



Prospective students' expectations of academic language and learning support to be provided to them at La Trobe University

By Usha Rao, Principal, Language Programs, La Trobe University International College, Victoria 3086

This short presentation is a report on a small research project carried out at La Trobe University International College (LTUIC) in September, 2009, to gauge the expectations of the students in regard to the academic language and learning support available for them at La Trobe University (LTU). The students, enrolled in English for Further Study (EFS) direct entry program at LTUIC, are aware, from information given to them and from reading on the LTU website, of what support is generally available; however, the survey, was carried out to elicit what they would like to be offered to them to assist them to be successful in their principal courses.

Background of the students

All the students surveyed have conditional offers to study at LTU. A large number of these students have been studying at LTUIC for 6 months or more, and at the time of the survey being conducted, they were in the last 10 to 20 weeks of their English language study. When the students have successfully completed EFS Advanced course at LTUIC they will have achieved the minimum English Language requirement to the degree course of their choice at La Trobe University. However, as they will have only achieved the minimum requirement, some students may need further support in English language when they begin their University course. On starting their University course, the students may also seek assistance off-campus or get support from their network of friends.

To ensure that they get the most from their studies at LTU, the students are encouraged to start thinking about the areas in which they may need further support. Language and Academic Support Units at the University, including those from faculties, provide this information for the LTUIC students. As stated above, information is also available on the University website. Student Advisors at LTUIC assist the students in planning for their future study.

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data, and the responses were validated by qualitative methods of focus group discussions and interviews with the students. The survey was distributed to 330 students in the EFS program at LTUIC. The questions were drawn from the ESL teachers' perceived needs of their students even after they have fulfilled the English language requirements of the principal courses that the students will be enrolling in at LTU. The respondents were all of Upper Intermediate and Advanced levels of English proficiency. They have offers from LTU to start their degree programs in February-March, 2010 provided they meet LTU's minimum English level requirements for their relevant courses.

Literature

The report of the Good Practice Principles (GPP) for English Language Proficiency for International Students in Australian Universities (DEEWR Project) was referred to. Each of the ten questions on the survey questionnaire was related to a corresponding Principle of that number on the GPP. The other two papers referred to were from the English Australia Conference, 2009. These were: Griffith University's Pamela Humphrey's presentation on IELTS 'capstone' testing trial: outcomes and implications, and the presentation by Dr Sophia Arkoudis of University of Melbourne on Developing and monitoring English language proficiency: issues and challenges.

Findings

261 students responded to the survey. Unfortunately, not all the questions received responses from every respondent. Of the respondents, 167 were of Upper Intermediate level and ninety four were from Advanced classes. 108 stated that their University offer was for a post graduate course and 142 were going into undergraduate courses. 64% of the students felt that they would require further assistance in English after they had started their principal courses.

The largest number thought that this support would have to be through resources provided in academic writing, followed by speaking and vocabulary expansion. For direct assistance, with a tutor, the highest number chose editing written work and help with oral and written assignments. Remarkably, the same areas of English language preparation, that is academic writing and oral presentations, were chosen as those that the EFS program was preparing them well in for their formal study. 87% of the students stated that they would like to choose English as a second language as one of their credit bearing subjects.

According to this survey, a large majority of students would like on-line tests with feedback made available for self assessment of their English level and areas of weakness, at any time of their university study. This, they felt, should be supported by on-line resources for self-help. Capstone testing of English was not a popular choice on this survey.

In developing speaking skills, conversation in social gatherings and the opportunity to be in activities with native Australians received the highest responses.

The findings from the survey of the students were compared with what is actually offered by various Language and Academic Support Units at La Trobe University. The following areas emerged as some of those in which, at present, LTU does not provide direct support to international students:

- Testing of English language level of degree students
- English language instruction specific to the areas of study in degree programs
- Opportunities for volunteer work/internships/work placements for all students
- Surveys of students to gather information about activities at LTU.

Conclusions

The survey confirmed that despite the instruction provided at LTUIC in academic writing, a large majority of students feel that they need more support in this area.

Conversation groups with native speakers of English and on-line surveys of students to gather information about them are also preferred.

Recommendations

To enrich the advanced level ELICOS course, English for Further Study at LTUIC, it is highly recommended that the following areas receive more attention:

- Editing of written work
- Writing assignment tasks
- Seminar presentations
- Speaking opportunities with native speakers of English
- Expansion of English vocabulary directly related to specific areas of study

It is hoped that some of the findings will generate further research/investigation.

Acknowledgement

Dr Caroline Chanock, Faculty of Humanities, La Trobe University.