

A SURVEY OF THE NEEDS OF ESL STUDENTS AT ONE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The needs of ESL students at the University of Auckland were assessed via two questionnaires: one to ESL students and one to academic staff. The questions were both quantitative and qualitative. Difficulties were identified in all areas of communication, though staff mentioned mainly difficulties in writing, probably because this is the only area in which problems are 'visible' to them. The study concludes with a list of recommendations targeted at different levels at the University: individuals, departments, and the University as a whole.

Introduction

The University of Auckland has a student population of 26,100 (1997). Approximately 5000 students graduate each year, of whom an increasing number have a language other than English as their first language. Although non PR (permanent resident) international students whose first language is not English require a score of 550 on the TOEFL test or 6.0 on the IELTS test for entrance, legislation does not allow any language restriction for permanent residents.¹

An increasing awareness of the rising number of ESL students and their difficulties in English proficiency led to two university reports in 1995, the first prepared by the Economics Department and the second by a Sub-Committee of the Deans Committee. The former investigated the written English communication skills of students in a core first year paper and identified a number of deficiencies. The Deans Committee report, entitled 'English Language and Entrance' (September 1995), considered several issues, which could be summarized as ways in which:

- prospective students could better prepare themselves for academic studies,
- the University could assist in the on-going development of students' English language skills.

The Report also expressed a strong need for reliable data regarding the English language background and performance at University of all students, stating that the University is in danger of producing a significant number of graduates with limited communication skills.

¹ At least not for entrance to the University - such a standard can be, and is, applied for entrance into particular courses of study, e.g. Medicine, Engineering.

The impetus for the current study was this Report and ongoing international research into the needs of second language learners of English in Western universities. Both reports described above were written from the perspective of lecturers, not students, but Flowerdew (1994), for example, points to information from learners as an important source of knowledge. The goal of the present study was therefore to provide information on the difficulties of ESL students at the University from the perspective of both students and lecturers.

Method

Information was obtained via two questionnaires, one to academic staff, the second to ESL students. The questionnaires included questions from similar instruments developed in other institutions (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1983; Cotterall, 1995; Ferris & Tagg, 1996a, 1996b; Horwitz, 1985, 1987, 1988; Li & Richards, 1995) as well as others specific to local issues. The questions were organized into five sections:

- background information about courses
- overview of ESL students' problems
- listening, speaking, writing and reading demands
- suggestions for which language skills should be focused on in special courses
- modifications to teaching or examinations as a result of the students' difficulties

The student questionnaire was a modified version of the staff version, with less emphasis on language expectations and more on problems. Both questionnaires were piloted and revised before distribution.

Staff respondents were identified through the Heads of all 51 Departments at the University. 136 (69%) staff questionnaires were returned, covering 156 papers, some lecturers completing one questionnaire for two or more papers. 129 (95%) were completed by the lecturer(s), 3 (2%) by a tutor and lecturer collaboratively, and 4 (3%) by tutors alone. The number of questionnaires in each Faculty were Science (45), Commerce (37), Arts (29), and 'Other' (25).

The student questionnaire was distributed on a voluntary basis during courses identified in the staff questionnaire as having a high proportion of ESL students. These were from fourteen departments ranging from first to third year courses. 305 (24.9%) student questionnaires were returned. Most respondents identified as Asian (89.8%) and the remainder as European, Pacific Islanders, or Middle Eastern. 124 were enrolled in a BCom, 62 BSc, 42 BTech, 25 BA, and 52 others. 131 respondents were in their first year at the University, 81 in their second, 56 in their third, and 37 in their fourth or more.

The results were analysed overall and by faculty (Commerce, Science, Arts, Other). Where responses were made on a continuum (e.g. 1=very often, 5=never) the scores were averaged and the means and standard deviations reported. Where the responses were made

in discrete categories (e.g. Always, Often, Sometimes, Never), frequency distributions of the various responses are reported. Responses from various questions are grouped under general headings in the following results.

Staff responses

The first result to emerge from the lecturers' responses was that many were uncertain how many ESL students were in their classes, giving ranges rather than exact figures. Estimates ranged from 1.5% to 70.0%, with a mean of 33.8% and a standard deviation of 16.0%. This indicates that on average, roughly one third of students attending lectures were perceived by their staff as ESL students, with a large variation from paper to paper, particularly between faculties, and with higher estimates for science and commerce (see Table 1).

