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Paper: Tracking Language Test Consequences: The Student Perspective

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Abstract

This study is set in the University of Auckland (NZ), a large tertiary institution with a high proportion of EAL students, and is part of an ongoing validation of the Diagnostic English Language Needs Analysis (DELNA). It sets out to examine the consequential validity of DELNA which is administered post-entry to EAL students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in academic English and advise them on appropriate language support. The findings show that while all the interviewees took up some form of language support, it often did not accord with the advice they had been given, and was unlikely to address their real needs. The study suggests that one-on-one advice post-DELNA and close monitoring of EAL students' workload and progress during the academic year are necessary to ensure satisfactory outcomes. It also concludes that academic success for such students is achieved only at considerable, intellectual, emotional and financial cost.

Paper

The issue of test validity has become broader and more complex over the past two decades, moving away from the traditional notion of different types of validity (i.e. content, construct, concurrent, predictive and possibly face validity) which were seen as properties of the test, towards an expanded view of validity as resting on multiple sources of evidence including those relating to the situation in which the test is used. A central figure in this rethinking of the validity concept is Messick (1989) who, as McNamara (2000) points out, stresses the importance of taking account of the impact of the test itself and the changes produced by its implementation. The term 'consequential validity' is now widely used with reference to these aspects of test use and is the focus of the current study, which is one of a series undertaken as part of an ongoing validation of an English for academic purposes (EAP) assessment administered post-entry at the University of Auckland, New Zealand (Davies and Elder, forthcoming).

The assessment in question, DELNA, the diagnostic English language needs assessment, was introduced for the purpose of identifying students whose progress at the University might be jeopardized because of their inadequate grasp of academic English. The influx of international students since 2001, when numbers totalled 8246 and by March 2002 stood at 14,026, has had a major impact on NZ universities (Elder, Smith & Bright, 2003; Pickering & Hunter, 2002). Not all our English as an additional language (EAL) students, however, come into this category. Some with their families have become NZ citizens; others have immigrated and become permanent residents. Some form of assessment had become necessary, then, because of the large numbers of students at the University of Auckland with "a more complex language profile" (Kirkness, 2003: 45). Their different educational experience and their different exposure to English means that they present as

Elder et al (p.2) point out “special linguistic and cultural challenges to their receiving institutions” Even those who had been through the NZ school system were not required to present an English qualification for entrance to university. It is worth noting that as of 2005 all students seeking entrance to universities in NZ must present 8 credits in English literacy from the National Certificate of Education Achievement (NCEA). This will begin to impact on the number of DELNA assessments in the next three to four years. In the meantime there are many students, both from English-speaking backgrounds (ESB) and EAL, who can benefit from this diagnosis.

DELNA is a two-tiered procedure: the first tier, made up of two tasks, academic vocabulary and text-editing, is delivered online and is designed to filter out students (particularly in courses where there are large numbers of ESB students) whose language proficiency is appropriate for academic study. The second tier includes a listening, reading and writing component developed in conjunction with the Language Testing Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. It assesses students’ academic English skills in greater depth so that their strengths and weaknesses can be highlighted. Performance is reported on a 6-point scale, with a descriptive profile for each skill area and a recommendation of possible language support. It is important to emphasise that DELNA is a diagnostic assessment. It was not designed as a selection tool and may not be used as such. Students are assured that their results do not appear on their academic record and that it is in place to guide them to language support where needed, to increase their chances of success in their studies.

Our study set out to track the post-test consequences of DELNA by finding out whether students actually acted on the advice they received after they had done the assessment. We were interested to know whether DELNA was fulfilling its purpose of encouraging students to use the information about their language proficiency constructively and take up appropriate language support. We wanted to listen to what the students themselves had to say about DELNA and the advice they received.

We drew up, therefore, the following research questions which all relate to the impact of DELNA on the stakeholders, including the students who take the test and those who teach them:

Research questions

1. How do students react to receiving advice that they should seek language support?
2. Do they respond constructively to the advice offered?
3. To what extent do they perceive language skills to have been an obstacle to their academic progress?

