

A model for language and academic skills development for first-year students of business

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ABSTRACT

Studies of strategies used to assist students with the language demands of their first year of tertiary study demonstrate that one model does not suit all. The success of a model is often dependent on collaboration between language and subject specialists, and on the willingness of the institution to support such initiatives. This paper evaluates ways in which one New Zealand tertiary institution addresses the language needs of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students studying in their first year of business programmes. It is also evident that native speakers of English could benefit from aspects of this language programme but different issues emerge as a result of their inclusion. We identify where this research sits in relation to previous studies in the field, offer recommendations for a language development model and identify key characteristics for the institution's provision of language support to students.

Introduction

The School of Languages has been working with the School of Accountancy, Law and Finance (ALF) at Unitec to enhance the language and tertiary study skills of ALF students, particularly in their first year of study. At the beginning of Semester 2, 2003, four English language tutors from the School of Languages were seconded to the School of Accountancy, Law and Finance to provide language development classes, which became known as the Professional Skills Development (PSD) Programme. Following a successful pilot, a continuation of the programme was agreed to, and an Export Levy Research grant from the Ministry of Education was secured to undertake an evaluation of the programme, using an action research framework. The research started in February 2004 and the results of the programme evaluation are presented here. The original report is published in full on the Ministry of Education's website (http://www.educationnz.org.nz/indust_researchreports.html) under A1.2 Language Learning Development.

THE PRESENTING PROBLEM

Unitec's schools enrol an increasingly diverse student population, including EAL students. EAL students often struggle with the language demands of their courses, particularly in their first year of academic study, despite having reached the required minimum English language entry level – typically a level of, or equivalent to, International English Language Testing System (IELTS) 6.0. As noted by Bretag and Kooymans (2002: 13), 'an IELTS score of 6.0 (or its equivalent) is barely adequate for successful academic study'.

EAL students have to cope simultaneously with the demands of tertiary study in another language, the acquisition of new academic vocabularies and the need to grasp new concepts that are often based on different cultural assumptions. In addition to these pressures of study, they may also be struggling with homesickness and orientation to a new country.

Students display varying levels of preparedness for academic work, and may be particularly unprepared if they arrive without first going through foundation-level study in New Zealand. They face new teaching and learning expectations and new and different lecturer–student roles and behaviours. Gunn-Lewis and Malthus (2000: 52) refer to this as 'mismatched expectations' and discuss the 'blame' that each party attaches to the other in this environment. Often there are inadequate opportunities in place within institutions to assist the students to develop their language and academic skills in a systematic way beyond a foundation level.

For these reasons, many EAL students drop out of their study and do not complete their first year of their programme. These failures may have far-reaching consequences for students and do nothing to enhance the reputation of the programme.

The research question and objectives

In framing the action research project to evaluate the PSD Programme, the following research question was formulated and objectives set.

How effective are the teaching and learning strategies of the Professional Skills Development Programme in enabling EAL students to develop their language proficiency levels during their first year of academic study and to cope with the linguistic demands of their academic field of study?

- 1 To develop and evaluate effective and innovative strategies for the language development of EAL students who are studying in the first year of the business disciplines of Accountancy, Law and Finance.
- 2 To develop a model of language learning that may be used to enhance EAL student success in business studies and in other academic disciplines.

Literature review

A review of the literature indicated that many models of assistance to EAL students (and to students in their first year of tertiary study) have been developed since the early 1980s. Gunn-Lewis and Malthus (2000: 50) refer to studies that involve consultation with overseas adult students and tertiary teaching staff, focusing on 'learning difficulties [and] an exploration of learning problems, rather than on the teaching practice, which overseas students find helpful and supportive'.

In contrast, Biggs (1997) discusses 'teaching-related problems of international students' and argues that international students could be helped more by 'improving teaching across the university [rather] than labelling them as a special case of deficit requiring remediation' (Biggs 1997: 1). Biggs (1997: 10) maintains that 'good teaching is good teaching', that teachers should focus on similarities amongst students rather than differences between them, and that teaching and assessment should take place in such a way that maximises student activity.