Furthermore, on average, nearly 10% of lecturers indicated that they did not know the difficulties experienced by ESL students. This figure was highest in the Commerce Faculty (14%), and similar in the other three (7-8%). In some cases this may be because tutors rather than lecturers have direct contact with the students.

Faculty	Science	Arts	Commerce	Other
Mean (%)	39.4	24.1	38.5	30.2
SD (%)	16.7	17.7	13.1	12.6

Table 1: Estimated proportion of ESL students in the papers surveyed in each faculty

Skills required in each course

Staff were asked to what extent students are expected to use each of the four skills and what difficulties ESL students in particular have with each. Figure 1 gives the frequencies for all courses, since these did not differ greatly between faculties. Listening was the most frequently-used skill, followed by reading. Speaking was not often expected, though most papers required it at least occasionally.

Of the four skills, writing caused the most difficulties, followed by speaking, then reading, then listening. Reported difficulties did not differ substantially between ESL and other students, nor between faculties.

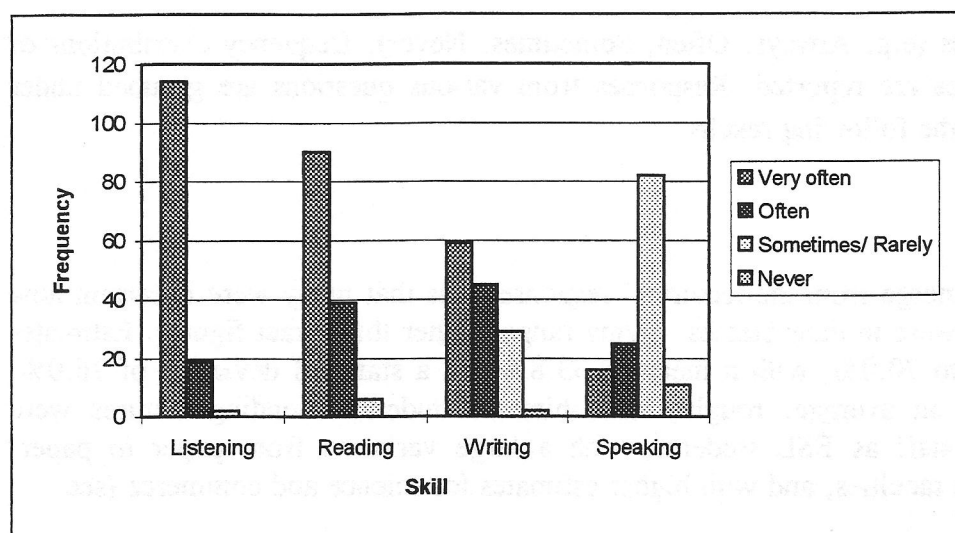


Figure 1: Staff perceptions of the frequency of use of the four skills, for all students

Two questions were also asked about the importance of each skill in English to success in the department in each field after graduation. Lecturers' perceptions of the importance of effective communication skills in both contexts were very high for all four skills. They were consistently judged slightly more important in the work-force than for the department, suggesting that while the University may tolerate inadequate communication skills by students, a similar flexibility is not assumed for employers. The Science Faculty generally regarded all four skills as somewhat less important for success at University than did the other faculties, though this difference was not evident for success in the workforce. When separated into three sections (listening and speaking, writing and reading), the following comments emerged.

Listening and speaking

Oral participation counted towards the course grade in only 31% of the papers surveyed, and this was stated in the course handbook in 28 of these 32 papers. However, lecturers considered good notetaking skills to be essential for success in 65% of the papers. Table 2 shows variations between faculties. Commerce placed greater weight on oral participation yet made students aware of this less often, while Arts placed less weight on this aspect.

