1.0 INTRODUCTION

An underlying promise made when admitting international students to a tertiary pathway program is that they will have the potential to succeed and articulate to a university. One of the essential factors contributing to fulfilling this promise is that each student will develop the necessary communication skills required for their courses. It is this basic tenet that underpins the continuous improvement approach described in this paper and provides the motivation to adopt a quality cycle based on co-ordination, intervention, and feedback.

The students referred to in this paper are those enrolled in pathway courses, that is, Certificate IV in University Studies and Diploma programs which are the equivalent of the first year of a university program. The core focus for both students and staff at the College is for the students to complete their Diploma, thereby gaining access to the second year of the university degree program. Typically this cohort of students may not have met either English or academic entry for direct admission to the university, and may enter the College at either Certificate or Diploma levels. On average, students are with the College for four trimesters, sometimes more, depending on their individual progress.

2.0 SETTING THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Whilst this paper is essentially a practical account of an approach to improve communication skills, there are some underlying core theories that inform practice. The reflection and critique on how students develop communication skills requires engagement from both administrative and academic staff. Specifically, admissions, marketing, and academic staff are all key stakeholders in setting entry requirements and ensuring that students have the potential to succeed. Forming a collective understanding about the importance of reflection and evaluation at the point of admissions through to classroom practice is an essential platform from which to begin. To this end, administrative and teaching staff collaborate in achieving the common objective to explore student outcomes in the development of communication skills.

Action research (AR) theory informs the theoretical context within which the above process can take place. This research perspective outlines a cyclical approach which allows the analysis of assumptions in the admissions process; their impact on classroom teaching and the needs of students; and action through intervention and evaluation. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) characterise Action research as “planning, acting, observing and reflecting more carefully, more systematically” (1988, p10), and that those involved undertake to:

- Develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening;
- Act to implement the plan;
- Observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs;
- Reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of cycles (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, p10).
Kemmis and McTaggart (1992), Mills (2003), McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003) and Holly, Arhar, Kasten (2005), provide a particular focus which facilitates a reflective approach to classroom research and improvement of practice through collaboration. “We collaborate with others to enhance the power of learning and we face the challenges we meet with action and analysis, sharing the results with others for critique” (Holly et al, 2005).

Mills (2003) suggests that to gain full insight into a situation that requires change or improvement “focusing on who, what, when, where and how …will clarify the area for the action research” (Mills 2003, p27). Adapting Mills’ advice the following questions formed a critique of the development of communication skills within the College.

- What evidence do we have that the development of communication skills is an issue that should be reviewed?
- Which students does this involve?
- How is the College making decisions about communication entry requirements?
- How are we teaching and supporting the development of communication skills?
- Who are the key stakeholders in this process?
- What outcomes do we want for our students?

The second underlying premise that underpins this Action research process is a common view held by teaching staff on second language learning and the acquisition of communication skills within a tertiary context. The approach adopted by the College is underpinned by the theory that language development and acquisition occurs within context. This axiom was adopted as best practice some years ago by Russell (1990) Gee (1990), Walvoord (1990, 1980), Ballard and Clanchy (1988) and Bock (1988). Gee maintained that “acquisition is explained as being exposure to models in natural, meaningful and functional settings” (Gee 1990, p154). In a recent interview on the ABC’s Lingua Franca, Alex Barthel, Director of the English Language Study Skills Assistance Centre affirmed that this theory continues to underpin best practice in the teaching of communication in a tertiary environment,

“…..because the reading and writing practices that students need to learn are specific to their discipline, these discipline-specific literacies are most effectively learned in conjunction with course content…..This kind of teaching leads to high quality learning for students and a high degree of equity as it reaches most of them” (Alex Barthel: are tertiary students competent in English? 2007).

An essential ingredient to the Action research at the level of classroom practice and curricula change is the engagement of communication skills teaching staff, and more importantly those involved in content teaching. There is also an underlying commitment from management that:

“language cannot be seen as an isolated event, but as a ‘conduit’ which is used to transmit and consolidate values and knowledge determined to be important by any one society or sub culture of that society, for example an academic institution” (Fiocco 1997 p14).

