

English language growth and the international student

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The provision of academic language and literacy support has undergone various reincarnations since the arrival of large cohorts of international students which placed additional responsibilities on our universities. Although initially a peripheral service accessed on a voluntary basis, the trend now is to reach more students by embedding such instruction within the disciplines. In this way students are assisted in addressing the specific literacy demands of their area of study.

However, while language and academic support staff work closely to enhance students' assessment outcomes, the focus of instruction remains for the most part on the written product.

In this paper we report on an investigation of international students' learning strategies and specifically those instigated outside their formal learning activities. In particular, we present those affective variables that positively impact on the students' desire to improve their English language skills. Using methodology informed by Second Language Acquisition research, these learning strategies were classified as social, cognitive and metacognitive. Their use was then matched with GPAs, or normalised equivalents, to ascertain their effectiveness in relation to academic achievement.

Keywords: *International students; autonomous learning; second language development.*

1. Introduction

The education of international higher education students has been a major contributor to Australia's economy since the 1980s and reached its peak in 2009 by "generating \$18.6 billion and supporting approximately 125, 000 jobs across Australia" (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 5).

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Nonetheless, more recently some “shocks to the system” (Phillimore & Koshy, 2010, p. 24) have been experienced as a result of the falling Australian dollar, the global financial crisis, and other countries competing for market share (p. 24). As Marginson (2011) points out, “the stellar rise” of the Australian education export industry is experiencing an “even more spectacular downturn” (p. 21). Further impact from attacks on students, closures of private colleges and changes to immigration policy have contributed to this downturn in international students choosing Australia for their further study (p. 24). Universities are, therefore, now concerned about falling international student enrolments which have, in turn, generated renewed focus on international student related research. This has included industry-focused research and government reports supporting student well-being and safety and improvement in English language proficiency¹ (e.g., *International Students: risks and responsibilities of universities*, commissioned by the Victorian Auditor-General, 2009; *International Students Strategy for Australia 2010-2014*, commissioned by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2010; *Five Years On: English Language Competency of International Students*, commissioned by the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) 2013); and the *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International Students at Australian Universities*, developed by Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), 2009).

In addition, new agencies such as the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) have now drawn attention to the issue of English language standards for all students in universities. For the students, the attraction of possible Australian Permanent Residency status has meant that interest in outcomes and employability continues, and concern over the falling numbers of enrolments means that students’ satisfaction, learning preferences and the teaching they experience remain important.

Concurrent with this is the move in recent years within universities towards economic rationalism. This has meant seeking other cost effective avenues for assisting students, for example online help or embedded language instruction within the discipline. In the light of these moves away from individual or face-to-face support, there has been an interest in investigating what students do independently to enhance their English language proficiency once they have arrived in the country, enrolled in their courses, and have, so often, found their English skills to be inadequate for the task ahead of them. There has been extensive anecdotal evidence, as well as our experience as supervisors and language support advisors, of students’ continuing need for support in writing, reading and speaking throughout their studies.

In this paper we will review the outcomes of our Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded study entitled *Addressing the on-going English language growth of international students* (see Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan & Davies, 2010; Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan & Davies, 2011; Oliver, Dooey & Rochecouste, 2011; Rochecouste, Oliver & Mulligan, 2012). Using this information, we will outline the affective variables that influence the autonomous learning strategies adopted by international students.

2. Background

Skillen, Mertem, Trivett and Percy (1998), reviewing the history of learning development, identified an early “do nothing” (p. 2) model which left students who were unfamiliar with academic study, from lower SES backgrounds, or from non-English speaking backgrounds to “sink or swim” (p. 2). Following this and with the arrival of greater numbers of international students, language and learning or academic skills centres provided one-on-one consultations, generic classes and workshops. This “remedial model” (Skillen et al., p.3) relied on students to voluntarily attend classes usually outside lecture times. Gardiner (2012) notes that “the ‘EAP grammar teaching problem’ of the how, what and when to teach has been a constant dilemma” (p. 15). Gardiner’s investigation of students’ attitudes to his English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes showed some activities and tasks to be boring and students expressed a desire for grammar to be contextualised with authentic activities and practice. Furthermore, universities have found that limited attendance at academic language and learning classes and the prevalence of individual consultations results in support not reaching enough students and being therefore less than cost effective. Additionally, there is little evidence that students are able to readily transfer the generic skills that they learn in language and learning classes when responding to discipline-specific tasks and assignments. Moreover, few additional programs are credit-bearing (Green & Agosti, 2011) and as a result are seen as unnecessarily time-consuming for the students who need them most (Rochecouste et al., 2010; Stratilas 2011; Dunworth, 2013a).

