & Ellis (2001) who administered a battery of vocabulary tests to EAL students enrolled in an undergraduate ESOL credit course and found a modest but significant relationship between vocabulary test scores and subsequent academic grades. This finding lends support to the notion that word knowledge in general, and a command of academic vocabulary in particular, are implicated in academic success. That language proficiency plays a part in levels of academic performance is confirmed by Barton & Neville-Barton (2003) in their comparison of the performance of first year undergraduate students from native and EAL backgrounds who were comparable to one another in numeracy skills. Their study revealed that the EAL students showed a preference for symbolic, rather than linguistic, modes of working and

displayed greater than expected difficulties with the English language text components of a Mathematics achievement test, resulting in scores which were 10% lower on average than those of their native speaker counterparts.

While the data documenting the English language needs of EAL students is growing, it seems that many tertiary institutions in New Zealand are ill-equipped to rise to the challenges these students pose. Barnard (2002) mentions unprepared admissions officers, a shortage of interpreting staff in the international offices, and a lack of resources (i.e. teaching space, qualified staff) to provide adequate English language support. In addition, Elder & von Randow (2002) note that EAL students, who are already hard pressed to meet mainstream academic demands, are reluctant to spend the time or money on additional tuition in English. They also point out that degree structures are in many cases too inflexible to allow students to take available English credit courses which might go some way towards preparing them to meet academic language requirements.

The precise nature of these requirements is investigated by Lewis & Starks (1997), taking the lead from the earlier work of Horowitz (1989). Their study of examination questions in two different New Zealand institutions revealed differences between them in how writers were asked to formulate their answers, and suggests that a clearer articulation of these differing language demands is essential if university students in general, and EAL students in particular, are to understand what is expected of them. A later study, surveying learners and teachers in an EAP writing course at the University of Auckland (Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002), indicates that the message about what is important in academic writing has yet to be communicated successfully to students. The authors compared EAL learners' perceptions of success with those of their teachers and found that learners saw success in a highly individual way, which did not conform to their ESL teachers' expectations. Whether the expectations of ESOL lecturers are aligned with those of academics

from other disciplines is of course another matter. Gravatt *et al.* (1997) surveyed academic staff at the same institutions and reported that many lecturing staff were marking the work of EAL students more leniently (in terms of grammar and structure) than was the case for other students and had modified both their courses and course delivery to cater for EAL student's needs. These modifications were often made somewhat reluctantly, however, since many staff felt that dealing with student literacy issues was not their responsibility. Perhaps for this reason, Starks & Lewis (2001), also using a questionnaire, found that despite lecturers' low opinions of the general quality of many students' writing, actual grades were often determined mainly by the content of writing, indicating a gap between the lecturer's concerns about language standards and their marking practices.

The research described in this paper builds on the studies reviewed above by linking student and staff attitudes about language and its role in academic performance to actual language proficiency data yielded by the DELNA (Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment) administered to incoming undergraduate students after they have been admitted to the University of Auckland.

Our research addresses the following questions:

1. How proficient in academic English are first year EAL and NS students admitted to the University of Auckland?
2. What is the relationship between these students' English proficiency and their level of academic performance in their first year of academic study?
3. How important is English proficiency in the eyes of Faculty members and to what extent does it influence their judgements of students' academic writing?

4. How do EAL students perceive their level of English proficiency and its role in the first year of academic study?

Methodology

The first research question, exploring levels of proficiency amongst the incoming student population, was addressed by administering DELNA to a sample of first year undergraduate students entering the University of Auckland in 2002 and 2003, the first two years of the test's administration. DELNA is a two-tiered procedure: The first tier, made up of a test of receptive vocabulary knowledge and a text-editing task, which are administered via computer and together take less than 20 minutes to complete, is designed as a filter for the purpose of exempting linguistically able students from further diagnosis. Scores on this first tier has proved to be a good predictor of whether or not students will perform well on the subsequent tier. Thus, although the screening components of DELNA offer no diagnostic information, they allow the University to deal efficiently with large volumes of students, many of whom have a well developed command of academic English, although they lack any formal evidence of their proficiency. High scoring students are simply informed that their performance is satisfactory and that language skills are unlikely to hamper their academic progress. The second tier, two components of which are drawn from a test known as DELA (Diagnostic English Language Assessment) developed at the University of Melbourne's Language Testing Research Centre, are for those who perform below a specified threshold on Tier One. This second tier includes a Listening, Reading and Writing component and takes around two hours to complete. Its purpose is to assess students' academic reading, listening and writing skills in greater depth, so that their strengths and weaknesses can be highlighted. Writing scripts are double marked by trained raters with ESOL experience. Performance on each component is reported on a 6-point scale, with a descriptive profile generated for each skill area and a recommendation for the student about possible avenues for English support where these are deemed necessary.