The 18 students who took part in our study had all taken DELNA in 2003. They were part of a group of 225 students who completed the anonymous online evaluation at the end of the semester in which they had taken the assessment. Sixty of these students gave their contact details for follow-up and 18 were available to do a half-hour recorded interview. The aim of gathering naturalistic interview data is, as Lynch (1996: 131) says, “to arrive at the participants’ perspective on the programme in their own words”, and it is the voices of these 18 students that you are going to hear.

Table 1: **Demographic Information**

Student	Residency Status	Ave. Band	1st Lang	Years in NZ	NZ School	Faculty	Undergrad/ Postgrad
1	PR	6	Chinese	1		Theo	UG
2	PR	5	Chinese	4		Arts	UG
3	INT	7	Punjabi	.5		B & Ec	PG
4	PR	7	Chinese	.5		Law	UG

5	INT	6	Chinese	.5		Arts	PG
6	PR	6	French	3		Arts	UG
7	PR	6	Chinese	1		Arts	PG
8	INT	7	Chinese	1		B & Ec	PG
9	PR	6	Russian	2		Arts	PG
10	NZ	8	English	31	2	Arts	UG
11	INT	6	Chinese	6		Arts	UG
12	NZ	6	Chinese	14	5	Arts	PG
13	PR	7	Japanese	1		B & Ec	UG
14	PR	7	Hokkien/Malay	22	5	B & Ec	UG
15	NZ	8	Chinese	6	4	B & Ec	UG
16	PR	6	Hebrew	2		Arts	PG
17	PR	5	Chinese	1		B & Ec	PG
18	INT	6	Indonesian	.5		Arts	UG

You will see from the demographic details that they represented quite a range of disciplines and study backgrounds and included one ESB student.

Their DELNA band averages ranged from 4.7 to 8.1. These are explained below. While we know that language proficiency is only one of the many factors contributing to academic success, we believe that “there is a threshold of proficiency at or below which students are highly likely to fail in one or other of their first year subjects.” (Elder, 2003:15). Students who have a DELNA Band score of 4 or 5 in one of their skills are likely to be in this category and we suggest that they undertake sustained English language instruction. They may do this, at a financial cost, in the form of ESOL credit courses. We can report that, of the 2040 students who did DELNA in 2003, 23.5% of those who scored in Bands 4 and 5 failed papers compared with 8.7% of those in Band 6, 8.2% in Band 7 and 7.1% in Bands 8 & 9. (Elder & von Randow, 2003: 13).

DELNA bands

- 4. At severe risk, urgent need of English language instruction
- 5. At risk, needs extensive English language instruction
- 6. Needs concurrent English language instruction
- 7. May benefit from further English language support
- 8 & 9. Unlikely to require English language support

What findings then did our study produce? Firstly we discovered that while all the interviewees took up some form of language support, it often did not accord with the advice they had been given, and was in many cases sporadic and unfocussed in nature and unlikely to address their real needs in terms of academic language proficiency. And secondly, while many interviewees saw their intense workload as the main reason for this limited uptake of language support, we concluded that one-on-one advice post-DELNA, and counselling and a close monitoring of their workload and progress during the academic year would have meant a more realistic programme of academic study and language support.

Research Question 1: How do students react to receiving advice that they should seek language support?

We asked our interviewees two questions:

Do you think that DELNA was a reasonably accurate assessment of your English language proficiency?

Twelve of the 18 students agreed. Of the other six, two interviewees felt that “test anxiety” accounted for their results and a third thought that he had taken the assessment too casually. The ESB student felt her result was too high and two respondents gave no clear answer.

How did you feel when you got your DELNA profile and it suggested that you get some English language support?

Because three of the interviewees had been advised that their language skills were appropriate for university study, responses to the second question came from only 15 students. Reaction to the suggestion that they seek language support was mixed. Seven of the students reacted positively but four reacted negatively and four gave no clear answer. One respondent commented:

“To be honest I was annoyed because I thought I am too busy doing all the assignments and trying to cope with the life here.”

So while the majority agreed with the DELNA results, fewer took a positive view of the language advice given, a reaction reflected in the following findings about uptake of language support.