Met (1999: 3) refers to the 'growing phenomenon' and 'proliferation' of programmes, models and approaches that 'fall under the rubric of *content-based instruction*'. She points out that this term 'is commonly used to describe approaches to integrating language and content instruction, but it is not always used in the same way'. She notes, however, that 'all of the programmes, models, and approaches that integrate language and content share the common phenomenon: students engage in some way with content using a non-native language'. She proposes a continuum on which all programmes that integrate content and language can be placed. At one end of Met's continuum sit 'content-driven' programmes and at the other end are 'language-driven' programmes. In content-driven programmes, 'student learning of content is of greater importance than language learning', but in language-driven programmes, 'content is a useful tool for furthering the aims of language curriculum' (Met 1999: 4).

Between these extremes of the continuum sit sheltered courses, adjunct courses and theme based courses. Sheltered courses are content-driven and are taught in the second language (L2) but use 'linguistically sensitive teaching strategies in order to make the content accessible to learners who have less than native-like proficiency' (Met 1999:7). The adjunct model sits 'at the centre of Met's continuum of content/language integration' and in this model 'students are expected to learn content material while simultaneously acquiring academic language proficiency' (Met 1999: 7) The goal of theme-based courses is language-driven, using content as a context for language development.

Brinton (1993: 9) also distinguishes between 'content-based instruction' and 'English for specific purposes', which she defines as 'field specific', whereas content-based instruction courses consist of 'a broad-based inquiry into academic knowledge, with a particular topic chosen not as an object, but as a field of study'.

Iancu (1993: 20) further describes the 'adjunct model', which involves pairing the content of the academic course with an 'adjunct' English language course. She notes that even with the close link between language and content development, there is a real risk that students will come to regard the English programme as a 'tutoring service' (Iancu 1993: 23). The lower the language proficiency level of the students, the more likely they are to ask the language teacher for help with content.

Another model involves 'dovetailing' language and content (Bruce 2002). The English course shadows the content course and there is close collaboration between language tutors and the teaching staff of the content subject. Bruce lists several risks that exist with this collaboration (for example, strain on language teachers, language teachers become overconfident with content), yet says that it is 'professionally enriching' for all involved (Bruce 2002: 340).

Bretag, Horrocks and Smith's (2002) review of the literature in this field concludes that while some researchers focus on language competence, others are more concerned about cultural issues, and different learning backgrounds: 'All the research, however, recognises that international (NESB) [non-English speaking background] students require a range of institutional support arrangements; and that those responsible for teaching international students need to be cognisant of the myriad learning issues facing international students.' (Bretag, Horrocks and Smith 2002: 61) They report on a programme of language support involving a weekly support tutorial for international students in Information Systems courses and a parallel programme of training for Information Systems lecturers in classroom teaching strategies for NESB students.

Bretag and Kooymans (2002) note that universities have been slow to act on advice, which has existed for 15 years, that language support courses for students should be 'for credit'. Under this model, curriculum is jointly designed by an English-language tutor and a content specialist, and 'the focus is on students developing language and academic skills in the context of the subject material' (Bretag and Kooymans 2002: 11). They report increased levels of student and lecturer satisfaction and student success after working with this model but note the need for institutional support and willingness by all staff to work in such collaborative frameworks.

PSD Programme structure

The programme that was designed between the School of Languages and the School of Accountancy, Law and Finance at Unitec is closest to an adjunct model in which students are expected to learn content material but are also simultaneously developing their academic language proficiency.

In Semester 2, 2003, a tutorial system was introduced and English-language staff members were seconded to work alongside content lecturers to provide 'language development tutorials'. A range of practices was evident during this first semester; some content lecturers made the language tutorials an assessed component with compulsory attendance, others did not. Language tutors attended the content lectures and studied texts in order to become familiar with content. The language development tutorials were run for one hour per week, with classes of approximately 12 students. They were additional to content tutorials and at no extra cost to the students.

In semester 1, 2004 the tutorial programme was re-named 'Professional Skills Development Tutorials' in the belief that the enhanced language skills acquired during the programme were part of the essential and ongoing preparation for professional practice, rather than a form of remediation. The course was made compulsory for all students enrolled in the nominated courses. Generic academic skills (for example, note taking, task analysis, critical thinking and evaluation skills) were taught across all PSD tutorials, while subject-specific skills relating to the content and the demands of each course were also included (for example, reviewing legal scenarios in the law courses, familiarity with specialised vocabulary and concepts).

The enrolled students also included native English-speaking students because weaknesses in their academic skills were identified by content lecturers. Systems had to be developed involving online teaching tools and modified attendance requirements to cater for this group of students.