The sample used for this study included NS and EAL students enrolled in a range of academic programs and spanning a number of different Faculties. While the sample is not representative of the entire first year student population, given that the programs targeted for language diagnosis tend to be ones where language needs are perceived to be more acute, the numbers are large enough to allow a comparison between NS and EAL students and to give a sense of the level of need in programs where EAL students are present in high numbers.

To answer Question 2 we have relied on correlational statistics showing the relationship between students' overall DELNA band scores, as well as those on the Listening, Reading and Writing sub-components and subsequent academic performance as measured by students' Grade Point Average (i.e. the average performance across all academic subjects) at the end of the first semester of academic study. In this respect the study follows a path trodden by traditional predictive validation studies involving standardized academic English selection tests such as ELTS or IELTS in the UK and Australia (e.g. Criper & Davies, 1988; Elder, 1993; Allwright & Banerjee, 1997; Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999; and Kirstjens & Nery, 2000) or TOEFL in the US (Graham, 1987; Light, Su & Mossip., 1987). Data for two successive intakes are presented, namely: Semesters 1 & 2, 2002. In addition, we commissioned the University of Auckland's Planning Office to undertake a pass rates analysis, indicating the percentage of students passing and failing at each DELNA band level. The purpose of this additional analysis, which covers all DELNA test takers for the year 2002, was to determine whether, as other predictive validation studies have found, there is a threshold of language proficiency below which failure is more likely.

Research Question 3 addresses one of the issues addressed by Smith (2003) in her study of the rating behaviour and attitudes of Faculty members (tutors or lecturers) working at the University of Auckland. Smith targeted 18 Faculty members from a range of disciplines and asked them to perform a rating task which revealed how important they

perceived language proficiency to be in students' academic progress. Faculty teachers were assigned to Writing Rich (N= 6), Non Writing Rich (N= 6) and Language Teaching (N= 6) groups according to the type of program they taught on and the nature of its assessment demands. The Writing Rich (WR) programs (namely, English, Commercial Law, Pacific Studies and Commerce) were those where essay writing was the norm in first year. Non Writing Rich (NWR) programs (namely Physics, Mathematics and Accounting) were those where assessment, at least during the first year, was restricted to short answer or multiple choice assessments or involved primarily symbolic operations. The Language Teaching (LT) group was made up of tutors in the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics teaching on credit courses dedicated specifically to enhancing student academic language proficiency. Faculty lecturers /tutors from all three groups were asked to assess a sample of 24 DELNA writing scripts. These scripts were derived from a task requiring learners to describe and interpret a graphic display on a quasi-academic but non-specialist topic (e.g. the causes of road accidents in New Zealand, population trends in the country over the past 10 years). The scripts spanned a range of proficiency levels and included three written by native speakers of English. The Faculty teachers were asked to rate each script according to the standards they would typically apply to their first year undergraduate essays and to indicate whether their judgements as to the adequacy or otherwise of these scripts were more influenced by the content, grammar or organizational features of the essays. Note that other than being briefed on the task they were being asked to perform, no training was offered to these informants, as the intention was to get a sense of how they would rate language proficiency under normal circumstances. The aim was to see how closely the judgements of these mainstream Faculty teachers tallied with those of the trained DELNA raters, all of whom were language teachers, whether of English or ESL, and also to identify any differences in rating behaviour within and across the WR, NWR and LT groups. The methodology for this component of the study was partly inspired by a small study conducted in the US by Weigle, Boldt & Valsecechi (2003) and another

study undertaken at the University of Melbourne by O'Hagan (1999) although the Faculty teachers in these latter studies were asked to rate mainstream academic essays rather than using a common set of pre-rated scripts from a language proficiency test, as was the case here. Think-aloud protocol data were also elicited and a post-rating interview conducted with each of these Faculty informants to gather further information about their rating behaviour and to canvas their views regarding the role of language in academic performance. For reasons of space only a selection of these responses are reported below.

The student perspective (Research Question 4) was explored by Bright (2003) via case studies of seven immigrant and international students who had received a pass on the end of school Bursary examination and therefore qualified for university entry. All students were enrolled in writing-rich tertiary courses but had studied mainly 'symbolic subjects', such as Maths and Science, at secondary school. Background information about each participant was gathered via questionnaire. This included questions about academic background and two self-assessments, (one pre-sessional and one post-sessional), of each participants' language ability in relation to their course demands. Results from both DELNA and the first semester and second semester course examinations were also recorded.