Research Question 2: Do they respond constructively to the advice offered?

We first asked the 15 students who were advised to seek some form of language support what they had done. Our main finding here was that all of these students took up some form of English language support, though, on the whole, not that advised on their DELNA profile and not necessarily for any significant length of time. We have analysed their responses in terms of the course of action recommended by DELNA.

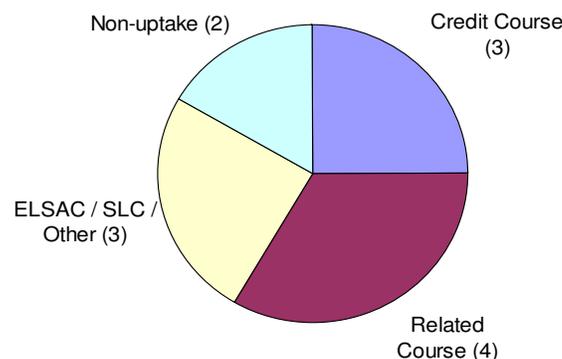


Figure 1: Recommended to take credit course

As you see from the graph above, twelve students were advised to take English language credit courses (i.e. sustained English language instruction in their weak skill/s) and only three followed this advice. Of the others, four were doing English courses, but not academic English skills courses, as part of their degree programmes, and one was attending tutorials within his programme. This last student experienced intense frustration during the tutorials because he understood very little and could not participate as he had hoped. His comment “I feel academically isolated at this University” captures his despair. Two of the students reported they did not have time to include anything other than brief visits to the SLC or ELSAC and two had no time for any extra language study, reflecting the theme of workload, which featured strongly in all the interviews.

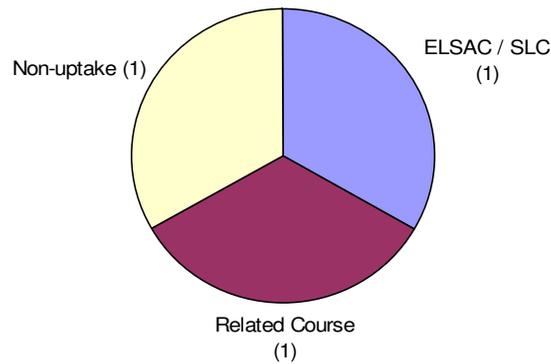


Figure 2: **Recommended to visit the SLC and ELSAC**

Three students were advised to work on their language skills at ELSAC and the SLC, and one took up this advice. A second was following an English-related course within her major, and the third didn't use either service.

You will see from the next graph that in summary the uptake of recommended language support was not high.

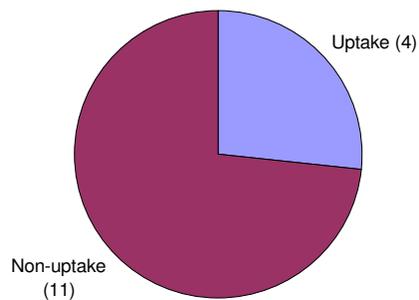


Figure 3: **Uptake / Non-uptake**

The 12 students recommended to take credit courses were also advised of the services of ELSAC and the SLC. Opinions in our group about the benefits of support provided were mixed and, in fact, many interviewees paid only a single visit.

"That was the first and last time I was there because what they're providing is quite a passive study method."

Others saw the benefits of these services and perhaps the strongest recommendation came from the ESB interviewee. She commented:



"[The SLC was] very helpful, it gave me some good ideas to try for my assignments [...] It would be helpful if each faculty told people about [it]. It is such a simple thing: if people need help, it is not threatening, I found it really helpful."

But another comment summed up a more common view amongst our respondents:

"I know that ELSAC is quite good but if I don't have time to go there then it is useless".

There was one student who thought that a very short course, 'just a few weeks, as simple as that', at ELSAC was all that students needed and this comment encapsulated the unrealistic expectations of a number of our interviewees: they were critical of the use of tutors whose first language wasn't English, they felt they could not profit from working with other EAL students and they were disappointed that the tutor would not correct their work.