Assessed components were introduced for all courses in the PSD Programme in Semester 1, 2004, ranging from 5% to 10% of the final course mark. These grades were dependent on participation in the tutorial, based on students' group work and contribution to class discussion, evidence of ongoing work related to the tutorials, and clarity of process and outcome in the work that was produced. For several courses, attendance itself became a portion of the assessed component. A summary of the programme and the students is presented in Table 1.

Depending on the scope and guidelines from the content lecturer, the PSD tutor typically worked with the students on the lectures that had just been attended. The aim of the tutorials was to facilitate comprehension of concepts and theories through discussion and tasks; to practise strategies for

**Table 1: Schedule of courses participating with PSD tutorials,
Semester 1, 2004**

Name of ALF course	Number of students	Student composition	PSD: compulsory?	Credit-bearing to ALF course	Frequency of tutorials
Law of Business Obligations	140	Chinese, Indian, New Zealanders	Yes	10% (incl. 2% attendance and class participation)	1 hour weekly
Economic Environment	53	90% Chinese, other non-English speakers, New Zealanders	Yes, 80% attendance compulsory	5% for participation	1 hour weekly
Introduction to Commercial Law	70	Chinese, Indian, New Zealanders	Yes	5% for participation	1 hour weekly
Accounting for Business	129	Mostly Chinese, some New Zealanders	Yes	5% for participation	1 hour
Accounting Principles	90	Mostly Chinese, some New Zealanders	Yes	7.5% of course marks	1 hour

reading content-specific texts; to clarify assignment and assessment expectations; to introduce vocabulary acquisition strategies; and to model and practise skills relating particularly to the subject area.

Research methodology

Evaluation research aims to increase the effectiveness of programmes by using information about the outcomes to make good decisions about programme planning. The research team took as its starting point the definition and stages of action research as outlined by Burns (in Cornwall 1999: 27):

Action research involves a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are at the same time members of the research community. The aim is to identify problematic situations or issues considered by the participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1981: 11) see action research as a process of planning, acting and observing, reflecting and revising in two distinct phases. In this research project, the action research process took place in two phases, as outlined below.

PHASE I: PLANNING

Before Semester 1, 2004 began, much of the planning phase was completed. This included:

- convening the research team and the Research Advisory Committee membership;
- scoping and planning the project with the research team and Research Advisory Committee;
- scoping the literature for models of language support;
- initiating the research team into the aims, objectives and timeline of the project;
- briefing the tutors involved in the research project.

The language tutors were offered guidance in advance of the start of the programme and early in the semester so that they could plan and self-reflect on their work in the tutorials. Tutors were asked to record observations of their interactions with students in a weekly journal. Student evaluation surveys and student and language tutor focus groups were conducted in weeks four and five of the semester to identify approaches that appeared to work and areas that needed modification.

Following the collation of the survey and focus group results, the research team, advisory group, tutors and student representatives met in weeks seven and eight to review data and determine modifications in planning teaching for the remainder of the semester and for Phase 2 of the research project. Students and tutors re-evaluated the programme in week 14 of the semester. Performance in summative assessment was compared with that of students in a control group and a model for future PSD Programmes was developed.

PHASE I: DATA COLLECTION

A questionnaire with 28 items was designed and administered to all students enrolled on those business courses that included a PSD tutorial. The questionnaire was adapted from that used by Adonis (2001), and the items were designed using a Likert 5-point scale on which students were invited to indicate their responses. In Section 1, students were asked to indicate how helpful study skills sessions had been. In Section 2, the students were asked to self-evaluate the improvements they had made as a result of the tutorials by responding to statements. The final section required students to respond to questions about their changing learning behaviours in tutorials and in content classrooms, their attitude to the subject matter and their working

relationships with their teachers in tutorials and subject classes. The questionnaire was administered in class and all were returned. A total of 331 questionnaires were returned and processed.

Qualitative data were collected from PSD tutors in two focus group sessions, and two focus group sessions were also held with students. Both groups were asked about 'what helps/what doesn't help' in the tutorials and were asked for suggestions for changes that they would make in the programme. In addition, tutors were asked to describe the 'perfect model' for PSD tutorials, while students were asked to comment on any improvements that they had noticed in their understanding of subject matter and other skills. They were also asked how content lecturers could improve their delivery techniques.