Further qualitative data was elicited from a set of three writing tasks which probed participants' expectations and perceptions of their course prior to enrolment, the difficulties and problems they experienced during their course as well as the strategies they used to cope, and, following Thornbury (1991), Block (1992), Ellis (2001) and Oxford (2001), a metaphorical depiction of their experience of acquiring or studying in English. The nature of the tasks was discussed with each participant, usually in a face-to-face conversation with the researcher, to ensure that participants had a clear understanding of the task requirements. This was particularly necessary in the case of Writing Task #3, the metaphorical description of their experiences. Each of these writing tasks

engendered a follow-up interview during which the researcher clarified any points in the writing that were ambiguous or unclear and explored further any issues of interest. Participants also attended a group discussion at the end of the semester, in order to reflect back on their year's experiences and to exchange and compare ideas. This exchange of ideas and experiences served to spark off discussion on issues that the researcher might not have otherwise thought of or known to raise. (Lynch, 1996:130). Again, due to space constraints, only a small segment of the data is presented below. Detailed reference is made here to three of the participants only, since these exemplify trends in the larger data set.

Results

Results are reported in relation to each of the four research questions posed above.

1. How proficient in academic English are first year EAL and NS students admitted to the University of Auckland?

Results based on the first two years of the DELNA assessment involving a total of 3042 students indicate the following distribution of scores (see Figure 1).

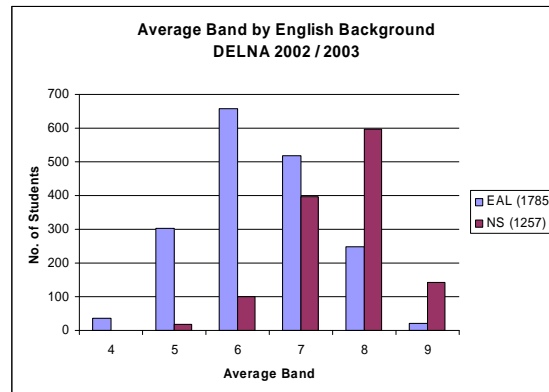


Figure 1: Average DELNA band by English background

The figure indicates that by far the highest level of need is demonstrated by EAL students whose performance on DELNA places around half of them in the barely adequate (Band 6) or at risk categories (Band 4 & 5). There are relatively small numbers of native speakers of English occupying the lower proficiency bands although just under a half of these students score below the Band 8 or 9 levels and cannot therefore be regarded as fully competent in academic English. A breakdown of these results according to subskills is not presented here, but it is worth noting that both EAL and native speaker students performed most poorly on Reading, followed by Listening and then Writing.

2. What is the relationship between students' English proficiency and their level of academic performance in their first year of academic study?

Tables 1 to 6 below show correlational data from two successive University of Auckland intakes, one in Semester 1 2002 and the other in Semester 2. The results for the whole sample of test takers (Table 1) shows a weak but significant relationship between academic language proficiency (as measured by DELNA) and subsequent performance (as measured by students' average grade level across all the academic subjects taken in the first semester). It should be noted that this relationship is somewhat stronger for Listening and Reading than for Writing. However the overall coefficient of 0.3 indicates that language proficiency accounts for less than 10% of variance in GPA.

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Overall
2002 Semester 1 (N=761)	0.37	0.41	0.23	0.32
2002 Semester 2 (N=1052)	0.34	0.41	0.25	0.32

Table 1: DELNA-GPA relationship: All Faculties combined

Tables 2-6 present data from those Faculties who assessed the students in sufficient numbers to produce reasonably robust statistical findings. The

findings for business (both semesters) and Arts (both semesters) look very similar to those for all the faculties collectively. Interestingly, the relationship between proficiency and achievement is considerably stronger for Architecture and, perhaps more predictably, weaker for Science, where it accounts for less than 4% of the overall variance in students' grades. The tendency for Reading and (to a lesser extent) Listening to predict more strongly than Writing is, however, consistent across faculties.

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Overall
2002 Semester 1 (N=127)	0.32	0.38	0.28	0.33
2002 Semester 2 (N=153)	0.40	0.49	0.26	0.31

Table 2: DELNA-GPA relationship: Faculty of Arts

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Overall
2002 Semester 1 (N=129)	0.21	0.37	0.09	0.19
2002 Semester 2 (N=64)	0.11	0.25	0.01	0.13

Table 3: DELNA-GPA relationship: Faculty of Science

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Overall
2002 Semester 1 (N=46)	0.40	0.08	0.07	0.32
2002 Semester 2 (N=281)	0.33	0.39	0.26	0.37

Table 4: DELNA-GPA relationship: Faculty of Business

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Overall
2002 Semester 1 (N=184)	0.40	0.40	0.28	0.46
2002 Semester 2 (N=189)	0.37	0.44	0.30	0.41

