

# **Collaborating across boundaries: Developing a cross-departmental approach to English language development in an undergraduate business unit**

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This paper analyses a collaborative activity undertaken to identify and support undergraduate students at one Australian university who could be considered “at risk” because of the level of their English proficiency. The program, which was piloted in 2009, involved collaboration among staff across a number of areas: the faculties of Business and Health Sciences, academic language and learning staff and TESOL specialists. The project comprised an initial compulsory English language diagnostic assessment of all students enrolled in a discipline-specific communication skills unit, and the provision of a structured series of supplementary English language tutorials for those who were found to be in need of additional developmental assistance. The procedure, activated under the nomenclature, Starting University Confidently and Competently English Support Scheme (SUCCESS), was linked to the unit in the sense that the supplementary tutorials complemented the content of the disciplinary unit. The pilot program not only revealed the benefits of the scheme for the students and a wider group of stakeholders, but also uncovered some problematic issues that served as lessons for the future and threw up some ongoing questions.

**Key Words:** English language development, diagnostic assessment

## **1. Background**

Enrolments of international students in Australian universities have been on an upward trajectory for a number of years, with preliminary statistical data for 2009 indicating that previous record levels have again been surpassed (Australian Education International [AEI], 2009, p. 6). As the numbers have increased, so too have the concerns expressed in the research literature that the English language proficiency levels of international students, who come primarily from countries where English is not the primary language of communication (AEI, 2009), are not commensurate with the demands of tertiary study (e.g. Bretag, 2007; Coley, 1999; Sawir, 2005).

A very high profile report on the issue (Birrell, 2006) excited the attention of the media and prompted a national symposium, which took place in 2007. This led to a number of recommendations for action. A subsequent project, funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), resulted in the 2009 publication of the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities* (DEEWR, 2009). Perhaps prompted by the intention of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) to refer to the *Good Practice Principles* during university audits (DEEWR, 2009), many universities have sought to engage with the issue by promoting activities that will facilitate the development of student English language proficiency. The pilot project described in this paper, the Starting University Confidently and Competently English Support Scheme (SUCCESS), was one such initiative.

While international students comprise up to 35% of enrolments at the university where SUCCESS was located, the program was not intended to focus on this group in particular. The diverse and burgeoning domestic student population now includes not only many students from English as an additional language (EAL) backgrounds, but also mature age learners and those coming to tertiary study from a range of non-traditional pathways or non-traditional educational backgrounds. For many of these groups, academic discourse, whether in an additional or first language, presents considerable challenges; so many students stand to benefit from additional assistance in their use of language. The first principle underpinning the development of the SUCCESS program, therefore, was that it should be inclusive. The practical consequence of this principle was that the program should potentially be available to all students rather than to a specific cohort.

The second principle of the SUCCESS program was that it should be linked to disciplinary units of study, while retaining a certain degree of transportability so that some of the key components could be slotted into other units if the pilot should prove to be successful. While the message has not as yet been widely embraced by the academic community in general, there is a considerable body of research that supports the development of linguistic and communication skills from within the disciplines, particularly when there is collaboration between language specialists and their disciplinary colleagues (e.g. Andrade, 2006; Barrie & Jones, 1999; Bonanno & Jones, 1996; Crosling & Wilson, 2005; Johns, 1997; Skillen, Merten, Trivett, & Percy, 1998).

The team responsible for developing SUCCESS initially comprised the coordinator of a business communication unit, academic language and learning staff from the business faculty, the Dean of Teaching and Learning for the business faculty and the manager of an institution-wide English language development project that had been established some months earlier. A subsequent pilot conducted in the faculty of health sciences brought into the team the coordinator of a health science communication unit. The diversity of the areas represented in the development team embodied the third principle that underpinned the project: that it should be collaborative, include a range of perspectives and represent breadth of professional expertise.