This view that students develop communication skills through an understanding of the tertiary subculture and its values is intrinsic to the way in which communication skills are taught in the College. The awareness that academic literacy skills cannot be taught or learnt in isolation is shared by teaching staff and embedded in our approach to student learning. As much as possible this methodology is adopted for formal communication units as well as support programs.
In order that a more systematic plan of observation and reflection could be implemented (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p 25), and that our teaching theories became embedded in practice, a formal approach emerged. This scrutiny commenced with assumptions and decisions made at the point of admissions, by a critique of delivery and curriculum and an examination of student performance. The processes that followed involved academic, admissions and marketing staff, and can be summarised as follows:

1. Question and formalise our perception of English proficiency;
2. Review/re-assess and determine English entry levels;
3. Review decisions/policies about entry levels;
4. Review the development of curriculum for core units;
5. Review the development of content for support programs;

Each step in the above process interacts and is interdependent in forming a continuous improvement cycle “committed to educational improvement…through systematic monitoring” (McNiff et al. 2003, p18). Each step is essential for interrogating every stage of the improvement cycle, and is essentially characterised by three fundamental elements in the cycle: Co-ordination, Intervention and Feedback.

3.0 CO-ORDINATION

The appointment of a Communication Skills Coordinator (CSC) position was an initial crucial step in ensuring that the collaborative process operated smoothly. Alex Barthel (Alex Barthel: are tertiary students competent in English? 2007) notes that “there is an urgent need to set up strong educational strategies” for students and that “the funds generated by overseas students are rarely invested in this additional support to students.” Not only was the appointment of a Coordinator a recognition of the need for an increased resource commitment on the part of the College, but it also represented a shift towards a more formalised and systematic approach to continuous improvement. For this to happen, it was essential that the Coordinator liaise closely with the academic, admissions and marketing staff to develop appropriate curriculum, policies and procedures.

3.1 Curriculum Development

One of the main responsibilities of the CSC was to review the content of units offered at the College. The aim was to develop core communication skills units and support programs which assisted students to develop the academic skills required for them to succeed at university. In addition, there was a recognition that support for developing academic skills also needed to be embedded within their discipline-specific units.

- Core Communications Units

There were two key factors taken into account when developing these units. One was a move away from a mode of instruction which focuses on the teaching of English grammar and vocabulary to a much broader approach to the acquisition of language. The focus shifted to the acquisition of a 'Discourse' which, according to Gee (1990), is:

A socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, behaving, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a
socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful role (p143).

A second factor was the acknowledgement that acquiring language is a developmental process which needs to be scaffolded. Therefore, the curriculum of the two Communications units was revised to reflect a lock-step, developmental approach to improving the communication skills of the students, one unit building on the content of the other. An on-going process of review and evaluation resulted in a focus on the teaching of generic skills, such as referencing, paraphrasing, critical reading strategies and academic writing which catered to the needs of students in a range of disciplines. The content of these units not only made the students more motivated because they perceived the content as directly relevant to their course, but also ensured that the College was more adequately preparing the students for the transition to university.

- **Core Content Units**

Core subject teachers tend to have very different views on their role in developing the communication skills required for their discipline. Many view the development of this kind of literacy, particularly for international students, as a 'problem' that needs to be 'fixed' by an 'outside' person. It became quite clear that professional development of teaching staff in dealing with issues such as developing writing and speaking skills, paraphrasing and referencing skills was going to be an important part of the continuous improvement cycle. This observation led to the implementation of several voluntary professional development seminars for lecturing staff. Teaching materials were developed to assist lecturers in their classroom practices in an attempt to embed key communication skills into the content and assessment structure of the units. The CSC also worked collaboratively with core unit lecturers by providing students with individual assistance on assignment preparation and presentation. With reinforcement presented by the CSC as well as the content lecturers students cannot ignore the importance of improving their communication skills.

- **Support Programs**

Currently, the College offers two adjunct support programs: The English Development Program (EDP) and the Study Skills Program. The EDP program focuses on the development of writing skills intrinsic to the core units, while the Study Skills focuses on developing academic skills such as critical reading and note-taking, referencing and exam preparation. The support classes are promoted through a variety of channels. However, the most effective strategy has been the more formalised approach to informing all stakeholders of these programs: students; admissions and academic staff; and lecturers. Greater awareness of the content and delivery of these programs has been established. Furthermore, monitoring of attendance and performance of the students is undertaken and observations are used for reflection and review.