Table 5: DELNA-GPA relationship: Faculty of Architecture

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Overall
2002 Semester 1 (N=45)	0.19	0.50	0.35	0.43
2002 Semester 2 (N=100)	0.33	0.48	0.42	0.52

Table 6: DELNA-GPA relationship: Faculty of Education

The pass rates analysis (Table 7) presents the same information in a different form. The DELNA candidature is divided into four groups (Column 1), with those at the top and bottom end of the proficiency scale (Bands 8 & 9 and Bands 4 & 5 respectively) collapsed into a single group due to the limited numbers at the individual band levels. Column 2 indicates the percentage of failures at each level and it is clear from these percentages that those at the Band 4 and 5 level are around three times more likely to fail than their more proficient DELNA counterparts. Their failure rate also compares very unfavourably with that of the university undergraduate population taken as a whole which was around 10% in 2002.

Band	Fail Grade
4 and 5	23.5%
6	8.7%
7	8.2%
8 and 9	7.1%
University undergraduates	10.8%

Table 7: DELNA scores and university fail rates (2002)

3. How important is English proficiency in the eyes of Faculty members and to what extent does it influence their judgements of students' academic writing?

Results of the rating exercise conducted by Smith (2003) revealed that while the raters differed widely from one another in the decisions made about individual DELNA scripts, they were more likely to agree with the DELNA raters on the scripts classified as linguistically adequate (Band 6 and above), than on those which had been classed as inadequate (see Figure 2 below). In other words they were generally more lenient in their judgements of student writing than the trained DELNA raters, who had rated each script according to pre-specified linguistic criteria. This leniency was more marked amongst the WR group as indicated in Fig 3, which shows the relative frequencies with which members of the three rater groups made a positive evaluation of a DELNA writing script.

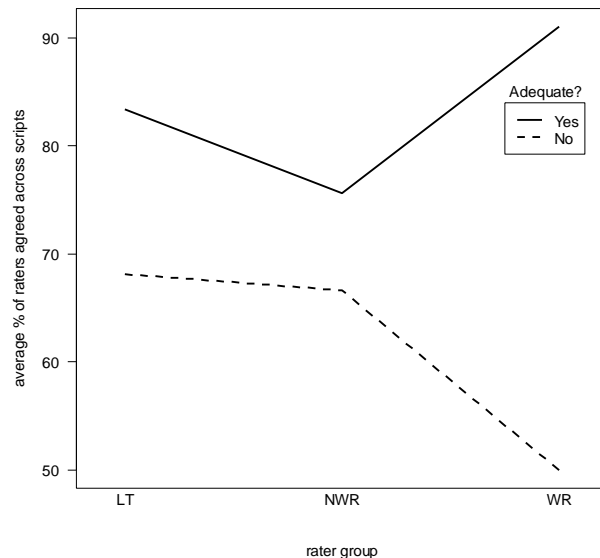


Figure 2: Percentage agreement with DELNA raters' "adequate" & "inadequate judgements": LT, NWR & WR groups

When asked which feature of writing was most influential in their overall judgment, Faculty teachers indicated Content (i.e. in 55% of cases) far more frequently than Grammar (34%) and Organization (which accounted for only 11% of their choices). This tendency to give more weight to Content than the other two categories was consistent across WR, NWR and LT sub-groups. The protocol analysis however revealed that Faculty informants differed from one another considerably in the way they interpreted these terms, with some mentioning vocabulary in the same breath as content and others including it under the grammar category.

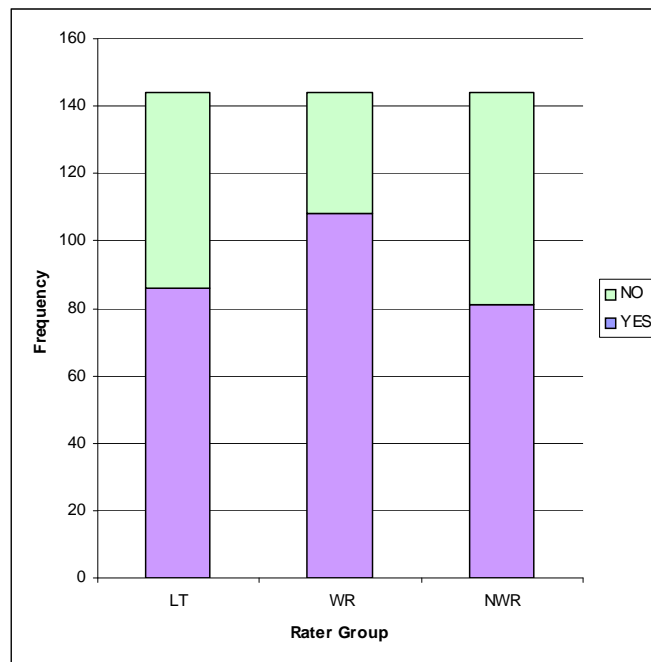


Figure 3: Relative frequency of "Yes" (=adequate) & "No" (=inadequate) ratings across Language Teaching, Writing-Rich and Non-Writing Rich groups.