Percentage of papers where...	Science	Arts	Commerce	Other
oral participation counts towards coursework	22.2	14.3	32.4	24.0
stated in course outline/handbook that oral participation counts towards coursework	82.2	89.3	64.9	84.0
lecturers consider good notetaking skills to be essential for success	54.5	77.8	64.9	68.0

Table 2: The proportion, by faculty, of papers for which oral participation counts towards the course grade

There were only three significant areas in which students were required to use listening and speaking skills as part of their coursework. These were asking staff clarification questions (74% of papers), interacting with senior student tutors (67%) and taking part in small-group activities (39%). Arts students were expected to participate in substantially more small-group activities, debates and interactions with tutors or demonstrators, and to ask staff more clarification questions than other students. In contrast, Commerce students collaborated more frequently on assignments, while 'Other' students gave more oral presentations and were more often required to interact with native speakers outside class. Despite this expectation, many ESL students did not talk in tutorials as much as they or their lecturers wished. Lecturers attributed this to students' unwillingness to expose their weaknesses, to general shyness, or to lack of confidence. Some saw the use of students' first language in discussions amongst themselves as hindering their progress in English.

Specifically, difficulties in listening and speaking tasks identified in more than 20% of papers were:

- Up-front oral presentations (51%)
- Large group discussions or debates (50%)
- Asking staff clarification questions (47%)
- Leading class discussions (47%)
- Understanding lectures and taking useful notes (44%).

Lecturers commented that students copied down everything from overheads and the board but nothing from the spoken part of the lecture (5 comments), an observation supported by a study in progress at this University (Lewis & Gravatt, 1998). Students' comments about difficulties ranged from extraneous noise to the lecturers' language and use of examples. Both the informality and the formality of the language were mentioned, in particular lecturers' use of idiomatic English (23 comments).

Writing

The writing tasks required in more than 20% of papers were:

- written reports (45 %),
- expository or critical essays (42 %),
- case studies (26 %).

Differences between faculties were that:

- Commerce students: Asked more questions
Led far fewer discussions
Gave fewer oral presentations
- Arts students: Asked more questions
Interacted much more with tutors/demonstrators
- Science students: Led fewer discussions
- 'Other' students: Interacted much more with native speakers outside class
Interacted more with tutors/demonstrators
Participated much more in debates.

Features relating to content were consistently considered more important than those relating to sentence and paragraph organization or spelling and punctuation, though the importance of all features was relatively high. The results were similar across the faculties, though Science consistently placed lower importance on all features than did the other faculties.

A further question asked staff to make two judgments about features of written assignments for the paper: the extent to which each feature is a problem for native and non-native speakers of English. This question was analysed by looking at the difference between the mean ratings for ESL and native English speakers. In all cases ESL students had greater difficulty than did native speakers. They were also rated as having more difficulty with sentence and paragraph structure and organisation rather than with the content or ideas. This indicates that while ESL students understand the concepts and requirements, the structural aspects of writing tasks cause difficulties. This could be regarded as positive information, in that a lack of knowledge of the mechanics of writing can be more easily addressed than a failure to understand new content.

Figure 2 indicates which features of written assignments were considered important. As can be seen, the features nominated most often related to content rather than structure. There was considerable variation between faculties. In Science and Commerce, meeting specified assignment requirements was most important, followed by content. In Arts there was a spread of features, including content, the development of ideas, addressing the topic, and meeting the specified assignment requirements. In 'Other', content was nominated by nearly half of the respondents, with the development of ideas second.

The features identified as least important were fairly similar for the different faculties, with some notable exceptions. Punctuation and spelling were considered least important

substantially more often than for the other categories, while for Commerce, sentence structure was the least important. Commerce was the only category which nominated development of ideas on a substantial number of occasions, but they did not nominate overall writing ability at all, in contrast to the other three categories, where it was nominated in between 15% and 20% of responses.

