

DO INTERNATIONAL NESB STUDENTS NEED AN ACADEMIC LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM? ¹

Bambang Yudi Cahyono ²

Abstract: This study examined the academic language skills of international students from non-English speaking background (NESB) at the University of Melbourne. It aimed to determine whether or not they need an academic language development program. The participants were 158 international NESB students of distinct categories. The students' academic language were measured using the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) test administered before the commencement of their academic study. Scores of the test were compared across categories and correlated across academic language skills. The results from this study suggested that, in general, international NESB students need a language development program to improve their academic writing skill. In addition, it was suggested that the development of the academic writing skill of international NESB students be accomplished through a program directly related to academic language writing.

Keywords: academic language skills, academic language development program, English language proficiency, International NESB students

With the increasing number of international students in Australian universities, an important issue that needs to be taken into account is whether the academic language performance of non-English-speaking background (NESB) students would ensure success in their academic study. In addition to the academic language performance, it should be noted that academic success also depends on other factors such as financial support, motivation, and adequate study skills. An important step is to examine the international

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² **Dra. Bambang Yudi Cahyono, MA** is a faculty member of the English Department of the State University of Malang and currently a Ph.D student in the Department of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics of the University of Melbourne, Australia.

NESB students' academic language performance before they commence their academic study (Sawyer, 1999). By using the data on the academic language performance, a decision can be made to provide an academic language development program for students who need it (Pantelides, 1999).

Current statistics indicate that there were 143,788 international students in Australia in 2001. Out of this number, thirty per cent were international students studying in Victoria, making up one-fifth of the university population in this state (Auditor General Victoria, 1999-2002: 3).

A common indicator of English language proficiency (ELP) to be considered in the admission process of international NESB students is the scores of the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test. This standardized test is administered by an international partnership of the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), the British Council, and the IDP Education Australia (IELTS Handbook, 2002). The IELTS test consists of four subtests, i.e., listening, reading, writing, and speaking. This test has a score for each subtest and a global score, ranging from 0 indicating "no attempt for the test" to 9 suggesting an "expert user" of English.

International NESB students that had taken the IELTS test received a test report form with scores for each subtest and a global score. A global score is produced by averaging and then rounding the individual subtest scores. Although it is not clear, it is determined that the scores of reading, listening, and global score are reported in whole and half bands, while scores of writing and speaking are reported in whole bands only.

Leading universities in Victoria, for example, require an IELTS global score of 6.5 for admission (Auditor General Victoria, 1999-2002: 41). This means that a prospective international student should be a "good user" of English. According to the IELTS statements describing the ELP, being a "good user" means that a student has "operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations" and "generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning" (IELTS Handbook, 2002: 20).

The IELTS global scores have contributed to the selection process of international NESB students. However, research studies have shown that the students' ELP as measured by the IELTS test has a low predictive value toward their academic success. Based on data collected in Curtin University, it was reported that a high IELTS score did not seem to be parallel with

success (Dooey & Oliver, 2002). Additionally, in a study comparing IELTS and TOEFL as predictors of academic success in the University of Melbourne, it was revealed that there was a low correlation between IELTS or TOEFL scores and achievement as measured by grade average (Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999). With little evidence for the validity of IELTS as a predictor of academic success, the academic language skills of NESB students need to be investigated further. The results of the examination would be useful to determine whether a program of academic language development should be recommended for international NESB students.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out in the University of Melbourne which had 5,839 international students up to 31 August 2000, or 13.45 per cent of the total number of students (International Student Services, 2001). The international students comprised NESB students and students with English speaking background.

A particular proportion of the international NESB students received scholarship from the Australian Government through the Australian Development Scholarship (ADS) Program. The ADS program which was given to students from developing countries was aimed to “allow people to gain knowledge and skills which will help the development of their home country when they return home after finishing their study” (ADS, 2002: 1). The program provides opportunities for people in more than 35 selected countries of Asia (e.g., Indonesia and Vietnam), Africa (e.g., South Africa and Zimbabwe), and the Pacific (e.g., Tonga and Vanuatu) to undertake tertiary-level study in Australia.