More common now are the embedded or integrated models of language support taught in conjunction with discipline content and which follow the Sixth Good Practice Principle of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Australian Universities Quality Agency [AUQA], 2009). This Principle states that the “development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods” (pp. 8-9). However, rarely do

discipline specialists see it as their role to teach beyond the content of their course and hence there is a strong need for collaboration between language access specialist (LAS) personnel and academic teaching staff (Arkoudas & Tran, 2010, Murray, 2011). At present the many academic publications on embedding literacy support into the disciplines suggests that this collaboration is becoming more common practice. However, to align with discipline needs this support remains focussed on assessed written tasks.

While studies abound of integrated or embedded instruction, they appear currently to occur at the impetus of the individual lecturer and to be “bolted on” (Wingate, 2006 p. 457) to the main purpose of the unit. They often provide scaffolding support for currently pending assessment tasks using an Academic Literacies approach (Lea & Street 2008) to student writing alone and leaving the academic language and learning (ALL) skills advisor peripheral to the process of learning and teaching, or “as an outsider from a faculty perspective” (Frohman, 2012 p. A48). Indeed, Stratilas (2011) argues that “academic development needs to be reflected in the course objectives and learning outcomes of discipline-specific classes” (p. 44), while Arkoudis (2008) has called for a more “systematic approach” across departments and faculties rather than the “low-level integration of disciplinary and language learning and teaching” that currently exists (Arkoudis, 2008, cited in Arkoudis & Tran, p. 174). As Green and Agosti (2011) claim, “putting in place mechanisms that support the development of academic literacies should be afforded the same level of importance as that which is given to the delivery of all other subjects” (p. 31), see also Dunworth (2013a) for a comprehensive review of the range and impact of course or embedded language support. Dunworth raises the key issue of “how to position English language development as a core rather than marginal teaching and learning issue” (p. 11). In spite of this, recent research attention remains focussed on plagiarism and academic literacy skills, and reports on the provision of language and learning support via Information and Communications Technology (ICT) are extensive. A further area that has taken a new turn centres on assessment with Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELAs) and exit assessment, in addition to the previous need for adequate International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores, now being introduced and investigated at some universities.

In the light of the above history of changing directions in supporting students, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, attention has focused on what these students do autonomously to improve their English language skills. Since integrated or embedded learning support focuses predominantly on written assessment requirements (Murray, 2012),

Rochecouste et al. (2010) were keen to understand how students strive to improve their language skills in all areas, not only writing, but also reading, speaking and listening and how they worked to improve their communicative competence. They did this because all international students need to communicate successfully. For example, they need to be able to ask questions of their tutors, lecturers and librarians; to participate in tutorial discussions; and they need to assimilate comfortably into the university community of practice. Most often this requires them to develop their own strategies for improving their English language proficiency. To this end, the study focused on what these students do independently to come to terms with their new study environment and culture.

3. International student English learning needs

A range of research instruments have been used to understand the English language learning needs of international students. Gardner's (1985) "Attitude/Motivation Test Battery" (AMTB), by Oxford's (1990) "Strategy Inventory of Language Learning" (SILL), and by Horwitz's (1988) "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI). Rochecouste et al. (2010) employed an online survey based on these research instruments to reach a population of 998 international students studying at Australian universities.

By using open-ended and closed questions it is possible for researchers to collect demographic and experiential data enabling both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Of particular interest to English language development is students' language improvement since arriving in Australia; when, where and how often they used English; their beliefs about learning English; and their motivation for doing so. Rochecouste et al., (2010) asked international students what strategies they used to improve both their English and their academic performance. By investigating learning strategies, that is, those "techniques that students apply of their own free will to enhance the effectiveness of their learning" (Dornyei, 2001, p. 51), Rochecouste et al., (2010) were able to track students' own understanding of their English skills and their attempts to improve. Thematic analysis was subsequently conducted on the rich set of quantitative data that students provided of their experiences, motivations and beliefs about learning and using English in higher education contexts.

English language support

As seen above, universities have responded in various ways to support international students from non-English speaking backgrounds with language



and academic support (LAS) centres and advisors being at the forefront of this assistance. However, although students may be well aware of their need to improve their English, many do not take advantage of classes made available by support centres (see Arkoudis & Starfield 2007), avoid them, or are unable to use such services due to employment commitments which also detract from the time required to manage one's studies as a non-native speaker.