The diagram below (Figure 4) shows the relative frequency of Content and Grammar and Organization choices made by Faculty teachers for each of the 24 writing scripts. Each individual script is presented as a single bar with those classified by DELNA raters as linguistically inadequate (i.e. below Band 6) arranged on the right hand side of the figure and those classified as adequate (Bands 6 and above) on the left. This diagram gives further insight into the descriptive statistics reported above, confirming that Content was the most influential factor in their ratings overall and that Organization hardly featured in raters' decision making. Grammar fell somewhere between the two, but was significantly more salient to the Faculty teachers when rating those scripts deemed by the DELNA raters to be linguistically inadequate ($p \leq .001$).

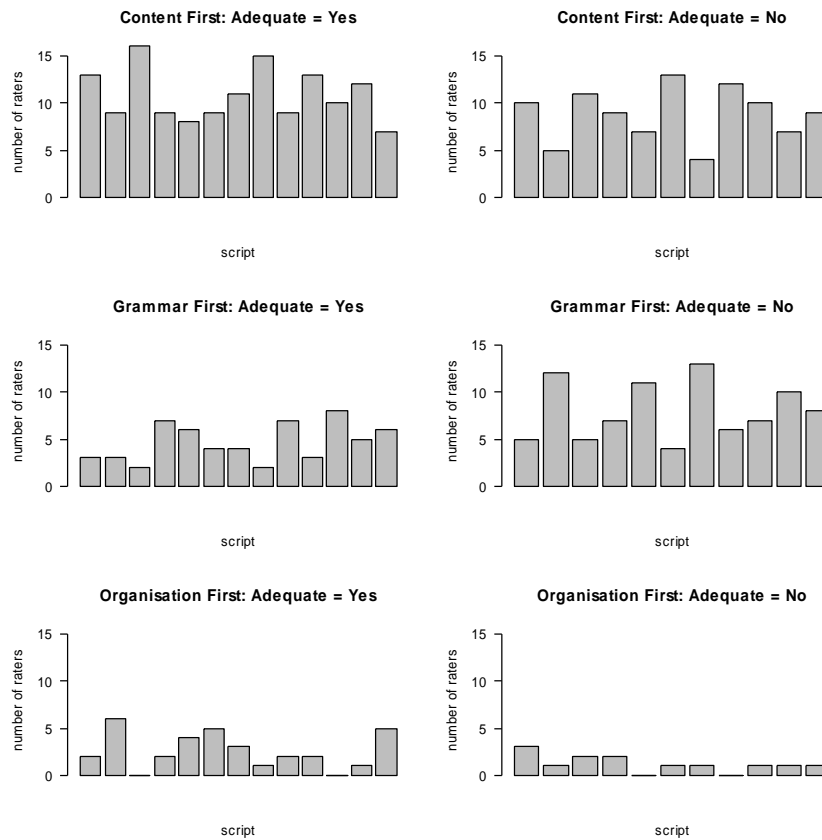


Figure 4: Relative weighting of Content, Grammar and Organization features in Faculty raters' judgements of writing quality (adequate vs inadequate)

Concerns about language also featured strongly in Faculty members' comments during the follow up interviews, a selection of which are reported verbatim below. The source of each comment (i.e. whether it is

made by a Faculty member from a writing rich, non writing rich or the language teaching program) is indicated in brackets after each quote.

"We have got down to the stage [where] we don't even assume students can read effectively or write effectively because the majority can't." (WR)

"Because we have got [these] English language problems, we have said well O.K. well let's not penalize people because their English is not particularly good in the sense their written English is not good, and they are not good in articulating ideas." (WR)

This latter comment came from a teacher who rated all the DELNA scripts as adequate for academic purposes, based on the standards she applied in her own department. Various reasons were given by Faculty teachers for overlooking English language problems, for example:

"Anybody can get into university and you can get away with very limited English and therefore the corollary to that is the courses are forced to lower their standards and throughout the University." (LT)

"If I have got this standard coming in below it, I have two choices. I either end up with quite a few Ds and Cs which looks very bad on me, I'm not doing my job in teaching. So there is a lot of pressure to make allowances, so I think the quality can get affected, quite inevitably, and that's a danger." (LT)