## 2. The pilot

The pilot involved a series of steps from the identification of those in need of additional assistance to a final assessment of progress. In the first tutorial of semester, all students undertook a written task through which those who required targeted language development were identified. While diagnostic assessment was not a concept new to the business faculty, having been provided some years earlier by the faculty's academic language and learning staff, for the SUCCESS pilot it was linked to the university's institution-wide post-entry diagnostic assessment of writing. This not only gave access to marking criteria and bandscales that were normalised across the university, but also enabled some of the resources allocated to the institution-wide project to be channelled into the SUCCESS pilot. The format and topic of the writing task, however, were discipline specific, and designed with primary input from the unit coordinator. As it was a first year, first semester unit, it was decided that students would select one of two expository essay tasks on topics connected with business studies but which required

no previous disciplinary content knowledge on the part of the student, and which had some relevance to their own experience. In brief, one of the questions, for example, invited students to discuss the extent to which they agreed with the statement that everyone should learn English because it is the international language of business.

The essays were marked according to four broad criteria: task fulfilment; overall organisation, cohesion and coherence; grammar and vocabulary; and mechanical accuracy, the latter including such aspects of writing as spelling and punctuation. A set of more detailed descriptors was provided for six different levels within each criterion, and sample essays of varying levels of language use were provided to assessors at a marking standardisation session held before the commencement of semester. The criteria appear in the Appendix to this article. The criteria were intended to be interpreted in consideration of the candidates' level of tertiary experience: as this was a task for beginning students it was not expected that writers would, for example, demonstrate sophisticated understanding of academic writing such as deductive argument or include "academic" syntactic forms such as nominalisation. Because it was a pilot program, and because several markers were involved, all completed essays were moderated for consistency by the coordinator of the university's diagnostic assessment instrument. Where there were discrepancies between the scores awarded, students were allocated the higher score, as this was considered ethically appropriate with an untried instrument. In all cases the higher score was that of the moderator, for reasons which may be explained by one of the "issues" identified below.

Those who obtained a score of 50% or above were exempted from a weekly tutorial which had been set up to focus specifically on language development, while those who scored below 50% were required to attend the tutorial. The actual cut-off score was to a certain extent arbitrary, since very few pieces of work were submitted that suggested the writer would not obtain some benefits from undertaking classes in developing English language use in an academic context. The rationale for setting the cut-off score incorporated both educational and pragmatic factors, such as the level of the SUCCESS syllabus, which had been set in advance to cater for those with the greatest need (i.e. those whose English proficiency level was closest to the university's minimum English language entry requirement); the provision of the budget, which allowed for a maximum of fifteen classes of 20 students in the face-to-face SUCCESS tutorials; and the availability at short notice of tutors with both TESOL and tertiary teaching expertise.

The tutorials ran for one hour each week over nine contact weeks. While this meant that class time was very limited, one premise of the program was that students should be encouraged to become autonomous learners; the classes were therefore a springboard to further independent study and ongoing application of the principles learnt during the SUCCESS tutorials to actual unit assignments. As it transpired, the staff of the Communication Skills Centre did report an increase in the number of students voluntarily seeking out their services, many of whom, it was anecdotally reported, were enrolled in the business communication unit that was piloting SUCCESS. The linguistic components of the tutorials had been set, using the accumulated experience of the language and learning staff in the business faculty, to focus on some of the most frequently-occurring issues in academic writing: the distinctive nature of academic writing, the distinction between text types, essay and examination questions, parallel writing, sentence construction, the format of introductions, conclusions and summaries, paraphrase and précis, and referencing conventions.

At the end of semester, students were set a follow-up writing task which was marked using the same criteria as those used in the initial diagnostic procedure. Students had been informed that they had to achieve marks of 50% or higher in the final essay in order to pass the unit, although the marks themselves did not contribute to the students' final grade for the unit. This strategy had been introduced for the pilot both to encourage students to attend the tutorials and in order to underline the message that high level language skills were considered important in the course. The linking of the task result with the outcome for the unit overall was considered necessary to encourage student participation in the SUCCESS program. In the past, many students had been identified as requiring support, but although they had been counselled by their tutors and

referred to the faculty's Communication Skills Centre, many had not attended any of the programs on offer. Low attendance in such programs is not a phenomenon exclusive to the faculty where the pilot was taking place; on the contrary it has been extensively identified in the literature on language support (e.g. Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Hirsh, 2007).