Given that the language used in the academic context of the university is different from the language background of the international NESB students, these students are advised to take a language diagnostic test. A diagnostic test is “a test designed to provide information about specific strengths and weaknesses of the test taker” (Henning, 1987: 191). Information gained from an academic language diagnostic test would be beneficial to examine academic language skills requiring improvement so that the learning process in the students’ academic field would be reasonably efficient.

Diagnostic English Language Assessment

The diagnostic test given in the University of Melbourne is called the Diagnostic English Language Assessment (DELA) test. The DELA test measures academic language skills needed for university-level courses of study (Language Testing Research Centre, n.d.). This test consists of three subtests, i.e. reading, writing and listening.

The reading test assesses the students' literal and inferential skills varying from reading for specific information to reorganizing information from the text in another way. In addition, speed is an integrated part of the reading test. This test contains three reading passages followed by questions. The passages deal with general topics that are considered appropriate in an academic environment such as conservation, natural resources, and energy. The types of items in the test include, among others, answering short-answer and multiple choice questions, and completing cloze texts or figures. The time allocated for the reading test is 55 minutes.

The writing test requires the students to write an argumentative essay of at least 300 words on a determined topic. The prompt provides input for ideas in the form of a short reading passage or a set of passages. However, the students are encouraged to contribute their own ideas. The writing measures the fluency, content, and form of the students' essays. Aspects of fluency include cohesion and coherence. Aspects of content include ideas and the arrangements of arguments to arrive at some conclusion. Aspects of form cover the range of vocabulary and the accuracy of the sentence structures. The total time used for this test is 55 minutes, including 5 minutes for reading.

The listening test measures the students' understanding of a mini lecture. More specifically, the students are assessed on their ability to recall or locate specific information from the lecture, reorganize information to complete a chart or diagram, summarize main points, and to differentiate between main ideas and supporting detail. The lecture is divided into several sections with topics of general interest such as health and education. A brief introduction is given to the students before the lecture to help them get an idea of the topic. Following a section of the lecture, questions requiring short answers are given. The listening test takes 30 minutes. With the time needed for administration, the DELA test takes about 2.5 hours.

The administration and the scoring of the DELA were conducted by faculty members of the Language Testing Research Centre (LTRC). This

standardized test is of a high reliability. The band scores of the DELA test are similar to the IELTS scores which range from 0 as an indication of not taking the test to 9 as the maximum level of performance. A student is considered good at his/her academic language when he/she can achieve a score of 7 for each of academic skills (i.e., listening, reading, and writing).

The results of the test discussed in this study include individual scores of academic language skills in reading, listening, and writing, and the global performance derived from the average of all of these three skills. The score of writing suggests overall proficiency based on aspects of fluency, content, and form. All of these scores are taken into account when a recommendation is made on whether the students need an academic language development program.

Language Development Programs

Various programs have been offered to help international NESB students adjust the linguistic demands of their academic fields. Institutions within the university which coordinate the academic language development programs include the Horwood Language Centre, the Centre for Communication Skills and English as a Second Language (CCS&ESL, 2002a), and the Learning Skills Unit (LSU).

The Horwood Language Centre (2002) manages the Introductory Academic Skills (IAS) Program for international NESB students. The ADS students usually take the IAS Program as a part of their scholarship. The major purposes of this five-week program were to raise the students' awareness of the ways they were expected to study in an Australian university and to develop their language skills. The language-skill sessions are designed to develop the students' abilities in listening to lectures and note taking, reading and research skills. More importantly, skills in writing and oral presentation are emphasized. In the writing practice, the students learn to understand more about aspects of writing an essay. In the oral presentation, the students are required to present their essay within 5 to 10 minutes.

The Centre for Communication Skills and English as a Second Language (CCS&ESL, 2002a) provides credit subjects for international NESB students from various disciplines. These subjects are made up of communication-skill subjects and ESL subjects. Especially for postgraduate students, a course named Presenting Academic Discourse is offered to develop their skills in critical reading, summary writing, and oral presentation.

In addition to the credit courses, the Centre offers international NESB students short courses and individual tutorials. The short courses include development of oral skills such as pronunciation and conversation fluency and written skills. The individual tutorial is intended to give “an opportunity to get one-to-one assistance from an ESL tutor” to work on the academic language skills, especially writing (CCS&ESL, n.d.: 1).