The focus group sessions were conducted by an experienced facilitator who was not known to members of either the student or tutor groups. Results were collated and used in the summary of findings, alongside the results from the quantitative data. These can be seen in Appendix A (student focus groups) and Appendix B (tutor focus groups).

PHASE 1: RESULTS SUMMARY

A summary of the results of the student questionnaire administered in Phase 1 is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Results – Phase I student questionnaire (N = 331)

Question	High: always/ often %	Average: sometimes %	Low: seldom/ never %	Not applicable %
Section I				
Impact on ALF performance:				
Tutorials are useful	65.5	23.9	8.1	2.4
Tutorials make me more confident about the subject matter	53.7	29.9	11.8	4.5
Tutorials help understanding of the subject matter	62.8	26.9	8.1	2.1
Tutorials provide information not found in lectures	45.6	34.7	14.5	5.1
Because of tutorials, I now join discussions more	37.2	32.9	21.1	8.8
Tutorials enable me to raise concerns about ALF courses	42.9	35.3	12.4	9.4
Tutorials help me to link ALF content to real life situations	43.5	33.2	12.7	10.6

Continued ...

Table 2: Continued

Question	High: always/ often %	Average: sometimes %	Low: seldom/ never %	Not applicable %
Without tutorials my performance in ALF would suffer	27.8	38.4	22.4	11.5
Tutorials increase interest in ALF courses	42.9	35.3	12.4	9.4
Tutorials made me think more deeply about ALF courses	51.1	33.5	10	5.4
I enjoy hearing other people's points of view	61.1	26.9	7.8	4.2
I enjoy the opportunity to get to know other students	59	27.5	9.6	3.9
Section 2				
Tutorials were helpful for ...				
... writing	61	21.1	6.9	10.9
... writing feedback	47.7	16.6	7.2	28.4
... exam and test preparation	21.5	13.6	5.7	59.2
... study skills	56.8	24.5	9	9.7
... tutorials with subject matter	65.3	24.8	6	3.9
Improvement in ...				
... test and exam results	19.9	16.3	1.8	61.9
... writing ability	54	26.6	4.5	14.8
... language skills	48	25.4	7.8	18.7
... specialist vocabulary	40.9	19.4	7	32.7
... interest in subject matter	54.4	24.8	7.8	13
Section 3				
ALF student response to PSD tutors ...				
Tutors give valuable feedback	25.1	21.5	8.7	44.7
Tutors help with test and exam preparations	17	14.2	11.1	57.7
Tutors give encouragement and motivation	54.3	28.1	7.5	10
Tutors acknowledge ideas and opinions	62.2	25.4	4.5	7.9
Tutors welcome different opinions	76.7	16.3	2.7	4.2
Tutors are friendly and easy to talk to	86.1	8.5	2.4	3

The questionnaire has been adapted from that used by Adonis, C (2001) and reported in *An evaluation of students' perceptions of a multi faceted support program in a large, diverse first year class*. Paper presented at the First Year in Education Conference, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, 5–7 July 2000.

As can be seen from Table 2, the results of the questionnaire gave a clear indication that students were finding the tutorials useful: 65.5% of participants reported that they were 'always' or 'often' useful, and a further 23.9% responded that they were 'sometimes' useful. Only 8.1% said that they were 'seldom' or 'never' useful. Only 27.8% of students felt strongly that their performance in business subjects would suffer if the tutorials did not exist. This question was negatively worded in the questionnaire, 'Without tutorials my performance in ALF would suffer', and this may have affected the result given here.

There is a range of ways in which the participants felt that the tutorials were useful. Most of the participants (86.1%) found the tutors 'always' or 'often' friendly and easy to talk to; 76.7% responded that tutors welcomed different opinions 'always' or 'often'; and 62.2% thought that the tutors acknowledged students' ideas and opinions 'always' or 'often'. Interestingly, only 54.3% of participants reported that the PSD tutor 'always' or 'often' gave encouragement and motivation, although quite a high proportion (28.1%) reported that encouragement and motivation was 'sometimes' given.

Students' perceptions of the usefulness of the tutorials in relation to the content vary. The tutorials were reported as 'always' or 'often' helpful in understanding the subject matter by 62.8% of participants, and a further 26.9% found them to be 'average' in their usefulness. Over half the students (53.7%) reported that the tutorials gave them more confidence in the subject matter; a further 29.9% reported that they 'sometimes' gave them more confidence. However, only 25.1% of students felt that tutors gave valuable feedback 'always' or 'often', and 47.7% indicated that feedback on students' writing was 'always' or 'often' helpful. Qualitative data also supported the view from students that language tutors could give more feedback to students (see Appendix A).