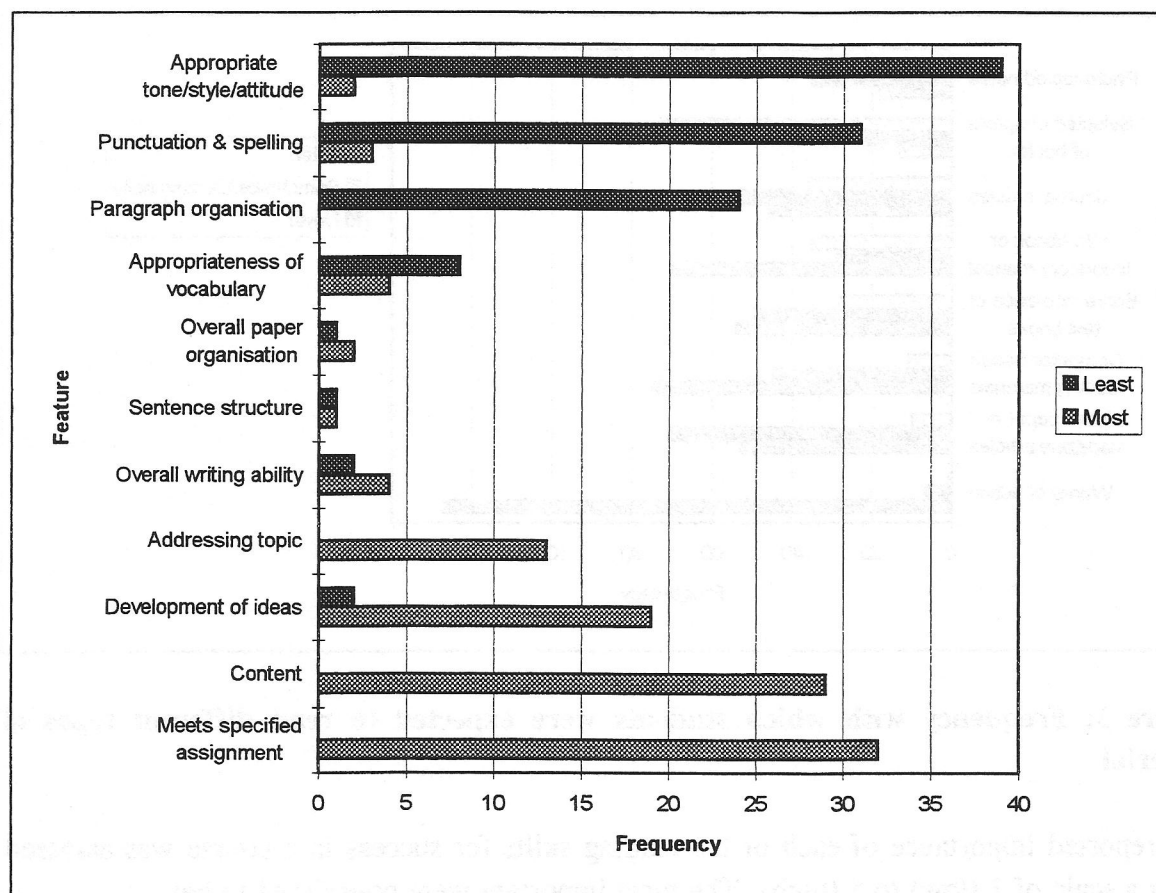


Figure 2: Frequencies with which features of written assignments were nominated as being the most or least important for gaining marks

When asked about their assessment procedures, 30% of lecturers reported marking the written work of ESL students more leniently, although this varied substantially, from 15% in Commerce to over 50% in Arts. Four features were marked more leniently by over 20% of staff: punctuation & spelling, sentence structure, appropriateness of vocabulary, and overall writing ability. Other structural features were also mentioned but no content-related features. This was the case in all faculties.

Lecturers reported that weaknesses in writing assignments and examinations took the form of not knowing how to interpret the question and not understanding the conventions of paraphrasing and quoting (16 comments). Cooperation amongst students and plagiarism were also mentioned (3 comments).

Reading

Figure 3 gives lecturers' reports of the frequency with which students were expected to read different types of material as part of their coursework. The most common materials in all faculties were photocopied notes and chapters from textbooks, with journal articles also common in Arts and 'Other'.