The Learning Skills Unit fosters independent learning and develops students’ potential for success by focusing on “the transferable academic and professional skills necessary for continued learning in a knowledge-based society” (Learning Skills Unit, 2000: 2). This Unit offers various activities to enhance the learning of the students in the areas of study and organization, writing, assessment, professional skills, and research involvement. Regarding the development of academic language skills, this Unit focuses on reading and writing issues which include note-taking, efficient reading and writing, critical reading and writing, tertiary essay writing, thesis writing, report writing, writing literature reviews and annotated bibliographies, and referencing and citation.

This study aimed to analyze the academic language skills of international NESB students of the University of Melbourne. The analyses addressed the following questions:

- ▶ Do the levels of academic language skills of the international NESB students differ across course levels?
- ▶ Are there any differences in the academic language skills of international NESB students across streams of academic study?
- ▶ Do the levels of academic language skills of the ADS students differ from those of non-ADS students?
- ▶ Is there any correlation between one and another academic language skill of international NESB students?

The results of analyses were used to investigate which groups of students need language development programs and which academic language skills should be recommended to the international NESB students to undertake.

METHOD

Participants

The participants of this research were 158 international NESB students of the University of Melbourne across distinct categories. Based on the

course levels, the participants comprised 75 postgraduate and 83 undergraduate students. The students were drawn from various academic disciplines, i.e.: 41 participants were from Arts and Social Sciences, 58 from Economic and Commerce, 16 from Medical Science, and 43 from Physical Science and Technology. Another consideration was whether they received scholarship from the Australian Government. The participants were 83 ADS students and 75 non-ADS students. Table 1 shows the international NESB students participating in this study.

Streams of academic study	Postgraduate		Undergraduate		Total
	ADS	Non-ADS	ADS	Non-ADS	
Arts and Social Sciences (ASS)	29	-	-	12	41
Economics and Commerce (EC)	9	3	6	40	58
Medical Sciences (MS)	14	1	1	-	16
Physical Science and Technology (PST)	18	1	6	18	43
Subtotal	70	5	13	70	
Total	75		83		158

Table 1 Participants of the study

Data

Data for this study were scores of the international NESB students on the DELA test administered in February, before the commencement of the first academic semester of 2002. The test for the ADS students was administered when they were in the fourth week of the Introductory Academic Skills (IAS) Program, while the test for the non-ADS students were administered about three weeks later. After scoring, the DELA scores were included in the Excel spreadsheet and filed as the document of the LTRC and the CCS&ESL. The data included scores of individual subtests of reading, listening, and writing, and the global performance of the three subtests. The writing score comprised separate scores of the components of grammar and vocabulary, fluency, and content. In terms of writing, this study concerned the overall writing performance (the average score only) to see, in general, whether an academic language program is needed.

The scores of the academic language skills gained from the DELA test indicated that the lowest score was for writing and the highest score was for reading and listening. Based on the band levels of language performance, the score categories ranged from the “extremely limited user” category (score 3) to the “expert user” category (score 9). In between were

scores of international NESB students of “limited user” (score 4), “modest user” (score 5), “competent user” (score 6), “good user” (score 7), “very good user” (score 8) categories.

Analyses

Data were analyzed in the light of the research questions. The DELA scores were grouped into variable categories: academic language skills, course levels, streams of academic study, and involvement with the ADS program. In order to select procedures for data analyses appropriately, histograms were made for the scores in all variable categories. The histograms showed that the scores were not normally distributed. It is likely that the distribution of the scores was influenced by the admission process that required students with a minimum IELTS score of 6.5, a moderately high score in the bands of 0 to 9. Consequently, international NESB students with IELTS scores below the cut-off were excluded for admission to the University. This resulted in the distribution of the DELA scores skewing in favor of the higher scores.