There was an interesting balance in the responses as to whether tutorials provided information not found in lectures, with 45.6% indicating this to be 'always' or 'often' the case and 34.7% indicating 'sometimes'. This result may reflect the different teaching approaches and strategies used by PSD tutors, which varied in the extent to which the tutor reviewed and expanded on the scope of the lectures.

The responses suggest that the students were encouraged to think more about their business courses as a result of their PSD tutorials: 51.1% responded positively to this question, and 42.9% indicated strongly that the tutorials increased their interest.

The desire to interact more with other students in the classroom and to be more active in their learning was also evident: 61.1% indicated that they

'always' or 'often' enjoyed hearing other students' points of view, and 59% reported 'always' or 'often' enjoying the opportunity to get to know other students. In focus group discussions (see Appendix A), students indicated that more time for students to ask individual questions and discuss problems was needed, although it could be argued that it was only the more confident students who participated in focus groups and that the majority still lacked confidence in this area in the business classroom.

Other comments from student focus groups indicated that the small groups in the tutorial sessions encouraged students to engage in discussion, although there was also comment that the mixture of L1 and L2 students caused some difficulty and that a wider ethnic mix of students would result in the sharing of different experiences and examples.

The high figure for those who thought the question about whether tutorials for exam and test preparation were useful was not applicable (59.2%), and low numbers who found that they were 'very' or 'often' helpful (21.5%) can be explained by the timing of the questionnaire, which was administered in the early teaching weeks and before major assignments or exams. In contrast, as can be seen in Appendix A, in the qualitative data there were clear statements about the usefulness of the tutorials in preparing students for assignment tasks, particularly in understanding what was expected by the question set. The step-by-step approach to assignment writing by the tutorials was much appreciated by students in the focus groups.

In the tutor focus groups sessions (see Appendix B), tutors talked extensively about the time spent in tutorials improving students' study skills. The questionnaire showed that 56.8% of students found study skills 'always' or 'often' helpful and a further 24.5% found them to be helpful 'sometimes'. It is noticeable that only 40.9% of students agreed that the extensive work done by tutors on specialist vocabulary had resulted in strong improvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS THAT INFORMED PHASE 2

Following the collation of the results, the research team met with the PSD tutors to analyse the data and to plan any improvement to the PSD Programme to take place in the second phase of the action research process. The following recommendations were made and were accepted as useful modifications of the tutorial programme:

- encourage more students to be active participants in class discussions;
- encourage students to do more pre-reading before lectures and tutorials;
- link tutorials and tasks explicitly to test, assignment and exam requirements;

- continue to be friendly and approachable but give students more encouragement and motivation;
- give students more feedback and consider modes that work best;
- continue with practical exercises on understanding handouts, lectures and textbooks;
- continue encouraging listening to all points of view;
- continue to acknowledge students' ideas and opinions;
- think about your vocabulary teaching and students' perceptions, and how best to respond to their comments;
- try to facilitate more discussion about individual needs, issues and concerns.

PHASE 2: DATA COLLECTION

Later in the semester, students (N = 130) from three of the original five courses were surveyed a second time to gather their subsequent views on the tutorials. A questionnaire with 15 items, many of which were from the original questionnaire, was administered. Some new question items were added to explore particular recommendations. Students were also invited to answer open-ended questions as part of the questionnaire, as no focus group for students was planned in this phase due to time constraints and exams.

As with the first questionnaire, the question items were designed using a Likert 5-point scale. In all questions, students had the option of indicating that the question was not applicable to them. A total of 130 questionnaires were returned and processed.

A short survey was given to business lecturers asking them to advise of any noticeable improvements that they may have seen in the performance of their students who had been participating in the PSD Programme. Three survey forms were returned. One focus group was undertaken with three language tutors. The same facilitator conducted the focus group session. Results were collated and used in the summary of findings, alongside the results from the quantitative data.

PHASE 2: RESULTS SUMMARY

As can be seen in Table 3, which reports the results of the Phase 2 student questionnaire, significant changes can be noted between similar or same questions from Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2 and these are discussed below.

