



The proficiency ‘problem’ on campus: Supporting NESB students

Abstract

International students’ English language proficiency continues to be a prominent issue within the Australasian university context. With the widespread use of international standardised tests of English proficiency, such as IELTS and TOEFL, in addition to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes, non-English speaking background (NESB) students have to overcome significant hurdles to be accepted to study at university (see Oliver, Vanderford, & Grote, 2012; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). Despite all students by definition having met entry requirements, there appears to be a stubborn discourse of an ‘English problem’ present within universities (Haugh, 2016). This matches anecdotal reports that many NESB students are unable to cope with the linguistic demands of university study. Given the growing internationalisation of student cohorts, it is safe to assume that this issue will only continue to increase in prominence. While English proficiency gains much of the blame for some NESB students’ learning difficulties, much research has shown that it is not the only factor at play. Academic content, learning styles, prior experiences, beliefs, values, motivations and culture shock all influence NESB students’ university experiences (Andrade, 2006; Holmes, 2005; Lee, Farruggia, & Brown, 2013; Phakiti, Hirsh, & Woodrow, 2013; Sawir, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Nevertheless, management, faculty and even students themselves tend to blame low English proficiency in the first instance. Zeegers and Barron (2008) attribute this to a ‘discourse of deficit’ propagated through the use of standardised testing regimes that privilege a western viewpoint. Pervasive negative attitudes can lead to NESB students being treated as persistently in deficit to a largely unattainable ‘native speaker’ norm (Benzie, 2010). In addition, the issue of ‘proficiency’ itself is not clear-cut; there are differences in how it is defined, measured and developed across the university sector (Dunworth, 2010). It is apparent that this ‘problem’ is not as simple as it seems at first glance. As ALL practitioners, then, what messages should we adopt when it comes to addressing NESB students’ language proficiency needs, particularly in conversation with management or faculty? How can we best support NESB students who come to us for help, especially at centres that do not have specialist TESOL support? What does the data actually say, beyond the anecdotal reports? This paper draws on the experiences of the advisers at the Academic Skills and Learning Centre at the ANU to seek answers to these questions. We discuss how we have conceptualised this issue, what we have started to do about it, and how we plan to move forward in supporting our NESB students while ensuring that the university continues to celebrate diversity and strive for inclusivity in an increasingly globalised world.

References

- Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5(2), 131–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240906065589>
- Benzie, H. J. (2010). Graduating as a ‘native speaker’: international students and English language proficiency in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 29(4), 447–459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294361003598824>
- Dunworth, K. (2010). Clothing the emperor: addressing the issue of English language proficiency in Australian universities. *Australian Universities’ Review*, 52(2), 5–10. Haugh, M. (2016). Complaints and troubles talk about the English language skills of international students in Australian universities.

Higher Education Research & Development, 35(4), 727–740.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1137878>

Holmes, P. (2005). Ethnic Chinese students' communication with cultural others in a New Zealand university. *Communication Education*, 54(4), 289–311.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520500442160>

Lee, B., Farruggia, S. P., & Brown, G. T. L. (2013). Academic difficulties encountered by East Asian international university students in New Zealand. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(6), 915–931. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.806444>

Oliver, R., Vanderford, S., & Grote, E. (2012). Evidence of English language proficiency and academic achievement of non-English-speaking background students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(4), 541–555. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.653958>

Phakiti, A., Hirsh, D., & Woodrow, L. (2013). It's not only English: effects of other individual factors on English language learning and academic learning of ESL international students in Australia. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 12(3), 239–258.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240913513520>

Sawir, E. (2005). Language difficulties of international students in Australia: the effects of prior learning experience. *International Education Journal*, 6(5), 567–580.

Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Forbes-Mewett, H., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2012). International student security and English language proficiency. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 16(5), 434–454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315311435418>

Smith, R. A., & Khawaja, N. G. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(6), 699–713.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004>

Terraschke, A., & Wahid, R. (2011). The impact of EAP study on the academic experiences of international postgraduate students in Australia. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 10(3), 173–182. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2011.05.003>

Zeegers, M., & Barron, D. (2008). Discourses of deficit in higher degree research supervisory pedagogies for international students. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 3(2), 69–84.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15544800801929393>