Given the distribution, the scores were tested using non-parametric statistical analyses. To compare the academic language skills of the NESB students across course levels and involvement with the ADS program, the *Mann-Whitney U* tests were used. To analyze the differences in academic language skills across streams of academic study, the *Kruskal-Wallis* test was used. Finally, to investigate the relationship between each of the academic language skills, the *Spearman's rho* correlation coefficients were used. To determine the significance of the data analysis throughout this study, an alpha level was set at .05 which means that a result would be statistically significant if its possibility of occurrence by chance alone was less than or equal to five times out of 100 (Brown, 1988: 115-116). The quantitative analyses were carried out using Minitab (Minitab Statistical Software, 2001).

RESULTS

Academic Language Skills across Course Levels

The first research question was whether the levels of academic language skills of the international NESB postgraduates were different from those of the NESB undergraduates. The descriptive statistics of the academic language skills in reading, listening, and writing, and the global performance by course levels are presented in Table 2. The table shows that the means of scores of the graduate students are different from the undergraduate students,



while the medians are the same. Variability in the scores increases along with the course level in all academic language skills.

	Academic language skills	N	Mean	Median	SD
Postgraduates	Reading	83	6.75	7	1.44
	Listening	83	7.29	7	1.26
	Writing	83	6.10	6	1.18
	Global	83	6.78	7	1.03
Undergraduates	Reading	75	7.03	7	0.99
	Listening	75	6.83	7	0.79
	Writing	75	6.27	6	0.86
	Global	75	6.76	7	0.73

Table 2 Academic language skills across course levels

In order to analyze the difference between in the academic language skills of the postgraduate and undergraduates, the medians were compared. The medians indicated that the postgraduate and undergraduate students achieved the “good user” category in the academic reading and listening skills, and the “competent user” category in the academic writing skill. In terms of global performance, the two groups of students were categorized as “good users”. The comparison of medians of the academic language skills is presented in Table 3.

	Reading		Listening		Writing		Global	
	P	U	P	U	P	U	P	U
<i>N</i>	83	75	83	75	83	75	83	75
<i>Medians</i>	[7.0	7.0]	[7.0	7.0]*	[6.0	6.0]	[7.0	7.0]

* $p < .05$

Table 3 Comparison of medians across course levels

Table 3 indicates that there was no significant difference in the academic reading and writing skills and in the global performance between international NESB postgraduates and undergraduates. It can be examined further that although there was a significant difference between the postgraduate and undergraduate students, these two groups of students were categorized as “good users”. The academic language skills of the NESB postgraduate students differed significantly from those of NESB

undergraduate students in terms of the academic listening skill [$W = 7378.5$, $df = 156$, $p < .05$]. Although the medians are the same, an examination of the means in academic listening skill indicated that the undergraduate students (7.29) outperformed the postgraduate students (6.83).

Academic Language Skills across Streams of Academic Study

The second area of investigation was the differences in the academic language skills of international NESB students across streams of academic study. The descriptive statistics of the academic language skills in reading, listening, and writing, and the global performance by streams of academic study are presented in Table 4. The table shows that the means of scores are different across streams of academic study, while the medians vary from 6, 6.5, to 7.

	Academic language skills	N	Mean	Median	SD
Arts and Social Sciences (ASS)	Reading	41	7.15	7	1.15
	Listening	41	7.12	7	0.98
	Writing	41	6.27	6	1.03
	Global	41	6.83	7	0.83
Economics and Commerce (EC)	Reading	58	6.76	7	1.39
	Listening	58	7.21	7	1.21
	Writing	58	6.03	6	1.20
	Global	58	6.79	7	0.95
Medical Sciences (MS)	Reading	16	6.50	6	1.32
	Listening	16	6.56	6.5	0.96
	Writing	16	6.56	6.5	0.81
	Global	16	6.69	7	0.87
Physical Science and Technology (PST)	Reading	43	6.93	7	1.12
	Listening	43	7.02	7	1.01
	Writing	43	6.14	6	0.86
	Global	43	6.70	7	0.91

Table 4 Academic language skills across streams of academic study

The differences in academic language skills across streams of academic study were then investigated using the Kruskal-Wallis tests. The Kruskal-Wallis results for academic language skills of the international NESB students

by streams of academic study indicated that there were no significant differences in all academic language skills and in the global performance. Since there was no significant difference between the academic language skills of the NESB students by streams of academic study, no post hoc comparisons were made.