Described by Stratilas (2011) as "ad hoc arrangements and reactive workshops" (p. 44), this type of support has earned the reputation of being a "quick fix" for non-achieving students (Chanock, 2007). Indeed one participant in Arkoudis and Tran's (2010) study pointed out that,

asking international students to utilize the LAS programs might be a sensitive matter, as they may get the message that they are having academic problems and need support to 'fix' them. It can be associated with the fear of being considered weak academically in the eyes of their teacher (p. 174).

Rochecouste et al. (2010) showed fewer students take advantage of generic "language and communication skills support services" (range: Mean 1.81; SD 1.299 – Mean 2.74; SD 1.398), than those who indicated their use of course related support involving lecturers, tutors or supervisors (range: Mean 3.05; SD 1.374 – Mean 4.13; SD 0.972). There were a correspondingly low number of students who were able to report that their teachers helped them find other support (Mean 2.93; SD 1.459).

In addition to this lack of take-up of existing support systems, the data also contained few anecdotal reports from the students about integrated or embedded instruction occurring across the universities. This is unfortunate as one item did suggest a potential positive outcome should this be put in place. Specifically, there was a positive but weak correlation with GPAs for Item 6 - My written assessments include marks for good English ($r = 0.100$ Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed).) (p. 39).

On the basis of these results, as described above, the focus of our research was on those strategies and motivational forces that international students instigate independently of faculties and learning centres to raise their English language proficiency (see Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan & Davies, 2010; Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan & Davies, 2011; Oliver, Dooley & Rochecouste, 2011; Rochecouste, Oliver & Mulligan, 2012).

4. What students do – Affective Variables

The development of strategies for independent learning requires motivation and positive beliefs about one's aims and abilities. To this end Rochecouste, et al., (2010) captured data on the participating students' beliefs about learning English and their motivations for doing so. The roles of beliefs and motivation in language learning are studied under the complex, although well researched, area of affective variables which also includes self-confidence, self-perceptions, and anxieties.

Beliefs about learning English

Beliefs about a language, its culture and one's own ability to learn it have been widely studied with Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) providing an excellent review of the impact of beliefs for language learners. A language learner's beliefs can have considerable influence on success. For example, judgement of the level of difficulty of a language can affect expectations and commitment (Burden, 2002). Further, beliefs are claimed to be dynamic and changeable (Amuzie & Winke, 2009, p. 376) suggesting that attention should be focused on modifying dysfunctional beliefs. Moreover, changing belief systems have been observed among students entering Australian universities and teachers can be central to this process (Devine, 1999).

Beliefs about how to learn a language can affect the use and efficacy of learning strategies. For example, if the student believes "that the best way to learn a foreign language is to memorize", they focus on vocabulary and grammar learning. But if the student thinks "that the best way to learn a foreign language is to absorb it in natural contexts", they will take advantage of social situations (Benson & Lor, 1999, p. 459). Also there can be "mistaken, uninformed, or negative beliefs that may lead to a reliance on less effective strategies, resulting in a negative attitude towards learning" (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005, p. 6; after Victori & Lockhart, 1995).

The link between autonomous or self-directed learning and the affective variables that impact on language learning is also strong. These variables include beliefs and motivation, with some types of motivation more effective than others in promoting strategy use and academic success. As long ago as 1992 Ames reported a strong correlation between success and strategy use, and between success and an intrinsic motivational orientation. In a similar vein "self-efficacy" or confidence in one's ability has also been linked to academic improvement and strategy use (see Schunk, 1991).

In our study (Rochecouste et al., 2010) there was a strong mean and low standard deviation for the belief that “I can become more proficient in English” (Mean 4.02; SD 0.834) suggesting a high level of self-efficacy amongst our participants, although this could be evidence of a bias in terms of the self-selecting sample. Interestingly, however, there was no significant correlation between this belief and student GPAs. However, there were a small number of beliefs about learning English that were found to correlate slightly with GPAs. These included the belief that knowing about the culture helped one’s understanding of English (Mean 3.44; SD 1.038; $r=0.157$ Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)). Of particular interest is the belief that reading English is easier than writing it which resulted in a weak, but positive correlation with students’ GPA (Mean 3.57; SD 1.001; $r=0.119$ Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)). Beliefs in having a good vocabulary and doing much practice were also strongly represented (Mean 4.21; SD 0.797), although no significant correlation with GPA was recorded (Rochecouste et al., 2010, p. 47).