Table 3: Results, Phase 2 student questionnaire (N = 130)

Q	n = 130					Total high	Total low	QI*	
	Always	Often	Some-times	Seldom	Never				
Tutorials have led to an improvement in:									
1	10.85	71.3	40.9	16.28	19.4	1.55	0	1.55	7
2	20.93	68.21	9.3	27.69	1.55	0	0	1.55	0
3	27.69	42.3	20.15	27.69	2.3	0	0	2.3	0
4	32.56	47.28	22.65	20.15	0	0	0	0	0
13	23.43	44.53	19.9	22.65	7.03	2.34	0	9.37	0
6	28.12	32.8	35.94	35.94	16.3	3.12	0	3.12	1.8
14	18.11	34.64	40.94	40.94	3.14	3.14	0	6.28	0
The tutor:									
5	25.78	50	25.1	22.65	21.5	1.56	0	1.56	8.7
7	28.12	46.09	54.3	25	28.1	0.78	0	0.78	7.5
8	21.09	54.68	62.2	22.65	25.4	1.56	0	1.56	4.5
9	31.53	50	76.7	17.69	16.3	0	0.76	0.76	2.7
10	55.38	33.07	86.1	11.54	8.5	0	0	0	2.4
Tutorials:									
11	33.07	46.15	65.5	16.92	23.9	3.07	0.76	3.83	8.1
12	23.43	49.21	56.8	25.78	24.5	1.56	0	1.56	9
15	19.53	50	27.34	27.34	3.12	3.12	0	3.12	0

* Questionnaire 1: The figures in this column provide a direct comparison with the results received from Questionnaire 1 for the same question (where applicable).

Note: Responses are expressed as percentages (%).

In the first questionnaire, 40.9% of students agreed that the tutorials improved specialist vocabulary, whereas in Questionnaire 2, 82.15% agreed that there was improvement. A significant increase can also be seen in response to the question asking if tutors gave valuable feedback: an increase from 25.1% to 75.78%.

In the first questionnaire only 19.9% of students agreed that 'tutorials led to improvements in exam and test preparation'; this figure leapt to 60.92% in the second questionnaire. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the second questionnaire was administered much closer to summative exam time and after all assignments had been completed and returned to students.

It is interesting to note the increase from 56.8% to 72.64% in responses to the item about whether the tutorials help students' study skills. Other reaffirming results obtained from the two questionnaires show a small increase for questions to do with 'encouragement and motivation' (54.3% to 74.21%), 'tutor welcomes different opinions' (76.7% to 81.53%) and 'tutor acknowledges ideas and opinions' (62.2% to 75.77%).

Finally, while 65.5% of students thought the tutorials were useful in the first questionnaire, 79.22% found them so in the second questionnaire. This is supported by the qualitative data acquired in the second questionnaire. One student wrote, 'I love this course, it is very useful for me to understand the materials'. In the second questionnaire, 89.14% of students agreed that tutorials assisted their understanding of lectures, handouts and textbooks.

In conclusion, the students' responses in the second questionnaire suggest that they found the tutorials useful and that they led to improvements in key skill areas. It is interesting that these key skills are not only 'language' skills but skills required to operate and succeed within a tertiary environment. Assistance with improving these skills formed part of a learning package that was useful for students and from which they identified improvements in their own behaviour and performance.

The three PSD tutors in the focus group confirmed that they had emphasised positive feedback and had worked on creating more interactive classrooms; this had been beneficial, as confirmed by the results from the students' questionnaires. The importance of working with the students' language within the context of the subject matter was emphasised by the tutors and priority had been given to preparation for exams at this end of the semester. The operational constraints within which the programme works were discussed; students have diverse needs, have so much to learn and limited time is available. The importance of working closely with the business lecturers enabled PSD tutors to negotiate PSD content and tasks according to the difficulties encountered by the students.

**DATA FROM EXAM RESULTS SEMESTER I, 2003 AND SEMESTER I, 2004
(CONTROL GROUP)**

As well as receiving positive feedback from the content lecturers in the School of Accountancy, Law and Finance who have worked with the PSD tutors, the researchers wanted to investigate whether there had been any marked improvements in the overall pass rates in the courses that had used the PSD tutorial system. Based on percentages of students who actually sat the assessments, we can see the following trends in Table 4, which shows the pass rates per course/semester, based on those students who sat assessments.