Academic Language Skills of ADS and Non-ADS Students

The third research question dealt with the difference in the academic language skills between the ADS and non-ADS students. The descriptive statistics of the academic language skills in reading, listening, and writing, and the global performance by involvement with the ADS are presented in Table 5. The table shows that except for the academic listening skill, the medians of the other academic language skills and the global performance are the same. The table also shows that in general variability in the scores is more likely to occur in the non-ADS students.

	Academic language skills	N	Mean	Median	SD
ADS students	Reading	83	7.13	7	1.05
	Listening	83	6.78	7	0.78
	Writing	83	6.30	6	0.88
	Global	83	6.80	7	0.73
Non-ADS students	Reading	75	6.60	7	1.40
	Listening	75	7.37	8	1.27
	Writing	75	6.03	6	1.17
	Global	75	6.72	7	1.05

Table 5 Academic language skills by involvement with the ADS program

Further analysis was carried out to examine the difference in the academic language skills between the ADS and non-ADS students. A comparison of the medians indicated that the ADS students achieved the “good user” category in the academic reading and listening skills, and the global performance. In the academic writing skill, these students were included in the “competent user” category. Like the ADS-students, the non-ADS students were categorized as “competent users” in the academic writing skills. Furthermore, the non-ADS students reached the “good user” category

in the academic reading skill and in the global performance. The same group of students reached “very good user” category in the academic listening skill. Statistical analysis indicates that there were no significant differences between the ADS and non-ADS students in all academic language skills and in the global performance.

Relationship between Academic Language Skills

The last research question was aimed to examine whether there was a systematic relationship between the academic language skills in reading, listening, and writing. Given the purpose of the investigation, no classification was made for the DELA scores of the international NESB students. Therefore 158 scores of each academic language skill were used altogether. The descriptive statistics for the academic language skills of the international NESB students are given in Table 6. As the means and medians show, the academic writing skill is the lowest among the three academic language skills. In addition, the academic writing skill has the lowest minimum and maximum scores compared to the other academic language skills.

Academic language skills	N	Mean	Median	SD
Reading	158	6.88	7	1.25
Listening	158	7.07	7	1.08
Writing	158	6.17	6	1.04

Table 6 Academic language skills of all participants

The results of computations of the Spearman’s *rho* correlation coefficients using Minitab are presented in Table 7.

	Reading	Listening	Writing
Reading	--	0.56*	0.21*
Listening	0.56*	--	0.19
Writing	0.21*	0.19	--

* 1-tailed $p < .05$

Table 7 Correlation between academic language skills

Table 7 shows that there was a significant correlation between the academic reading skill and the academic listening skill [$\bar{r} = 0.56$, $df = 314$, p

< .05]. The correlation between these two skills was moderately strong. The table also shows that there was a significant correlation between the academic reading skill and the academic writing skill [$\bar{r} = 0.21$, $df = 314$, $p < .05$]. However, the correlation between these two skills was very weak. Additionally, there was no correlation between the academic listening skill and the academic writing skill [$\bar{r} = 0.19$, $df = 314$, n.s.].

DISCUSSION

As previously mentioned, the University of Melbourne requires that an international NESB student has an IELTS overall score of at least 6.5 in order to be admitted to study in the University. Research studies have shown that there was a low correlation between IELTS scores and academic success (as indicated by grade average) (Dooley and Oliver, 2002; Kerstjens and Nery, 2000; Hill, Storch, and Lynch, 1999). Therefore, data on the DELA test were used as a major source of information for a recommendation whether an international NESB student needs an academic language development program.

Assuming that a prospective student with an IELTS overall score of less than 6.5 would not be accepted in the admission process, the DELA score of 6 on a particular academic language skill would mean that a language development program should be recommended to the student on that skill. Therefore, the category of “good user” (or a score of 7 on the DELA test) might be considered as the threshold level that would ensure success in the students’ academic study.