Beliefs about learning English were also expressed in the qualitative data. These included English being “one of the most beautiful languages ever created by mankind”, the belief that learning language is fun (Rochecouste et al., 2010, p. 48.) and believing that “being good at a language is the only way to know and fully understand the culture” (p. 62).

At the same time somewhat negative beliefs were also expressed, such as not saying anything in English until it can be said correctly, were held by some students (Mean 2.07; SD 1.036), and showed a slight negative correlation ($r = -0.108$ Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)) with the GPA.

Motivated learning behaviour

To undertake overseas study in the first instance requires considerable motivation and that motivation needs to survive those barriers that inhibit positive transition, such as culture shock, study shock, as well as the stresses involved in finding accommodation, using a different public transport system, and coming to terms with a new university environment. This motivation also has to survive in the face of discovering that the level of one’s existing English proficiency may not be adequate to succeed in an English speaking university context. However, the initial motivation of international students may not be quite as we imagine. For example, Choi and Nieminen (2013) note that less desirable motives are at play such as “avoidance of the hyper-competitive domestic system” or “pursuit of an overseas degree as an ‘easy

option' of moderate prestige" (p. 161) which suggests that the students choosing our universities may not be elite performers (p. 170).

Motivation has attracted attention both in language learning and in learning research generally. These studies address types of motivation and links to academic or second language learning success, as well as links to the learning strategies "...that students apply of their own free will to enhance the effectiveness of their learning; in this sense, strategy use, by definition, constitutes instances of motivated learning behavior" (Dornyei, 2001, p. 51). This was apparent among the students who participated in our study and the range of strategies they employed to improve their English language development are discussed later in this paper.

Scholars in this area distinguish between different types of motivation. Early work describes *instrumental* orientation for motivation (e.g., reasons such as getting a visa or a job) and *integrative* orientation (e.g., identifying with the L2 community) (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Gardner, Moorcroft & Metford, 1989; Kouritzin, Piquemal & Renaud, 2009; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). More recently motivation has been described as *intrinsic* (learning the L2 for "the inherent pleasure and satisfaction of doing so" (Pae, 2008, p.7, after Deci & Ryan, 2002) and *extrinsic* which originates in "some instrumental ends that are external to the activity" (p. 8).

Students in our study (Rochecouste et al., 2010; Oliver, Dooey & Rochecouste, 2012) exhibited a range of motivation orientations. For example, there was strong evidence of both intrinsic and integrative motivation with students' reports of English language skills providing "an advantage in selecting various types of books"; being "able to communicate with English speaking people the same as people from my country"; being "more confident in a foreign country"; "to have more Australian friends"; "being able to use English well is part of the mark of scholarship", "to be 'eloquent' when using English"; "to communicate with people of the world"; and to "help me a lot to understand the history, famous places I should go and also famous dishes I should try" (Rochecouste et al., 2010, p. 63).

Our student cohort also provided evidence of extrinsic and instrumental motivation: "I want to be a good architect with a good incoming project and design massive & unique buildings, so English is a MUST and a first step before I can reach into that stage"; "English is the prime language in Aviation so a good command on English is necessary"; "I am studying nursing . . . if I am not good at English, it's really dangerous for patients because everything we do is relate to their lives" (Oliver et al., 2011, p11).

The relevance of motivation for language learning and academic success was discussed in the seminal work of Csizer and Dornyei (2005a), who found that highly motivated students develop an *ideal L2 self*, while those students with a general lack of interest in foreign languages and cultures develop an *ought-to L2 self*. The ought-to L2 self refers to attributes that one ought to have, while the ideal L2 self is proactive about language learning, hence leading to a greater degree of success. Students in our study with an ought-to self image would have included those who studied only what they needed to know to pass their course – a learning strategy that correlated somewhat negatively with the GPA measure (Mean 2.81; SD 1.010; $r=-0.136$ (Correlation significant at the 0.01 level 2 tailed)) (Rochecouste et al, 2010, p. 43).