Table 4: Pass rates % per course/semester (figures based on students who sat assessments)

Course/Semester	Sem. I 2002	Sem. 2 2002	Sem. I 2003	Sem. 2 2003	Sem. I 2004
Accounting for Business	67	55	75	76	81
Law of Business Obligations	77	89	90	48	87
Economic Environment	57	63	53	61	67

As shown in this table, the pass rates for the three courses that participated in the two stages of the research project suggest improvements. These are particularly noticeable in the Law of Business Obligations course (an increase from 48% to 87%). This brings the pass rate back to the levels for the previous semesters noted. The pass rates of 67% for the Economic Environment course and 81% for the Accounting for Business course are the highest for the semesters listed.

We acknowledge that these pass rates and student success in assessment are dependent on a wide range of individual and institutional factors, some of which are not related to the development of the students' language proficiency during the course. However, we believe, that these pass rates are indicative of student success, which is related to the intervention of PSD tutorials and the provision of transferable skills in those tutorials. These transferable skills (participation in discussion, paraphrasing, summarising, accessing dense academic text, interpreting assignment tasks) can be utilised by the student in any academic context, although this transfer cannot be measured directly in the scope of this study.

Summary and conclusions

The PSD tutorials that were developed for students in their first year of business programmes were found to be both effective and innovative. The evaluation that took place using an action research framework found that in

Phase 2 of the project 79.22% of students thought the PSD tutorials were 'always/often' useful.

As noted above, in the second phase of the programme, the PSD tutors were asked to put greater emphasis on a range of areas, and this seems to have resulted in significant improvement in student satisfaction.

The research also found that students and PSD tutors had a strong sense about ways in which the business lecturers could assist students' learning by modifying their lecture delivery methods and by making their handouts clearer and assignment expectations more transparent.

A number of outstanding issues require further discussion. These are:

- ideal contact hours for tutorials;
- the extent to which PSD tutors should teach subject content as opposed to the language of the subject;
- the inclusion of native speakers in the programme;
- ways in which PSD tutors can motivate students towards more effective, independent learning;
- ways in which technology could be used to support the tutorial programme;
- ways in which the PSD tutor and business lecturer can work more closely together;
- outstanding questions that remain as to whether there should be a standardised percentage (for example, 5%) of assessment in all PSD tutorials rather than the range of 5% to 10% currently used.

COMPONENTS OF A MODEL OF LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Within the context of Unitec's business programme and the resources available to the two schools, the following features for the continued delivery of the PSD programme were identified, based on the results of this research.

The programme's name (Professional Skills Development) is useful, as it indicates to the students that the discipline programme considers that the enhancement of their competency in spoken and written communication is important to their professional practice and that it will enable them to operate more successfully in their studies and in their future working lives. This avoids the suggestion that the programme is in some way remedial. Our experience is that students will not participate regularly in a programme unless it is seen to be integral to the students' successful study of the discipline and their preparation for their professional working lives.

The programme should be compulsory for all students. This includes native speakers of English, as well as EAL students, because nearly all students need to develop their tertiary academic study skills, as well as their competency in spoken and written English in a systematic and comprehensive way. This inclusive approach also ensures that no student feels discriminated against, but it requires careful management to ensure that native speakers are required to participate in areas of work for which they have a demonstrated need.

The programme should be credit-bearing. Students should be awarded a percentage of their final course marks (ranging between 5% and 10%) based on tutorial attendance and/or class participation. This is supported by the model described by Bretag and Kooymans (2002), in which an undergraduate credit-bearing course was an integrated part of the business degree.

The PSD classes should meet each week and for a minimum of one hour per week. Ideally the class time should be longer than one hour (1.5 hours to 2 hours) but there are institutional and financial constraints on making the classes longer. There may also be potential for student resistance to increased compulsory class contact time.

One of the benefits of the PSD programme is the opportunity to develop good student interaction through pair work and small group discussions, and this is best achieved with limited class numbers. A mixture of students from different language and cultural backgrounds also increases the possibility of bringing multiple perspectives to classroom discussions.

The PSD tutor should be a specialist in language teaching (or a content lecturer with language training) but should also have or acquire a good working knowledge of the subject content through attendance at lectures and through reading course descriptions and course texts. The tutor should have a student-centred approach to the learning and be approachable and supportive to the students' learning needs.