- **Individual Assistance**

Individual consultations with students who require support with study and/or language skills are provided. The CSC works closely with lecturers in core units who must refer students. This referral system is essential to maintain open communication between the CSC and lecturer and to monitor the number of students seeking assistance. Apart from facilitating the development of students' communication skills, these consultations provide the CSC with an opportunity to gain valuable feedback about the students' level and performance and any intervention which may be required.
3.2 Admissions Policies

The English proficiency levels of international students in Australia and the extent to which standards are maintained have come under increased scrutiny recently. It is important to note that, while English levels are an important factor in a student’s performance, there are many other factors at play which make analysis and evaluation of the role of English in determining academic performance a complex issue.

In terms of Marketing and Admissions, the coordination process at the College has led to greater involvement by the CSC in monitoring and reviewing admissions policies relating to English entry requirements. All too often, academic results are not compatible with IELTS scores or ELICOS levels. Alternatively, IELTS scores are often not compatible with ELICOS levels, and ELICOS levels may not be comparable across different providers. In addition there is often the issue that if students are denied entry into a particular course at a particular time, they may have to wait another year for an entry point. It is not inaccurate to describe this process as a balancing act to bring about the best outcome for the student.

In order to ensure this decision making process is reviewed critically and the best outcome is achieved for students, the Coordinator is instrumental in investigating the relationships between English entry levels, academic performance, and its relationship to admissions. This has proven to be a challenging process as it is difficult to isolate the role of English language competency as a factor influencing academic performance. Although it is still early days, more comprehensive information is being gathered about the nature of the different English language pathways and the minimum levels required to enter particular courses. This is being continually discussed and revised with marketing and admissions staff.

This level of coordination has led to increased communication between the academic, admissions and marketing staff and an effective process of negotiation between all parties has been established in an attempt to meet the interests and goals of all stakeholders.

Developing communication channels as an avenue to discussing objectives, developing a plan and reflecting on the plan cannot be underestimated. Closer links between all stakeholders have been established.

4.0 INTERVENTION

An essential part of the continuous improvement cycle is on-going intervention to ensure that the key processes and objectives of the overall plan are being implemented, to determine to what extent they are working and to decide on appropriate courses of action to address any problems which arise. This intervention is primarily student-focused.

- Initial Intervention

As part of the College’s early intervention strategy in relation to communication skills, a diagnostic exercise was introduced for all new students. The rationale for this exercise is to apply one common English assessment tool which overcomes the various English pathways with which students present. More importantly it was also recognition that student self-selection for support programs is inadequate for those that might be at risk. The diagnostic exercise represents an additional alternative to ascertain English levels and assists in identifying students who require extra language support. This ‘early warning system’ has led to an increased uptake in the support programs and better counselling of students.
Intermediate and On-going Intervention

The more formalised approach adopted at the College led to the realisation that there was a need for further refinement of the monitoring of student performance. While student attendance and progress has always been vigilantly checked, the process has been enhanced through the establishment of an on-line tracking system referred to as ENGTRAX, which contains information imported from student records. This information is entered by the Admissions Department. ENGTRAX records key data about every student enrolled at the College such as their ID, nationality, course of study, English entry level and results achieved. Students are placed into categories according to various criteria, such as “identified as needing EDP”, “completed support program”, “failed communications I” and so on. This allows the CSC to track students throughout their course and facilitates communication with students. The data in ENGTRAX has been used to produce reports showing correlations between selected variables such as English entry and performance, completed English support and performance, which assist in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the decisions being made related to Communication Skills.

Furthermore, ENGTRAX is accessible to other student advisors who deal with issues such as student attendance and progress. Thus, intervention becomes a much more comprehensive and accurate process because the system allows different sections to ‘speak’ to one another, hence ‘closing the loop’ of student performance, attendance and welfare.