A further construct in the study of motivation in language learning is the Willingness-to-Communicate (WTC) which has attracted researchers since work by MacIntyre, Dornyei, Clement & Noels (1998). WTC has been attributed to a range of factors: self-confidence, social factors, and opportunities to use the target language. A lack of WTC was also observed in our qualitative data (Rochecouste et al, 2010, p. 64),

I feel very inconfident [sic] when it comes to speaking in English, as far as the basic Introduction is concerned it is ok, but I can't keep the conversation going the moment I am being asked what I am doing this weekend. My main problem is in the listening. I never understand the Australian accent. They speak so fast and they have a short [form] for every word. As far as I am concerned, my main problem is understanding their accent.

Invariably this led to increased anxiety due to a fear of making mistakes and subsequent loneliness:

I always use the wrong grammar and tenses that will make me embarrassed. I am a coward that I don't know how to communicate with the stranger and even all my housemates from America or Europe. I would like to learn English well but I don't know how to start....

Sadly there were numerous similar reports in our data which suggest that a considerable proportion of students do not have the skills and therefore the motivation to develop their communicative competence to cope in their new environment and they are being left to “sink or swim”. Such reports show a definitive need for action on the part of universities and faculties to create situations where international students are not afraid to interact with local students. *The Interaction for Learning Framework*



developed by Arkoudis et al. (2010; 2013) provides an excellent guide for academics to integrate “peer interaction activities in the teaching and learning context to optimise students learning” (Arkoudis et al., 2010, p. 45).

The lack of assistance for the development of communicative competence in our universities has not gone unnoticed elsewhere. For example, in a recent article in the *University World News* (21 September 2013 Issue No: 288), Hiep Pham, a PhD student at the Chinese Culture University in Taiwan and a visiting scholar at the University of Melbourne, wrote that our courses “provide ideal opportunities for internationalised learning experiences through interaction of students from different backgrounds” and that “English proficiency, effective communication skills and other types of “soft skills” should be repositioned from the periphery to the centre of all Australian higher education curricula”.

5. What students do – Autonomous Learning

The value of developing communicative competence was evident in our data with a small, but positive correlation (Mean 4.07; SD.886; $r=0.100$ Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)) between using English in daily life and academic achievement, as measured by GPAs or a normalised equivalent (Rochecouste et al., 2010, p. 29). The development of such skills is highly dependent on students’ own self-direction or autonomous learning. This type of learner assumes a greater responsibility for their learning (Thanasoulas, 2000), has “insights to their learning styles and strategies” (Thanasoulas, 2000, after Wenden, 1998), takes risks, for example, guesses when they do not know something, and has “a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language” (Thanasoulas, 2000, after Wenden, 1998). Rochecouste and Xu (2011) describe these types of students as experiencing recognition of their needs when learning of their lack of pragmatic and applied grammatical competence and their social adjustment issues. Upon recognition of these inadequacies, Rochecouste and Xu interpret students’ responses as activation of their own agency to use English appropriately; to develop strategies and access resources; to overcome isolation and anxiety; and to enhance their academic achievement. Research generally shows that students who display autonomous learning behaviours are more likely to take on new strategies. For example, such students can plan their own practice schedules, know their strengths and weaknesses, and know how to ask for help (Cotterall, 1999).

In higher education contexts, general, rather than language learning, strategy use is frequently described using terms such as “deep”, “surface” and “strategic” approaches (after Biggs, 1987, 1993, 1999; Entwistle, 1987).

Deep level learning is manifest by strong interest and enjoyment in the academic task, and “a search for inherent and personal meaning in the task, and integration with existing knowledge, and generalisation based on the knowledge gained from the task” (Rochecouste et al., 2010, p. 48). By contrast a surface learner will see a task as an imposition, rely on rote-learning rather than making generalisations in connection with existing knowledge. The strategic approach, on the other hand, involves judging the most appropriate approach for the type and value of the task – and this may be a surface or a deep approach. These approaches to learning contrast with those described in the second language learning literature - an area where there has been an extensive research. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing as a focus for at least two decades, this research includes the work of such people as O'Malley and Chamot (e.g., 1990) who describe a framework of social, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Although there have been some suggestions made to reconcile Biggs' strategies and second language learning strategies (e.g., Andreou, Andreou & Vlachos, 2005), O'Malley and Chamot's constructs remain quite distinct in the research. Therefore, as language growth was the focus of our study, we chose to use the second language learning framework.