The follow-up task was also a written essay, completed under test conditions. It deliberately did not require students to reproduce or discuss material that they had studied in the unit, because it was not content knowledge that was the focus of the exercise. Rather, the task required them to reflect on some aspect of their experience within the unit, making it relevant to the students' own lives but permitting the use of an expository format. Essays were marked by the same team of markers involved in the initial phase, and all those papers which scored below 50% were once again moderated.

The initial cut-off score for participation in the SUCCESS tutorials had been set at 50% for the reasons given above; this score was also set for the final summative writing task, even though in terms of the descriptors and sample essays it represented a standard of written language proficiency that was rather lower than that which the team believed would be appropriate to ensure that students had the best chance of participating effectively in their courses. Nevertheless, it was believed that the reasons for doing this justified that decision. First, the SUCCESS program was a pilot and therefore untried. Where there was room for doubt in a context which measured "that most flexible, multidimensional, fugitive, and complex of human abilities, the ability to use language" (Spolsky, 1995, p. 39), it was believed that it was ethically sound to give students the benefit of that doubt. Second, the stakes were high; if students could potentially fail a unit because they had not attained a standard of written English set with one particular instrument, then there should be no place for marginal decisions. Third, it was considered that the potential loss of self-confidence that borderline students might experience by failing the task would outweigh the benefits that repeating the unit might bring. Fourth, it was not considered appropriate for the team to act as gatekeepers for disputable cases when the university itself had no description of what constituted an appropriate language level to permit effective participation other than its entry requirements.

### **3. Results**

Of the 649 students who participated in the initial trial, 299 (46%) were initially identified as requiring additional English language development assistance.

A total of 12 students from the group of 299 identified for the SUCCESS program did not complete the final writing task, and all of these failed the unit. Five of these failed because their final unit grades were below 50% (the university-set score for a pass mark), and seven failed because they had not completed all the required tasks for the unit, even though their overall grades were above 50% (all but two being in the 50% to 58% range). Completion of all tasks set for the unit was a prerequisite for obtaining a pass grade. This was not a condition imposed because of the SUCCESS project, but one which applies in many units offered by the university.

This left 287 students who did complete the final writing task. Only fourteen of these did not obtain a score of 50% or more. However, ten of that group of fourteen had already scored below 50% for their assessed assignments in the unit, and had therefore already failed the unit on those grounds in any case. The remaining four scored between 50% and 60% for their course work. In other words, only four students failed the unit because of their result in the final SUCCESS writing task.

Students had been informed through their unit outlines and lecture briefings that passing the unit was contingent on obtaining a score of 50% or more in the final essay, but ultimately the decision to fail those four students (rather than, for example, to allocate them a conceded pass) was made by the unit coordinator in consideration of a number of factors that applied to the particular individuals involved.

The unit itself had an overall pass rate of 81%, with 528 students passing and 121 students failing. When the total cohort was split into those who had been identified as requiring further English language assistance and those who had not, there was a substantial difference between the two groups; the failure rate for the former being 28% and for the latter 10%. On the face of it, therefore, it appeared that those with the lower English language proficiency levels, as identified by the diagnostic assessment set in the first tutorial, were failing the unit at a significantly greater rate than those whose levels of proficiency had been assessed as higher. The correlating relationship between those identified as being in greatest need of support and their higher risk of failure, even after the intervention of the SUCCESS tutorials, was taken as one indicator of the validity of the initial diagnostic assessment instrument, and led to an increased level of confidence in the writing assessment task to identify appropriately those who were most in need of the SUCCESS program. The figures are reproduced in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Pass/fail rates for the students enrolled in the business communication unit.

<b>Description of group</b>	<b>Pass</b>	<b>Fail</b>
Unit results for all enrolled students	528	121 (19%)
Unit results for students in SUCCESS group	214	85 (28%)
Unit results for students not in SUCCESS group	314	36 (10%)

In order to examine the viability of setting the diagnostic assessment cut-off score at 50%, the results for all those 121 students who had failed the unit were also analysed. As described above, 26 of the group which had been identified as requiring additional support and failed either did not complete all set tasks or scored less than 50% on the final writing assessment task. A further 59 had scored below 50% on the first writing task and had been registered for the SUCCESS tutorials, following which they had achieved 50% or more on the final writing task. A further 20 students who had failed the unit had scored between 51% and 60% on their initial writing task. Only 16 students in total who had obtained an initial score of above 60% in their diagnostic written task went on to fail the unit. In summary, as shown in Table 2, 70% of students who failed the unit had scored below 50% in their initial writing task, and 87% of those who failed had scored 60% or below. It appeared, therefore, that the majority of students who were at risk of failing had been captured by setting the cut-off score at 50%.