On the other hand, some students found other interesting and resourceful ways outside the university to increase their proficiency – but note that most of these solutions are not necessarily going to add to the academic literacy they require to succeed at university:

- Local Community Education English/drama classes
- Interpreters' course
- Talking books
- Newspapers
- Working in café
- Working with English language home tutors
- Marrying a 'kiwi'

A second question we asked in this section of the interview was what further help the University could offer. Here the expectation came through clearly that the DELNA profiles should have been followed up by more personalised advice in a one-on-one session.

- "a personal assessment, a bit more direction...."
- "I need some follow-up communication after the test."
- "If someone from DELNA can give us some suggestion...."

Another expectation was that departments would follow up the DELNA results with the provision of appropriate language support, especially in two areas: speaking and writing.

In relation to speaking, three themes emerged quite strongly. Firstly interviewees felt that departments should offer help with pronunciation and provide opportunities to interact with their fellow-students who were native speakers. They voiced embarrassment about their speaking because of possible errors in pronunciation (and in grammar) and it was clear there was a conflict between their desire to engage in conversation with local students and their real embarrassment if they could not be readily understood in such situations. They saw a role for the department in organising buddies and study groups, which would provide contact between ESB and EAL students and allow the EAL students to improve their oral and aural skills.

One student expressed her diffidence about speaking with native speakers in this way:

"I have to search for someone to speak English ... I never give up but I think I need to be more brave".

"I feel like an idiot," said another. "I just say pardon, pardon all the time".

In her study at the Auckland University of Technology, Kirkness (2003:51) also found that students are “self-conscious about their accents and worry that they are incomprehensible.” Where language limitations discouraged EAL students from interacting with the local people, they noted an increase in their sense of isolation and a corresponding decrease in their confidence to engage in conversation in English.

A second theme was one of departmental expectations when it came to writing. Our interviewees felt that lecturers should take time to make clear what they expected for assignments and for examination answers. This is, of course, not so much a linguistic issue as one of understanding the academic conventions of the discipline. But it was a real issue for several of our interview group. A related concern was with the discipline-specific vocabulary of their subject. One respondent expressed it this way when discussing her studies in Anthropology and Sociology:

“I had the feeling that every day I was learning two, three four languages”.

A third issue for students was the greater part that departmental staff could play in helping their EAL students to find the appropriate language support. They felt that lecturers and tutors were not always helpful or supportive and that their comments on the students’ language were often generalised and vague. Yet academic staff, they pointed out, were in a good position when marking assignment work to look at their EAL students’ needs and direct them to services available within the department or wider university.

Research Question 3: To what extent do they perceive language skills to have been an obstacle to their academic progress?

In order to find answers to Research Question 3, in our interviews we asked three questions:

1. “Do you think language skills have been an obstacle to your academic progress?”
2. “What was the most difficult or challenging experience you had in your studies this year?”
3. “Is ability in English important for you in getting a job?”

When asked to evaluate their English language ability as a factor in their academic progress, the responses generally followed the prediction of their DELNA scores. That is, those students whose scores were in Bands 4, 5 or 6, saw their language ability as having an adverse influence on their academic achievement; the linguistically stronger respondents saw less effect from language limitations. Yet while students generally accepted the accuracy of their DELNA scores and acknowledged that language proficiency could affect their academic progress, they seem to have been less willing or able to take steps to improve it.

GPAs

The DELNA results of at least 12 of these students predicted that they were likely to have difficulties in their studies and that they should take language support to increase their chances of success. You will note in Table 2 the number of C passes.

Table 2: DELNA scores and GPAs

STUDENT	DELNA – Average Band	CURRENT GPA Sem 2 03	CUMULATIVE GPA Sem 2 03
1	5.7	B	C+
2	5.3	B-	C+
3	7.2	B+	B
4	6.7	NA	NA
5	6.4	B-	C+

6	6.1	B	B-
7	6.1	B	B
8	7.2	B	B-
9	6.3	B	B-
10	8.1	B	B
11	5.7	B-	C+
12	6.1	C+	C
13	7	B	B
14	7.1	C	C+
15	8	A-	A-
16	6	NA	NA
17	5	C+	C+
18	6.3	C	C

In answers to the question that followed on their most difficult or challenging experience during the year, many answers reflected the concerns already discussed earlier: the skill areas of writing and speaking were again specified as significant problems with particular reference to writing in assignments and exams and speaking in tutorials and presentations. Reading was a problem, not just in terms of vocabulary but also in terms of time (taking three times as long as their ESB peers, according to two of the students). Interestingly listening was the main challenge for only one respondent.