Social strategies

Our participants readily identified language learning strategies that could be categorised as the social strategies described in second language learning research. For example, they described strategies that involved interaction with lecturers/tutors, other learners or even people outside the university, for example joining a study group to work on assignments, or a discussion group of friends from different countries to practice English, joining Toastmasters, asking native English speakers to check one's understanding, checking lecture notes with friends, and discussing readings (Rochecouste et al., 2010, p. 53). Of particular note in our study we found that participating in campus activities or interacting in an English speaking environment showed a small, but positive correlation with the GPA (Mean 2.75; SD 1.085; $r=0.102$ Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed)). Despite this, in our research many students expressed feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, panic, loneliness and a sense of intolerance among native speaking peers with whom they attempt to interact. This result is similar to previous research showing interaction between local and domestic students as problematic in terms of international student socialisation (e.g., Arkoudis et al., 2010; Pearce, 2012).



Cognitive strategies

Cognitive learning strategies are those which embody manipulation of the knowledge itself to improve learning, in this case conscious strategies to develop competency in English. Strategies such as repetition, summarising, categorising, making inferences, were reported by a number of students. These also included doing grammar exercises, having someone check an assignment, focusing on correct grammar when chatting online, reading English books, listening to the radio and television documentaries and movies, and using words heard via these media (Rochecouste et al., 2010, p.67).

Students also reported using cognitive strategies for developing their understanding of academic content, particularly when they struggled because of their low level English skills. These strategies included thoroughly reading textbooks, lecture notes and websites to clarify understanding and get different points of view, seeking books by other authors on the topic to improve understanding, previewing and reviewing lecture notes, and writing down everything (Rochecouste et al., p.45). Clearly these should be strategies that all students employ, but for the students in our study these particular strategies are extremely time-consuming and leave little time for attending more focused support classes or taking part in social activities to improve their English.

Part of the difficulty is the selection of strategies that students make. For example whilst a number of participants expressed a range of strategies for improving their vocabulary, many of these were relatively low-level and time-consuming such as making lists, wall charts, and translating back to one's home language. The latter strategy – made easy by electronic hand-held dictionaries - correlated in a small negative but significant way with achievement measured through their GPA or normalised equivalent (Mean 2.49; SD 1.132; $r=-0.136$ (Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)) (Rochecouste et al, p. 36). On the other hand risk-taking by inferring meaning from context showed a significant positive, albeit small correlation (Mean 3.81; SD 0.874; $r=0.141$ (Correlation significant at the 0.05 level (2 tailed))). Inferencing from contextual meaning is generally considered a valuable learning strategy as it involves deeper cognitive processing (Read, 2000, p. 53), but it has not previously been related to achievement (Bialystok, 1981) and does not result in the long-term retention of a word (Haastrup, 1991).

Metacognitive strategies

Metacognitive or self-regulatory strategies such as time management, and ascertaining gaps in one's knowledge were also observed in our data. Among our students there were those who organised their time to get their assignments done early, placed themselves in an environment which forced them to speak English (e.g., planned not to share housing with people who spoke the same language), consciously immersed themselves in the culture, or got a job that required speaking English (Rochecouste et al, 2010, p. 56).

Instruction in autonomous learning and developing one's own learning strategies would be seem to be of benefit to this student cohort. To this end, one deliverable from our project was a CD ROM with downloadable texts, audio and video of strategy advice. This resource has been made available to international students at the participating universities and online via the edu.au domain name. The exponential development of ICT for student support will also enhance autonomous learning.

6. Conclusion

What seems to be the ever-changing approach to supporting international students' language development in our universities suggests that "it is by no means clear that there is consensus among academic staff or university hierarchies as to whose responsibility the development of high levels of language proficiency should be" (Dunworth, 2010, p.8).

In the face of the on-going juggling of responsibilities for and attitudes to supporting international students, the more motivated among our student participants appeared to have adopted numerous autonomous learning, and in the most part useful, strategies to enhance both their language acquisition and their academic achievement. This goes some way to addressing Skyrme's (2005) concern, that there remains the underlying difficulty of using "strategies to enhance the use of one's second language as a learning resource for disciplinary study in a second language" (p. 1). However there remained numerous instances of students not knowing what to do to improve their English which suggests the need for instruction in "how to improve your English", rather than limiting the focus on formal academic literacy. Clearly there is still much to do both in terms of future research and with regard to the support mechanisms that universities put in place.

7. Note

1. We use the term “proficiency” in the sense adopted by Dunworth, that is “English language proficiency describes the capacity to use English to construct and communicate meaning at a level appropriate for the communicative context. It is an overarching term that is intended to include general, academic and professional domains of use”. For further discussion, see Dunworth, 2013b, p. 15).

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