**Table 2.** Unit failure rates and results of initial diagnostic language assessment task

<b>Category</b>	<b>Unit failure rate</b>
Those who scored below 50% on first writing task	85 (70% of all fails)
Those who scored 51%-60% on first writing task	20 (17% of all fails)
Those who scored 61% and above on first writing task	16 (13% of all fails)

The cut-off score for the final writing task was slightly more problematic if obtaining a mark above the cut-off score was to signal to students that they had attained a level of English proficiency that would not impede their academic progress. While only 14 in the SUCCESS group who completed the final writing task fell below the 50% mark set, 85 of them failed the unit. Twelve of these did not complete the final writing task at all, but that still left 59 (49% of all fails) who obtained over 50% for the final writing task but who failed the unit. The reasons why those 59 students failed were not explored at this pilot stage because approval had not been obtained to conduct the type of study that would be required to address this question. There are, of course, many variables in addition to language use that can contribute to academic results, and an investigation into this issue would require a range of data collection strategies; this is an aspect of the results that will therefore be the subject of future research. It is, however, possible

that the numbers were buoyed by the cautious pass level that had been set by the team for reasons that have been described above.

The extent to which, or even whether, the SUCCESS tutorials had had a positive impact on students' unit results could not be reliably assessed, not only because the unit had not run in its current format in previous years, but also because "it is notoriously difficult to measure the impact of student attendance at workshops and short courses on their academic study due to the large number of intervening variables" (Arkoudis, 2007, p. 18). These variables may not only include social, economic and educational factors that relate to the students and their circumstances, but may also include institutional factors such as variability in staff assessment practices.

It was theoretically possible, however, to apply certain indirect measures that could cumulatively contribute to an educated appraisal of the SUCCESS program's efficacy: the change in scores from the initial to the final writing task, feedback from students, and levels of attendance. The final writing task was marked "blind", i.e. with no access to the student's diagnostic results or to the student's unit assessment results. After the marks had been submitted, they were then compared with the marks for the diagnostic assessment, and in all cases but one the students had achieved higher scores in the final task (with the single case, the score was the same for the diagnostic assessment and the final writing task). This indicated that improvement had taken place across the board, although, as indicated above, it could not be determined whether this was due to the SUCCESS intervention as it was not possible to control for the many other variables that could have contributed to the change, such as exposure to English outside the classes, independent language study, and so on.

The capacity to obtain information from attendance records and student evaluations was, for the pilot, unfortunately compromised by erratic record keeping on the part of some tutors, and a low return rate of evaluations. With regard to the attendance records, from the limited data that were available for analysis, it could be surmised that attendance rates were comparable with those anecdotally reported for the disciplinary content focused tutorials. For example, in one class of ten students, four attended regularly, two attended the majority of tutorials, two attended sporadically and two did not attend at all. While the attendance figures could not be used in a systematic way to identify levels of student engagement, the "capture" by the program of numbers of students who would not otherwise have sought out support, according to historical trends, was seen as an encouraging result.

With regard to student evaluations, only 45 completed surveys were received, representing four classes from three different tutors and an overall rate of 15% of the total population. The low number of responses was the result of survey distribution issues, and so could not in itself be interpreted as a form of student comment. Nevertheless, the data from the surveys had to be interpreted with some caution, and were viewed as provisional indicators of student attitudes rather than the "student voice". The survey contained five Likert scale items to elicit levels of agreement from "strongly agree" (SA) to "strongly disagree" (SD), including an option of "unsure" (U). In addition, the survey included a final open-ended question to elicit general comments, but these did not contribute substantially to the overall data, except with regard to one issue, as described below. The results from the first five questions are presented in Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Student evaluations (percentages rounded to nearest whole number; N = 45)