But other, more general situations were mentioned as the greatest challenge for two of the students. One cited workload, a comment repeatedly heard in response to earlier questions, while another spoke of 'cultural isolation', the difficulties of dealing with everyday problems. This was a less predictable response but the comments here show how language constraints reach out into all aspects of life and indirectly affect one's study and one's sense of identity.

Here are some comments from our group:

"As an overseas student I find the most difficult things is not study. It is living, cause I have to [go] by bus to supermarket shopping. I have to move nearly three times because [of] my landlord. And I don't like unsettledness because it affect my study."

And again: "Like the bus driver on the bus, he speaks very quickly and I can't understand. I have to struggle to ask them, 'Could you repeat again?' or 'Excuse me?' ... but I want to survive in this new society, I have to struggle to find my suitable place in this society."

This last comment echoes the emphasis that several students put on integrating themselves in New Zealand and making a contribution to their new society.

When we asked the students to describe their year's experience metaphorically, the common images were of drowning, struggling in water, being buried alive, searching for light at the end of the tunnel, trudging wearily uphill and desperation.

"If my English is not good enough, I have to be buried in the ground. Yes, to be buried underground. I am lonely, no friends around, no support people. No people can understand me. I am buried. I am trying my best to stand out and to stretch my life and to breathe the fresh air and to feel joy in my new life here."

Where DELNA scores indicated that these students were going to meet with difficulties in their studies, their own reports confirm that this was indeed the case. Banerjee's (2003: 394) study of EAL students at Lancaster University also shows "that a student's initial language proficiency is a good predictor of the nature of the student's study experience and the nature and the severity of the 'cost' experienced." While five students in our study failed some courses, most did not. Passing them, however, came at some "cost": financial cost is involved if students take up language support in the form of ESOL credit courses, but here we refer to "cost" in the sense identified by Banerjee, in terms of time, effort, stress, isolation and embarrassment. For post-graduate students, who have already had success at university, this is particularly painful. Banerjee also points out that "few fail Masters Courses but lack of language proficiency may prevent students performing as well as they could."(p.25) When students cannot reach their potential, then the lowered quality of their university experience is a 'cost'.

The final question in the interview asked whether ability in English was important in getting a job. Those who answered this question were almost unanimous in replying 'yes', whether they intended to stay in this country as permanent residents or citizens, or to return to find work in their home country. Again it was interesting to us that on the one hand they all believed that English language proficiency was vital for them, but on the other hand they were generally not keen to take up the language support options to improve it.

Before discussing our conclusions, it is important to address the apparent limitations of our findings, based as they are on a sample of 18 students who were motivated to come in to talk to us. We would, however, argue that, in return, we gained depth of information. As Banerjee (2003: 45) points out, qualitative data "has the potential to be rich and to explore the issues in great detail". Furthermore we argue, that in this case we can generalise our findings as they are consistent with the results from the two previous DELNA evaluations. Of the 225 students who completed the evaluation in 2003, only 22% had taken up language support post DELNA; in 2002 only 32% followed the advice. Again the themes were pressure of time, workload and coping with the new academic environment. The conclusions that follow, then, appear to reflect a wider picture.

Conclusion 1

The lack of specific one-on-one advice and counselling following DELNA appears to have been a major factor in students not accessing language support services constructively.

Conclusion 2

EAL students with a DELNA band of 4, 5 or 6 appear to be particularly vulnerable in their first year of university and would benefit from regular counselling and close monitoring of their workload and progress through their department, for example, by a staff member with this specific responsibility.