4. How do EAL students perceive their level of English proficiency and its role in the first year of academic study?

Descriptive data in relation to the seven participants selected for this research are set out in Table 8 below and form a backdrop for the case study data which follow. Scrutiny of these data indicates that while there

is some relationship between self-assessed English skills and actual proficiency as measured by DELNA in that the higher scorers, Nick and Jenny, had somewhat higher DELNA bandscores than Cherie, Sophie and Josie, there is no clear relationship between the level at which students self-assessed and either their end-of-school grades at entry or their subsequent grade level. Josie for example, outperformed both Nick and Jenny in first semester in spite of limited English proficiency (actual and self assessed) and both Nick and Josie failed one of their writing-rich subjects (indicated with an asterisk) in the second semester in spite of their differing perceptions of their language ability. Cherie, whose case is discussed in further detail below, was the highest performing student across the board but this could not have been predicted from either her self assessment or her actual proficiency as measured by DELNA.

	<i>Self-assessed language as adequate</i>	<i>DELNA scores (1= lowest 9=highest)</i>	<i>End-of-school grades</i>	<i>Final course results Semester 1</i>	<i>Final course results Semester 2</i>
CHERIE	YES	L 6 R 6 W 6	B B* A A A	B A D* A	A* A B*
NICK	YES	L 8 R 7 W 6	B B* A* C B	B D C* B	C* B* C D*
JENNY	YES	L 7 R 7 W 9	C* C* A* A* B	D C B* C	C* C* C C*
SOPHIE	YES	L 6 R 5 W 6	C B* D* D B	C C* D* C*	B* B C*
JOSIE	NO	L 6 R 6 W 6	C B* C B B	C* B B* C*	C C* D* C
TANIA	YES	Did not sit	C C* C C D	C D D	B* C C C
HANNA	YES	Did not sit	Did not sit	D-* C-* D D-	D* D- D- D-

Table 8: Language proficiency ratings and academic grades of case study participants

Qualitative analyses, exemplified in the case study data presented below, revealed that participants in this study followed three different pathways: to a promising level of academic success, to limited academic success or to failure and the abandonment of their course of study. In other words, some stumbled initially but recovered and went on to achieve well; some stumbled and recovered, then continued to stumble and recover, and some having stumbled did not find their footing again. These pathways were typified by three participants: Cherie, Sophie and Hanna whose results are highlighted in the Table 8 above and who all, rightly or wrongly, perceived language proficiency as being strongly implicated in their success or failure

Cherie was a Chinese student who had studied for two years in a New Zealand secondary school, preparing for the Bursary examination which would give her entry to university. She studied mainly Maths and Science subjects but she also included Economics, a language-rich subject, in her Bursary programme. Her choice of a Commerce programme exposed her to some language-rich papers and her first few weeks were vividly described in her writing.

During first two weeks, assignments, quizzes and lots of readings made me feel overwhelmed and I do not even know how to start. So many things just have to be finished in such a short time. [...] I start to lose confidence and to worry about not being able to complete the degree. Especially management paper requires lots of writings, readings and very high business language skills. Rather than simply complete writing, you have to write fluently, logically and professionally.

Sometimes I have to spend one hour to finish writing one page write-up compared with those native speakers who good at writing only use half an hour.

Having failed one of her four papers from the first semester, Cherie cut her losses and embarked on only three papers in Semester 2, including a repeat of 'Introduction to Business', the failed paper from Semester 1. This reduced workload proved a successful strategy and at the end of the year, she passed all three papers with 2 As and a B.

Cherie's choice of metaphor for the process of learning English suggests that for her language was more than just a tool or a skill to assist in one's career. She saw it as a source of enjoyment and an activity where making an effort is rewarded with a pleasurable result.

Acquiring English was like savouring Chinese tea. There are various stages you have to go through in order to taste good tea. Similarly, to get good English language skills you have to study steadily through different steps as well. At the beginning when I start drinking tea I only feel that it tastes differently from water and quite curious. It is just the same feeling I got when I start studying English. There are lots of things for me to explore because it is new and totally different from my first language.

It is clear from examining Cherie's writing and interview comments that she saw language as an important factor in her academic study. However, although her language skills as measured by DELNA were somewhat limited, the strategies she used to deal with her limitations meant that language proficiency was not in the end an obstacle to her academic success.

For Hanna, on the other hand, her level of language was one of several factors that led to her dropping out of university study and returning to her home in Seoul. As a result of the six years she had already spent in New Zealand, she felt fairly confident of her ability to cope with her study at university. Unlike the other participants she did not sit Bursary

but entered university on the strength of having successfully completed a tertiary diploma course and for this reason did not feel the need to sit DELNA. Her Diploma level studies had given her confidence that her English proficiency was adequate for academic purposes and when she embarked on her university course (Arts and Commerce) she did not doubt her ability to cope with the work. The reality was rather different from what she had expected.