The results from the study showed that international NESB students reached the threshold level in the academic language skills in reading and listening, and in the global performance (as measured by the DELA test). It was also found that there was a significant correlation between academic language skills in reading and in listening. Since the international NESB students reached the “good user” category (score 7) in these two academic language skills, the development of these two skills was not a priority. The assumption is that with the threshold level of academic language skills in reading and writing, the international NESB students would be able to work more independently to contribute to their academic success. Conversely, the international students reached the “competent user” category (score 6) in the academic writing skill. Therefore, with the assumption that international NESB students need supports from other people, a priority should be given

to the development of the international NESB students' academic language skill in writing.

According to Dooley and Oliver (2002), international students who did not fully meet language admissions criteria had the potential to succeed academically. With regard to these particular students, Dooley and Oliver (2002: 51) questioned "the extent to which these students sought and found measures to enhance their English language ability during their first undergraduate year". The results of the present study supported Dooley and Oliver's research findings in that international NESB students, especially those with academic language skill below the threshold level, need a program to develop the weak area of academic language skills. As results of this study show, the development of academic language skill should be accomplished through a program directly related to the development of academic writing skill. Such a program would be beneficial for all international NESB students, regardless of their course levels, streams of academic study, and involvement with the ADS Program.

As all international NESB students need the academic writing development program, the supports provided by the institutions in the University of Melbourne were likely to be useful. The Horwood Language Centre which provides supports through its five-week Introductory Academic Skills (IAS) Program aims to enable the students to write an essay and present it to audience. The CCS and ESL takes a role in this endeavor by offering supports through short courses and workshops such as "Academic Writing", "Editing Academic Writing", and "Plagiarism". Individual tutorials with appointments up to 8 times a year would provide a options for the international NESB students. The Learning Skills Unit with its related-to-writing supports and drop-in tutorials was likely to be needed by the international NESB students. Supports in essay writing, research report writing, and literature reviews are writing genres relevant with tasks assigned to university students (Moore and Morton, 1999).

Whereas a variety of academic writing development programs are available for all international NESB students, some programs are provided for postgraduate students. The CCS and ESL with its subjects for postgraduate students of particular academic fields (e.g. "Presenting Academic Discourse: Engineering Stream" (CCS and ESL, 2002b) and "Presenting Academic Discourse for Health Professionals" (CCS and ESL, 2002c) would support postgraduate students' need. The role in the provision of academic writing

skill within a particular academic study is in line with results of previous research. A study focussing on strategies for assisting students with language difficulties (Logan and Barthel, 1998: 107) indicated that language support helps students but “it is most effective when it is incorporated into their professional subjects”. Since so far “Presenting Academic Discourse” has been limited to the Engineering and Health Professionals academic fields, it would be beneficial if in the future the subject is also offered to international NESB students of other academic fields.

International NESB postgraduates could also get supports for the development of academic writing skill from the School of Graduate Studies (SGS). With its “Upskill Program” the SGS provides various short courses related to the development of academic language writing such as “Academic and Thesis Writing” and “Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing”, and “Writing, Style & Grammar” (School of Graduate Studies, 2002). The existence of the institutions offering various programs related to the development of academic writing skill would be helpful for international NESB students.

Whilst the results of the study showed that the international NESB students’ academic language skill in writing was below the threshold level, there were serious limitations which need to be addressed. First of all, the study used the IELTS criteria to interpret the results of the DELA test. Without information on the correlation of these two measures, the same scores of the DELA and the IELTS and might not reflect the same meaning. Therefore, the interpretation needs to be considered in light of this possibility.

Additionally, although the study suggested the importance of a language development program in academic writing skill, the academic language writing scores were based on the overall performance. For this reason, it was not possible to identify a writing component more specifically (such as grammar and vocabulary, fluency, or content) which needs to be given an emphasis in the academic language program.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the international NESB students’ academic language skills in reading, listening, and writing. The results from the study indicated that international NESB students of distinct categories reached the threshold level in the academic language skills in reading and listening as measured by the DELA test. This is likely to mean that the students could work more independently in the areas of reading and listening to contribute

success in their academic study. It is also revealed that the international NESB students' academic language skill in writing needs to be developed. Various programs available to develop academic language skill in writing would be useful for the international NESB students. It is suggested then that an attempt (or a mechanism) be made to ensure that the international NESB students do seek academic language supports through the available supporting institutions.

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