Conclusion 3

Departments and their academic staff may not be taking advantage of the unique position they are in to guide and provide support for EAL students and to facilitate positive interaction between ESB and EAL students in their courses.

Conclusion 4

EAL students with limited language proficiency may pass their university courses but at considerable 'cost' in terms of time, effort and emotional stress.

It is clear that presenting students with their DELNA profiles is not in itself enough to ensure that they will act on the advice. The specific purpose of DELNA is to highlight students' strengths and weaknesses in academic English in order to advise them about appropriate language support. If, as our study suggests, uptake of this advice is limited, then DELNA's purpose is not being fulfilled. It is clear that the identification of language needs is merely a first step in a more complex process. A second step would be to set up personal interviews with students post-DELNA so that they have the opportunity to discuss what their results imply for progress in their studies and what services are available for them to work on any areas of linguistic weakness. An important third step in the post-DELNA process would be for departments to provide counselling and close monitoring of the workload and progress of "at risk" students.

While taking DELNA alerted our 18 students to their linguistic weaknesses, the consequences were minimal, in that the majority did not follow the advice given on their DELNA profiles. A closer look at the context sheds some light. For some course workload prevented their taking on any additional commitments, for others lack of one on one counselling seems to have been the reason for their piecemeal response and we may speculate that some felt being admitted to university was a sufficient acknowledgement of their language proficiency.

If DELNA is to be judged by the student uptake of advice then it is found wanting. On the other hand, the impact of DELNA on faculties and departments and the positive changes that are being made have been considerable. In 2002, the pilot year, there were 1111 assessments, in 2003, 2040 and thus far in 2003, 5106. Many courses in which there are high numbers of EAL students require students to take the screening and follow it with the diagnosis if they do not reach the cut score. Each semester more courses ask to have their students "delnaed".

Increasing numbers of courses are mounting content-based language tutorials for students whose DELNA scores identify them as being "at risk" – the Business and Economics Faculty, a faculty with significant numbers of EAL students, has been the frontrunner and, indeed, the model for other faculties. In 2005 Engineering will follow this model. The School of Theology requires students who do not give evidence of English language proficiency to do DELNA and then invites them to a Saturday morning English for Theology course run all semester. EAL students in the Department of Film, Television and Media Studies are able to attend special language tutorials for them, as well as mainstream tutorials.

Attendance at the special language tutorials mounted for EAL students identified by DELNA as needing help is, however, not yet consistently high. The role of the language advisors and mentors, which we proposed in our conclusions, should be to encourage students to take the support on offer and to monitor their uptake.

In concluding we would argue that the whole university experience is richer when language skills improve and intellectual and social isolation are reduced. A Language Support Taskforce which has addressed these issues at the University of Auckland will make its recommendations this month. While their recommendations and ours represent a considerable financial commitment, this, as Hughes (2004a) has said in the context of the University of Nottingham, "is an investment, not an expense."

Inevitably this study has raised further questions that should be addressed. The first is whether even exposure to a sustained course of language improvement over a semester or a year will be enough for weaker EAL students, those scoring in Bands 4 & 5 in DELNA, for example. In such cases, would intensive full-time English instruction be a better answer, rather than necessarily less intensive language help? Hughes (2004b) questions the advisability of "remediating English at the



same time as studying for a degree”. However, the “cost” factor has made students at the UoA loath to take the foundation studies path.

This raises a second question of whether tertiary institutions should be enrolling students with such low language levels, since relatively large numbers of these students have such difficulties in their tertiary study. In the present economic climate this may not be a popular path to follow. But, as we have shown, there are costs for all stakeholders in the present situation.

We know that language acquisition is a long-term undertaking. At least two of our students understood this and we would like to leave the last word to them.

“It’s like looking after a plant . . . I didn’t notice any progress but at the end ... little by little... I’ve got huge progress.”

“My comparison would be similar to exercise because you don’t need to speak perfect English to do uni work or interact with someone, but it would be better if you can speak better English, so you can speak more efficiently and effectively. Exactly the same thing; you don’t have to exercise and daily living is good enough, but if you go to the gym your body is better for sure.”

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