Item	SA	A	U	D	SD
Overall, I'm glad that I participated in SUCCESS.	42%	44%	4%	9%	0%
My English has improved as a result of SUCCESS.	13%	71%	13%	2%	0%
I feel more confident about my English as a result of SUCCESS.	4%	64%	29%	2%	0%
SUCCESS motivated me to continue to improve my English.	24%	64%	7%	4%	0%
I think the SUCCESS program should continue.	40%	35%	11%	3%	11%

The results indicated that over 80% of respondents were glad to have participated in the SUCCESS program, believed their English had improved as a result of the program and felt motivated by it to continue to improve their English. A large majority, 75% of respondents, agreed that the program should continue. The qualitative comments on this issue revealed that the primary source of dissatisfaction among the 11% who believed that the program should not continue lay in the use of a final test. This finding was supported by tutor comments, as described below, leading to the decision to review this element.

#### **4. Program benefits and issues**

The experience of the pilot led to some positive outcomes, as well as several issues that needed to be addressed in order to improve the overall program and to clarify its educational intent.

There were four main benefits. First, students in need of assistance were identified very early in their studies using a non-discriminatory process, in the sense that all students, regardless of language background, were required to complete the diagnostic task, which was marked by TESOL-trained staff using transparent criteria. This was a marked improvement over the practice, in many units across the university, of recognition of language development needs much later in the semester by discipline-based staff after students had submitted their first assignments, or the ad hoc identification of particular individuals using no specific criteria, or criteria of which nobody but the staff member was apprised.

Second, the diagnostic task represented a single, standardised form of assessment, which was in sharp contrast to the many means by which students had met the university's English language entry requirement. While the focus was on writing, and was therefore limited to diagnosing aspects of language use related to that particular skill, the results nevertheless indicated that certain specific pathway programs (information about which had not been available to the diagnostic assessment markers) were articulating into degree programs students with substantially lower English levels than their peers. These aggregated results were made available to marking staff and area managers so that they could negotiate with pathway providers to review their programs in line with the university's needs.

Third, students were offered a language development program that was linked to their unit of study and which incorporated factors to promote both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to participate: the development of tutorial topics linked to their areas of study and greatest need; the timing of tutorials at times to suit the students' availability; and the inclusion of a task that had implications for the assessment grade within their discipline-based unit.

Finally, the introduction and resourcing of the SUCCESS program sent a wider message to students and staff that the university believed that English language development was valued, and that assistance was available to guide students towards increasing levels of proficiency and independence in this area.

At the same time, two major issues were identified; one that could be traced to assumptions made by the organising team about the markers' and tutors' level of expertise and understanding of the project's aims, and the other to the educational approach that underpinned the program. With regard to the first issue, it was recognised that markers would need training to standardise their marking for the initial and final writing assessment tasks, so an induction session was facilitated by the manager of the university's institutional diagnostic instrument. However, some of the results indicated that tutors did not all share understandings of the nature of the construct being tested, did not consistently apply the criteria to students from English-speaking and EAL backgrounds, and did not share the same level of knowledge about language – the latter evidenced in the correction of “errors” that were not, in fact, either mistakes or part of the marking criteria. Issues of inter-rater reliability are not unusual in education (e.g. Alderson & Banerjee, 2000; Brindley, 2001; Newton & Whetton, 2005), and it is essential that efforts are made to minimise their occurrence. In addition, tutors, who had been provided with the curriculum and a set of basic materials, were in some cases unsure about their role in relation to the unit, and “taught to the test”.

The experience indicated that in future a more thorough induction of staff (Weigle, 1994), using a smaller group of assessors (Clauser, 2000) would be critical to its success, and this recommendation has now been taken on board for future programs. The process of moderating assessments was a valuable tool to promote reliability (IELTS, n.d., p. 5) and to identify further training needs. It was also clear that the primary aim of the program, to promote and support students in their progress towards autonomous educational development, would need to be more effectively articulated to all those involved.