The teaching approaches and content should include the following key academic and language skills:

- academic writing skills including assignment writing/referencing/paraphrasing/summarising skills/issues relating to plagiarism;
- summarising lecture content/identifying key points in a lecture;
- pre-reading of course textbook and lecture notes;
- using the textbook;
- exam and test preparation;
- developing and using subject-specific vocabulary;

- working with the language found in textbooks, handouts and lecture notes of the content area;
- identifying the language expectations of assignment and exam questions;
- language requirements of oral and written presentations.

Subject content and interpersonal skills should be taught interactively using the following:

- pair and small group discussions;
- problem solving;
- case study analysis with discussion;
- encouragement to express opinions and share different perspectives and experiences;
- development of ability, willingness and motivation to learn through engagement with subject matter.

There should be open, clear communication between PSD tutors and content lecturers so that there:

- is a clear definition of content boundaries for PSD tutors;
- are modes of feedback between PSD tutor and content lecturer about perceived student difficulty in lectures, with assignments and with handouts;
- are opportunities for PSD tutors to work together with subject lecturers on programme development, so that improvement exists.

There should be clear open communication between PSD tutors and students so that:

- students are better placed to benefit from PSD tutors' feedback;
- students grow in confidence, express their opinions in discussions and learn to acknowledge the ideas and opinions of other students;
- students are more likely to remain motivated and encouraged in their study.

It is further recommended that the PSD tutor and content lecturer should develop a written statement on the responsibilities and communication methods that each party agree to in this collaboration.

Further research

This research has evaluated the success of the PSD Programme and has identified areas where the programme could be improved. At the core of

the investigation has been concern for the success of students in academic programmes and ways in which success can be enhanced through well-constructed interventions. The following suggestions for further research would build on our knowledge of how best to develop the factors that lead to student success in their academic programmes during their first year of study in a tertiary programme.

FOCUS ON STUDENTS

A longitudinal study could measure academic progress of a number of Unitec students who have participated in PSD. The research would survey the group regularly and form focus groups to evaluate the factors that are contributing to students' success and retention at Unitec, or to record their decisions and reasons for leaving the programme. This study would also build on the work undertaken by Gunn-Lewis and Malthus (2000).

FOCUS ON TEACHING

Biggs (1997) believes that successful cross-cultural teaching involves ensuring that subject teachers use best practice in their teaching. As he says, 'Good teaching is good teaching' (Biggs 1997: 10).

Further research could be undertaken to observe subject teachers in their lectures and classes and to analyse those teaching strategies that EAL students find contribute most to their understanding of the subject matter.

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Appendix A

QUALITATIVE RESULTS – STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

PSD tutorials help with ...
<p>Lectures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarising lecture content • Reinforcing lecture content • Identifying key points in lecture • Applying practical examples in lecture content
<p>Assignments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of test question • Assignment layout and format • Step-by-step approach to assignments
<p>Working with content material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical exercises that help comprehension • Case studies
<p>Small group work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networking with other students • Small group discussion • Opportunity to ask individual questions especially about lecture content • Confidence to speak out
<p>Language/academic skills development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialist vocabulary • Referencing • Academic writing skills
PSD tutorials don't help with ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutors are not always content expert • Length of the tutorial could be longer • Not asked enough about own questions and issues • Class next door too noisy/latecomers affect tutorials • Not enough ... time, group work, case studies, small group discussion
Students would like ALF lecturers to ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarise content clearly • Give more practical examples • Simplify handouts • Emphasise that pre-reading is necessary • Give more feedback on written assignments • Be clear about expectations of assignments

Appendix B

QUALITATIVE DATA – TUTOR FOCUS GROUPS

The 'perfect model'

- Important to have credit bearing/compulsory component of PSD study
- More tutorial time needed; time to consolidate, work on understanding of concepts
- 10–12 students per class works well
- Consistency of cohort numbers
- Regular contact with Business lecturers
- Lecturers being at the same stage in the course so that all students are at the same stage of content
- Advocate for greater ethnic mix
- Focus tutorials on assignments close to assignment deadlines
- Reinforce good preparation for tutorials through pre-reading, pre-class activity, for example, students preparing material for presentation in class
- Aim for greater student participation in discussion
- Get students to use textbooks more selectively
- Focus on assignment writing/referencing/paraphrasing/summarising skills. Constant reminders about plagiarism issues.
- Work on 'soft skills' ... taking responsibility, interactive group work, cooperative activity through problem-solving approach; email lists; permission to discuss in their own language
- Expand use of 'Blackboard' [online learning tool]