5.0 FEEDBACK

Evaluating the effectiveness of the plan would not be possible without opportunities for comprehensive and relevant feedback to critically inform ‘Coordination’ and ‘Intervention’. In terms of action research, feedback is necessary to observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs. “Observation has the function of documenting the effects of critically informed action – it looks forward, providing the basis for reflection now, but more so in the immediate future as the present cycle runs its course” (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, p13). It is the role of the CSC to ensure that this feedback is delivered to all relevant stakeholders.

5.1 COLLEAGUES

Academic staff and lecturers

The issue of communication skills has attained a higher profile within the organisation as a result of regular communication with academic and lecturing staff. In the Academic Department, feedback is provided through weekly academic staff meetings and academic reports which include statistics such as the number of classes offered, student attendance, retention rates as well as student results. Academic notes recorded for all students and ENGTRAX allow all members of the Academic department to monitor a student’s progress and they serve as a basis for review of course structure, curricula, and methodologies. The CSC provides feedback on Communications units and support classes, in particular.

Lecturers are encouraged to provide on-going formal and informal feedback to the academic department. Active participation in the appraisal of the Communications units, support programs and discipline-specific units has been encouraged and this has led to improved curricula and delivery. Feedback on the relationship between student performance and English language skills
is obtained as part of the intervention policy and this has enabled more effective counselling of students.

- Admissions and Marketing

The Admissions and Marketing Departments and the Communication Skills Coordinator are involved in regular formal and informal communication regarding English entry level policies and procedures. This has led to an active critique and dialogue between the Marketing and Admissions staff and the CSC. With all stakeholders there is a greater awareness of: the nature of the different entry levels; the admissions processes and the importance of timing in decisions about how students are placed; the recognition of the need to more accurately record English entry levels; and the support and confidence that the implementation of a diagnostic exercise can bring to all parties.

5.2 STUDENTS

The perceptions and experiences of students are invaluable in reviewing the quality cycle, despite the fact that there may be limitations to this form of evaluation. The College Portal represents the most efficient form of communication between the College and students so this has been developed to access feedback from students on issues relating to communication skills. On-line student surveys, as well as written unit evaluation forms, reveal that students value the support classes highly. Student attendance in both the support classes and individual consultations are recorded and are indicative of the students’ assessment of these courses. Reports comparing the performance of students identified as needing support and who undertake support programs and those students who do not, despite being identified as weak, show that success rates are higher for those who complete support programs. However, it must be noted that these students tend to be the highly motivated so it is also difficult to isolate whether it was the support program itself which has led to the better performance. Feedback from students who have completed CIC courses and are now undertaking University courses has revealed that, despite the fact that they may still experience language problems, the academic communication skills acquired at CIC have prepared them well for their studies.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed a systematic approach to unravelling the complexity of developing communication skills for international students, and the decisions we make based on these skills. It is a core issue which affects the choices and judgements made by marketing, admissions and teaching staff in day to day operations. For those of us who are involved in the recruitment and teaching of international students the enormity of this issue has never escaped our focus. It is therefore appropriate to explore ways in which we can critically evaluate and move forward in a continuous improvement cycle. For our purposes the Action research paradigm has provided this framework.

The importance of the three integral processes of the cycle, co-ordination, intervention and feedback, cannot be underestimated. Each one of these processes depends on the other for a successful outcome; each interacts and contributes equally to improve communication skills in our students. All staff involved in the three processes have an equal contribution and the positive outcomes are worthy of note:

- The development of communication skills is a focus and concern of all involved key stakeholders, both administrative and academic;
All these staff are engaged in discussion on how communication skills are best developed;
These key stakeholders are engaged in discussion of admission policies;
The level of understanding developed between staff across administrative and academic areas has been invaluable
Student feedback indicates we are following the correct path.

The intent of this paper has not been to describe a perfect picture, but merely a work in progress. There are issues that will always throw us off balance, and give cause for questioning, that is the nature of second language learning and delivery. However, the key lesson for us all is that critical, systematic reflection can contribute to collective experience; inform practice and challenge assumptions; and, very importantly, improve outcomes.

**Bibliography**

*Alex Barthe: are tertiary students competent in English? (2007) ABC Radio National, 24 February.*