I tried to go to the tutorials and I understand the lecturer but I couldn't do the work. So that was really a bit different to other people. Other people say they don't understand the lecturer but they're following the work ... totally different.

By the end of the first semester, Hanna's confidence had been severely damaged and although she continued through to the end of the year, her heart was no longer in her studies.

The first semester I lost my ... You know, 'I can do this', something like that. I don't know ... I kind of lost interest in study, don't want to do it again because ... It's kind of like, don't want to finish the tramp, just catch the ferry and go back to the bus and go back home.

She refers in this extract to her metaphor for studying in English. To Hanna it is like going on what New Zealanders term "a tramp", a long hike which in her case was demanding, difficult and often demoralising. Rather than completing the hike, she turned back and went home, giving up her studies.

The pathway followed by Sophie fell midway between the other two. She had been in New Zealand from the age of 11 and her original intention on leaving secondary school was to take a Commerce course. But her Bursary marks precluded this and she began to study Sociology and Psychology in a Bachelor of Arts programme. The following extract

explains the metaphor she chose. It also gives us an insight into her feelings as she struggled with a demanding and language-intensive course.

First, when I faced any difficulties or feel disappointed with my study of English, e.g. failed in the exam, particular in English class or I don't understand someone's speech, but people who live in N.Z less time than me and they do understand it. I always feel that I'm useless. When I come to these situations, I would act like a snake in winter, which is sleep. No one can wake it up. By the mean of sleep, (referring to myself), I would do nothing, I would sit there and my mood for studying would be very down. And I become to had low-esteem. The time for sleep would be like the season for winter.

For Sophie, this time for withdrawal was a time for reflection. She knew that it was part of a cycle and that with time her mood would change and her enthusiasm for study would return. In this metaphor the English environment is portrayed as alternately hostile and inviting, so Sophie's attitude towards English is neither totally positive nor totally negative, although English language is clearly a key factor in her mood swings. Her choice of metaphor has allowed her to explore the affective aspects of studying in English and explain how they may affect the learner's progress.

Discussion

The DELNA results reported above confirm what has been claimed in earlier studies (e.g Gravatt et al 1997) that there are large numbers of students admitted to the University of Auckland with limited academic English proficiency, whether or not they achieve a pass on the Bursary examination. We have already noted that as many 30% of those assessed, including considerable numbers of native speakers, score below the Band

7 level, and are therefore deemed to require concurrent language support. Close to 12% score below the Band 6 level and are therefore deemed to be at risk or severe risk in their academic study. As might be expected, the vast majority of these low scoring students are from EAL backgrounds.

However the central question remains as to how much this matters. The findings of this three part study can be used to construct two very different views regarding the role of language in academic performance.

One view is that English proficiency is relatively unimportant compared to the host of other factors (economic, social and cultural) which influence students' progress in their studies and this is supported by the rather weak relationship between DELNA scores and academic grades. The correlational analysis suggests that while there is some variation across skills and faculties, language proficiency, as measured by DELNA, generally accounts for less than 10% of variance in students' Grade Point Average (GPA) at the end of the first semester of academic study.

In some respects this result is surprising. Although it conforms closely to the findings of previous research (Criper & Davies, 1988; Light *et al.*, 1987; and Graham, 1987), one might expect a stronger relationship between language proficiency and GPA given the unusually wide spread of proficiency scores in this sample which is unusual in that includes both native speakers and EAL students who might have been excluded from American British or Australian universities (where other such studies have been conducted) on the grounds of their limited English proficiency. However this proved not to be the case. Language proficiency here and in other institutions where such research has been conducted, plays a definite role, but its contribution is nevertheless limited with around 90% of the variance in GPA explained by other factors.

The findings of the quantitative analyses are also reflected in the case study data. We saw, for example, that students' self assessed language

proficiency at the outset of their studies was rather inaccurate as a predictor of the grades they later achieved, with those rating their proficiency as high performing no better than those with a more modest sense of their own ability. Students, like Cherie, whose proficiency as measured by DELNA was barely adequate, may be highly motivated and may adopt strategies to deal with their shortcomings (e.g. working hard at improving their language proficiency; limiting the number of subjects they enrol in) and may go on to be successful, even in writing-rich subjects.