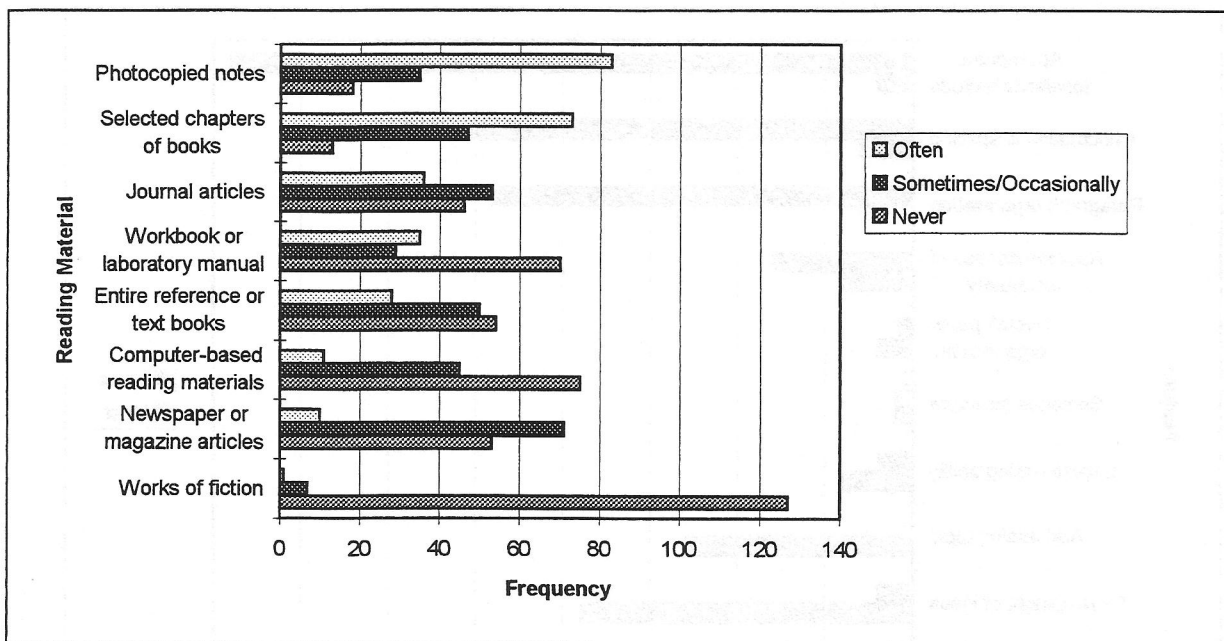


Figure 3: Frequency with which students were expected to read different types of material

The reported importance of each of the reading skills for success in a course was assessed using a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). The most important were considered to be:

- General comprehension (4.47),
- Knowledge of specialist vocabulary (3.99),
- Critical reading (3.52).

General approaches to learning

Three additional themes emerged in lecturers' comments. According to them, ESL students see the purpose of reading as memorizing information, rather than applying, evaluating or synthesizing it with other information (12 comments). Thus students found it difficult identifying the main points in a reading passage or lecture. Secondly, lecturers commented about ESL students' general approach to university learning. Students were said to be more concerned with knowing how to do their assignments and examinations than with thinking about the ideas involved, and with repeating facts rather than asking questions or making personal judgments (12 comments).

Lecturers' perceptions of ESL students' individual requests for help outside class varied. For example, one admired their tenacity in not leaving until they understood the point, while another saw the requests as taking more time than appropriate.

Student Questionnaire

Skills required in each course

The importance of each skill as reported by students was rated on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (very often). The most highly-ranked skills were listening (4.66) and reading (4.53), then writing (4.07), with speaking considerably less common (3.00). When asked how often they have difficulty with each skills, the results for all four were similar, at a medium level, though the standard deviations were relatively high, indicating that difficulties varied widely between the subjects.

Figure 4 compares the importance students placed on the various communication skills for success in their course of study and after graduation. As can be seen, all skills were considered very important, though speaking was considered notably less so at University.

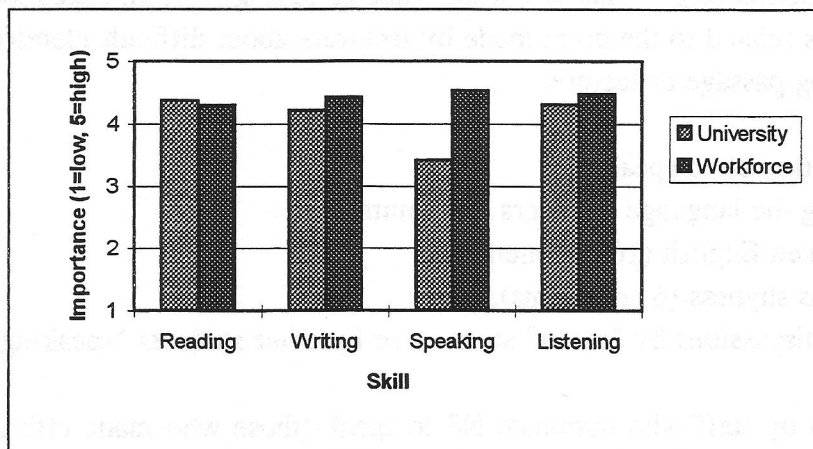


Figure 4: The importance of the various language skills for success at University and in the workforce

Listening and speaking

Listening and speaking difficulties most commonly described as occurring 'Always' or 'Often' were:

- Large group discussion (58.2% of respondents)
- Class discussions (48.2%)
- Interaction with native speakers (32.9%)
- Out-of-class projects (27.2%).