The second issue was most probably prompted by the inclusion of a final writing “test”. Its importance, in that if students did not obtain a score of 50% or more they could fail the unit, created considerable stress among students, according to tutors and student evaluations, and led to some tutors teaching to the final task in a way that was undermining of the formative intention of the program. Of the perceived benefits of the final assessment, the first – that progress in the SUCCESS program could be evaluated – was difficult to demonstrate for the reasons previously described; and the second, that it would encourage students to participate in tutorials, may have eventuated but was offset by the negative effects on students’ and tutors’ approaches to learning. It was therefore agreed that in future other ways would need to be found to promote student participation in the program if the formative intent of the intervention was to be maintained.

## 5. Conclusion

The SUCCESS pilot was very valuable for those involved in terms of its benefits and the lessons learnt from its introduction. From an organisational perspective, the program was valuable in that it both highlighted the extent to which the university valued the development of students’ English language capabilities, and identified pathways or English language gatekeeping measures which were producing students with particularly extensive developmental needs. From an educational perspective, the initial diagnostic assessment results were encouraging in terms of identifying the instrument as appropriate for its intended use, and from the limited data available, the program itself appeared to have had a positive impact on participants. It represented a formalised middle way between the stand-alone language development programs offered by many universities and the full integration of language development into discipline-based units, in a way that had not been previously attempted at the university where the pilot took place. The two major recommendations to emerge from the pilot were first that the process would benefit from having an assessment team that was small and highly trained, and that moderation should continue to be used; and second that the post-test concept was flawed in execution and that the team would need to review ways of measuring progress and promoting participation in the SUCCESS tutorials. Further trials have been planned that will take these recommendations into account in what it is hoped will be an ongoing process of improvement.

## Appendix: Marking criteria for writing tasks<sup>1</sup>

### Task fulfilment

Grade	Descriptor: essays in this category...
5	Address the question in sufficient detail and length, and in an appropriate register.
4	Address the question in an appropriate register, but may lack some detail or length.
3	Address the question, but may lack detail or an appropriate register.
2	Address the question only partially or in a limited way.
1	Answer the question minimally.
0	Do not address the task at all or misinterpret the task.

<sup>1</sup> Note: Illustrative text samples accompanied the criteria.

**Grammar and vocabulary**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Descriptor: essays in this category...</b>
<b>5</b>	Do not include any grammatical errors, and incorporate an extensive range of vocabulary items.
<b>4</b>	Include few, if any, grammatical errors, and incorporate a wide range of vocabulary items.
<b>3</b>	Include some grammatical errors, and/or incorporate a sufficient range of vocabulary items to address the task.
<b>2</b>	Include some grammatical errors or avoid complex structures, and/or incorporate a limited range of vocabulary items/inappropriate vocabulary items.
<b>1</b>	Include several grammatical errors and/or incorporate a very limited range of vocabulary items/inappropriate vocabulary items.
<b>0</b>	Are unable to achieve the task set because of grammar and/or vocabulary limitations.

**Organisation, coherence and cohesion**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Descriptor: essays in this category...</b>
<b>5</b>	Are logically organised, have unity of theme and express ideas coherently through a range of appropriately connected sentence types.
<b>4</b>	Are logically organised, express ideas coherently, and use a range of appropriately connected sentence types.
<b>3</b>	Have an overall organisation and coherence, and include a range of sentence types which are usually appropriately connected.
<b>2</b>	May lack overall organisation, but develop ideas coherently. Sentences may be limited in type or inappropriately connected.
<b>1</b>	May lack overall organisation or idea development, but include a connection between the ideas expressed.
<b>0</b>	Lack overall organisation, thematic unity and cohesion in and/or between sentences.

**Mechanical accuracy (spelling, punctuation)**

<b>Grade</b>	<b>Descriptor: essays in this category...</b>
<b>5</b>	Are free from spelling or punctuation errors.
<b>4</b>	Contain very few spelling or punctuation errors.
<b>3</b>	Contain a number of spelling and/or punctuation errors.
<b>2</b>	Contain several spelling and/or punctuation errors.
<b>1</b>	Contain numerous spelling and/or punctuation errors.
<b>0</b>	Contain so many errors in spelling or punctuation that overall comprehension is impeded.

*The overall grade is obtained by adding the totals for each criterion and dividing by 2.*

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