As to how such successes are possible in the absence of high levels of English proficiency, our investigation of Faculty teachers' rating behaviour offers a partial explanation. The decisions these university tutors or lecturers made about the adequacy or otherwise of DELNA scripts were often at odds with those of the trained DELNA raters. If they were indeed following the instructions given and marking these scripts according to the standards they would normally apply in their own departments, then it seems that they would be willing to pass essays written in highly flawed English. The feedback they gave to the researcher regarding the basis for their decisions suggests that in general, like those surveyed by Starks and Lewis (2001), they placed far greater value on content of student essays than on their manner of expression and were prepared to "forgive" poorly written essays if the meaning was clear and/or the student showed evidence of clear thinking. The reasons given for passing essays written in poor English were both practical, ethical and political. There was a practical need to accommodate to the abilities of the incoming student population if the university's core business of teaching was to be fulfilled and there was a sense that the institution had a duty to encourage and promote its foreign students, even if this meant compromising standards of excellence. There was also political pressure to maintain high pass rates since low grades might be interpreted as the result of poor teaching. When we take the lecturers' feedback into consideration, it is easy to see why the correlations between

language proficiency and GPA remain relatively constant, regardless of the level at which students are admitted.

An alternative answer to our question about the role of language proficiency in academic performance is that it is of central rather than peripheral importance. The Pass rates analysis presented above gave a more nuanced picture of the role of English in academic study than the correlational analysis. The relationship between language proficiency and academic success is clearly not linear, in the sense that the better the students' proficiency is, the higher their grades will be and hence the rather inconsiderable correlations discussed earlier. The Pass Rates analysis however reveals that there is a threshold of proficiency (Bands 4 and 5) below which students are far more likely to fail than those with higher levels of language proficiency and than university undergraduate students more generally. Thus, the fact of speaking English as a second language, combined with the host of other cultural barriers which may face EAL students on their first encounter with an English medium academic institution, may be quite powerful in determining final outcomes, delaying or preventing their completion of courses in many cases.

As for the Faculty informants, although many indicated a willingness to pass linguistically flawed essays, even those rated at Band 4 or 5 by the DELNA raters if the content was sound and intelligible, there were some scripts that nearly all of them found unacceptable. Note also that the reasons given for their decisions about these unacceptable scripts were more likely to be linguistically based, although content issues continued to play a role. The think-aloud data gathered from the NWR group in particular revealed that many were highly condemnatory about the quality of the language in the scripts they were rating and in many cases stated that they were passing them against their better judgement.

The post-rating interviews also revealed that a number of Faculty teachers, while they found it necessary to tailor their input to

accommodate the needs of EAL students, were extremely unhappy about the quality of the teaching they were delivering. They were also concerned about the consequences for their more linguistically proficient students of what they saw as a dumbing down of content for their more able students. Furthermore, they felt that in some cases the students they were passing would not be able to function effectively within the wider community and that their limited English reflected poorly on the University.

Finally, the case study analysis indicated very clearly that, while some EAL students, like Cherie, rose to the challenge and managed to achieve a pass or better on some of their subjects, students' limited language proficiency often came at a price. The costs for Sophie included a vast expenditure of time in order to comprehend the course readings, inability to understand some of her lectures and a feeling that she was engaging only superficially with the course content and that her ability to express herself was severely curtailed by the fact of using the L2. The costs for Hanna were even greater leading her to a point where she was too demoralized to complete the "tramp".

A quantitative analysis which focuses exclusively on endpoints and ignores processes will obscure many of the difficulties faced by students along the way. We need also to acknowledge that although some of the case study students (with the exception of Cherie) failed to take active steps to improve their English, this was not due to a lack of will, but rather to a lack of time and a need to give priority to their major field of study which was already fully exercising them.

Conclusion

This study has revisited the question of what role language proficiency plays in academic performance via a study conducted at an English-medium university with a linguistically and culturally heterogeneous learner population. Its particular contribution has been to draw together

different sources of evidence to answer this question, namely: statistical data documenting the relationship between language proficiency and university grades and pass and completion rates in two successive semesters; a “think-aloud” analysis of the factors underpinning university lecturers’ judgements of students’ writing scripts, and anecdotal accounts from a number of EAL students on the nature of their study experience. The picture emerging from this multifaceted approach is complex, suggesting that while a certain level of competence in English is essential for full engagement with academic study, this may not always be reflected in academic outcomes or in the marking practices of even those Faculty members who set store by high standards of English. It seems therefore that some students may complete their courses without having acquired proficiency in academic English.

While the findings reported in this paper highlight the importance of developing strategies to improve the quality of academic English amongst university students in general and EAL students in particular, they also show that language proficiency is clearly not the only factor determining student outcomes. This is of course as it should be. If language proficiency were all that mattered, then native speakers would be automatically assured of an easy passage through their academic courses, regardless of their level of disciplinary knowledge or of other attributes such as intelligence, initiative and effort which are rightly rewarded in the academic domain.

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