There was little difference between the results for the seven identified difficulties (oral presentations, finding words quickly, worrying about mistakes, inability to explain in English, best way of explaining, pronunciation, entering discussion). These were experienced 'always' by about 10-20% of respondents, 'often' or 'sometimes' by about 65-80%, and 'never' by about 5-20%. This suggests that oral communication is a difficulty for many ESL students, despite not being perceived by them as an essential skill for success in their course.

Note-taking, descriptions, clarifying, instructions, and subject matter were of similar difficulty, being experienced 'always' or 'often' by 10-30% of respondents, 'sometimes' by 40-60%, and never by 15-30%. Problems with informal language were reported by nearly 40% of respondents.

In contrast, problems relating to the speed, volume, and accent of lecturers or other students, as well as situations where more than one person is speaking, were reported by around 70% of students as 'Always' or 'Often' occurring, with the remaining 30% reporting 'Sometimes' having difficulty with them. Specifically, ESL students often found it difficult to identify what was being said as a new point, an elaboration or illustration of the last point, a non-explanation (e.g. "That is not the same as saying..."), an exception to a rule or an aside, which is related to the point made by lecturers about difficult identifying the main points in a reading passage or lecture.

Students attributed their reticence to speak to:

- difficulty understanding the language of others (45 comments),
- limitations in their spoken English (10 comments),
- affective factors such as shyness (6 comments),
- exclusion from group discussions by "racist" students or by other students "speaking out faster" (5 comments),
- unintentional exclusion by staff who nominate NS to speak (those who made efforts to include everyone were spoken of with gratitude).

Writing

The perceived importance of and difficulties with the various features of written assignments are given in Table 3. Each is ranked from most to least important/difficult, on a scale of 1 (least) to 3 (most). As shown, the features identified as important varied more than those causing difficulty. The aspects causing greater difficulty tended to be expression and the development of ideas, and these were also identified as important.

Importance		Difficulty	
Time constraints	2.70	Clear expression	2.22
Expression of ideas	2.62	Expression of ideas	2.17
Clear expression	2.56	Time constraints	2.16
Following instructions	2.47	Sentence structure	2.15
Writing ability	2.45	Appropriate vocabulary	2.14
Development of ideas	2.43	Writing ability	2.13
Sentence structure	2.38	Development of ideas	2.12
Overall organisation	2.37	Tone & style	2.00
Appropriate vocabulary	2.28	Punctuation & spelling	1.99
Addressing topic	2.25	Evaluation/ revision	1.91
Evaluation/ revision	2.23	Addressing topic	1.91
Paragraph organisation	2.20	Overall organisation	1.89
Punctuation & spelling	2.19	Paragraph organisation	1.87
Tone & Style	1.91	Following instructions	1.69

Table 3: The perceived importance and difficulties experienced with aspects of written assignments

Students' comments were brief and referred to difficulties in all stages of the writing process from knowing about research skills to organizing writing in their own words (15 comments).

Reading

There was very little variation in the level of difficulty reported by students in reading different types of material (journals, newspapers, fiction, entire books, book chapters, photocopied notes, laboratory instructions, computer materials). 10-20% of ESL students described experiencing difficulties 'Often', 50-70% 'Sometimes', and 10-20% 'Never', except for the latter three categories, where the 'Never' figure rose to around 30%, with a concurrent slight decrease in both the other categories.

The ratings of difficulty, as presented in Table 4, were not particularly high, nor was there much variation between the different skills. In this case the difficulties were assessed on a scale of 1 (never) to 5 (very often).

Difficulty	Mean rating
Understanding vocabulary	3.34
Reading critically	3.33
Creative writing	3.33
Guessing unknowns	3.18
Understanding writer's position	3.15
Oral presentations	3.13
Scanning	3.06
Discussion participation	2.92
Understanding main points	2.82
General comprehension	2.81
Understanding organisation	2.74
Details	2.53

Table 4: Difficulties with reading tasks

Some students reported difficulties with specific types of materials (9 comments), with lecturers' handwriting on the board also mentioned (5 comments).

Perceptions of available courses

56.9% of the 290 students answering the question about courses available to assist them were aware that the Student Learning Centre has courses for ESL students, while only 43.9% (of 285) were aware of the English Language Centre courses. 21.9% had taken a course offered by one of these centres. Overall ratings regarding the usefulness of the courses were generally positive, though those varied widely for specific courses. The SLC's Writing Skills course was considered very useful (4.0 on a scale of 1 (no use at all) to 5 (very useful)), whereas their Language Exchange programme was considered less useful (2.9), probably due to difficulties with finding partners for all the students wishing to use the service.

Discussion and recommendations

The emphases of staff and students were different in a number of areas. For example, while lecturers saw listening as by far the most important skill for university study, students ranked it as equal with reading and writing. When it came to reasons for non-participation in activities calling for listening and speaking, lecturers mentioned affective factors such as not wanting to expose weaknesses while the biggest reason suggested by students was not understanding other people's language. While staff saw greater difficulties in writing than in the other skills, students identified writing problems as being only slightly worse than the other communication skills. Perhaps staff are more aware of the product (writing) than the process (listening and reading). It seems that if ESL students' writing can be

understood, despite weaknesses in vocabulary, sentence structure, etc., lecturers do not mark the students down. In fact, a significant number of staff in each faculty report marking these structural features more leniently than for native English speakers. This probably means the weaknesses will continue. There are implications for individual lecturers, for departments and for the university as a whole in these results.

At the level of individual lecturers, the lenient policy towards the marking of ESL students' assignments raises questions. Even if workshops run by the ELC/SLC focus on these skills, if students are not penalized for inadequacies in these areas, how popular would such courses be? Do students know about this marking policy? Can native speakers expect the same leniency? Lecturing is another area where some changes could be made. If 44 % of lecturers identify understanding lectures and taking useful notes as a difficulty for ESL students, a finding supported by another study by the same researchers (Lewis and Gravatt, 1998) then perhaps lecturers could benefit from advice on organising and delivering lectures. If these suggestions are seen to would lead to better teaching and learning for all students the action is more likely to be taken. According to the students' comments about shyness and feeling excluded from group discussions, staff could encourage greater participation in tutorials in a number of ways, of which naming students to speak is perhaps the most straightforward. Further suggestions along these lines are made elsewhere (Starks and Lewis, forthcoming).

At the departmental level staff who correct ESL students' assignments should receive some formal instruction in the writing process as a basis for marking and providing feedback. It could also be helpful to have marking policies made explicit for all students. In faculties where speaking is important in the workforce, the University should perhaps place greater emphasis on ensuring that all students graduate with adequate speaking skills. In addition the value of speaking in the learning process should be emphasized to students.

At the university-wide level it seems that greater knowledge is needed about the sources of support. The fact that under half the students were aware of the two main sources of study assistance within the university and that fewer than a quarter had actually made use of them has a clear message about publicising these courses. Lecturer's comments about ESL students' learning styles have also been well documented in the literature. Perhaps the university should enunciate more clearly its expectations in terms of a Western educational style, via a handbook available to all first year students. The relationship between English competence and academic success, e.g. Gravatt (1997) and Gravatt (1998) could be emphasized to enrolling students by the same medium. A more controversial question is whether ELA papers should be compulsory for all students unable to prove English competence to a prerequisite standard.

Changes of attitude are harder to implement. ESL students need to dare to take part in discussions, even when they are not overtly called upon and native English speakers could

consider whether their communication style, particularly in group discussions, wittingly or unwittingly excludes some class members

In conclusion, many of the concerns expressed in this study are widely reported internationally. Writing in a new language, new learning styles in lectures and tutorials, and different cultures of learning (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Ramsden, 1992) are the basis of advice at all levels. It is hoped that this small study will add to the international body of data which both describes and suggests solutions for the problems.

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