

The DELNA language advisory session: How do students respond?

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, the role of the academic English language advisor in English-medium universities worldwide has become salient, as the numbers of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students seeking out English-medium institutions have grown. In order to make the most of their tertiary studies many of these students need assistance to further develop their language proficiency. For this reason, in 2002, the University of Auckland implemented the post-entry Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA), to identify those most in need of language enrichment and to advise them about the appropriate language courses on campus. Initially the advice was sent by email but, in a further step in 2005, the role of Language Advisor was established, acting on student requests for a personal discussion of their assessment results. This role was premised on a policy of voluntary follow-up by students, based on the philosophy that they should take some responsibility for their own learning needs (Read, 2008). Subsequent analyses of uptake (Read, forthcoming) showed, however, that it was the weaker students in general who bypassed the opportunity to receive guidance. In response, certain faculties and departments introduced a requirement for students not only to access the advice but also to act on it. Recognising the importance of student input in the assessment process (Shohamy, 2001), this paper draws on students' anonymous online evaluations over 11 years, in order to discuss their response to the DELNA requirement, with a particular focus on the language advisory session and the uptake of advice.

Introduction

The language profile of English-medium universities worldwide began changing in the 1980s, as migration and the recruitment of foreign fee-paying students increased the number of EAL students on their campuses. It quickly became evident that language advice and guidance were going to be imperative if these students were to succeed in their studies, and yet not all institutions were prepared for this. Defining the role of a language advisor was something that universities in the United Kingdom, for example, only began addressing in the 1990s (Mozzon-Mcpherson & Vismans, 2001).

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At that time at the University of Auckland, where migration, principally from the Pacific and Asia in the previous two decades, was affecting the language profile, academics had begun to discuss the language issue (Ellis & Hattie, 1999; Gravatt, Richards & Lewis, 1997; Moran, 1995) and to attribute the larger than normal failure rate to students' lack of English proficiency. As a response to their concerns, the university introduced the post-entry diagnostic English language needs assessment, DELNA, to be administered to the whole first-year cohort to identify those students with levels of language that would be a barrier to academic success and to guide them to the appropriate English language credit courses or other language enrichment services on campus (Elder & Erlam, 2001).

In the first two years, a small number of faculties and departments adopted DELNA and administered the assessment in a lecture slot to all the students in a particular course, with all results and advice being sent by email. The first investigation of student responses to DELNA advice (Bright & von Randow, 2004) showed convincingly that they wanted to meet with a person to discuss the language profile generated from the results of the three diagnostic tasks (the listening, the reading and the writing) and have the language enrichment options explained. In 2005, increased funding meant that a DELNA Language Advisor could be appointed, and an analysis of students' DELNA bands showed that the more proficient students immediately accepted the invitation to meet with her. The weakest, on the other hand, did not and they were not followed up, as the original thinking was that language enrichment would be more effective if the students were self-motivated (Read, 2008).

This philosophy, however, did not suit the faculties and schools whose students needed to identify their language needs early and work on them throughout their studies in order to gain professional registration and perform effectively in the workplace once they graduated. The Faculties of Business and Economics (now the Business School), Engineering, and Education and the Schools of Pharmacy and Nursing therefore made DELNA, attending the advisory session and the uptake of advice compulsory. The Faculty of Arts followed suit in 2009 with their special admission students, and in 2011, DELNA became compulsory for all doctoral students.

This trend towards greater compulsion has impacted on DELNA. The first component of its two phase structure is a 30-minute online screening, which filters out proficient English users, and then the remaining students take the second component, a two-hour pen-and-paper diagnosis (for details of the DELNA assessments see www.delna.auckland.ac.nz). Although the Screening has been compulsory for first-year students since 2006, doing the Diagnosis and acting on DELNA's advice had been seen as a voluntary decision for the students. However, increasing compulsion has raised the stakes involved, particularly for students who have to take a credit course as part of the language enrichment they must undertake. The Language Advisor's role also changed once a requirement to take the advice was included. The DELNA team (the researcher and colleagues) were concerned about these changes, and this led to an

investigation into students' response to the DELNA requirement, their experience of the advisory session and the factors which influenced their uptake, or not, of language advice.

To carry out this investigation, 2000 student responses to an anonymous online evaluation gathered over 11 years of DELNA (to view the questionnaire see www.delnatask.com/evaluation/) were exported to and analysed in Microsoft Excel and NVivo. Further feedback was provided in 23 interviews with students who wanted to come in and talk in more detail about language and their university experience. Their interview responses demonstrated that this experience is significantly enhanced as they take up some form of language enrichment and their language skills improve.

The University of Auckland wants its students “to reach their academic potential within a climate of excellence” (University of Auckland, 2005, p.8), and by providing language enrichment opportunities has accepted its responsibility to help students do this. Students, on the other hand, also need to accept theirs by taking DELNA and, if required, consciously improving their language skills. In fact, many were not accepting this responsibility and the DELNA team was conscious of the need to conduct the assessment with the collaboration and cooperation of those assessed (Shohamy, 2001). In this way their feedback could be used to benefit future students through the improvements made to the process (Read & von Randow, in review) and their positive experiences could be passed on to their peers (Richardson, 2005). This article focuses first on students' response to the DELNA requirement and then on their response to the advisory session, integrating their actual feedback (from the drop-down boxes in the online questionnaire) throughout.

The DELNA requirement

Student uptake of DELNA 2002–2012

During the period 2002-2012 there was increasing student uptake of DELNA with significant numbers of students acknowledging the benefits gained through the assessment process. Initially, however, many English-speaking background (ESB) students reacted negatively because their faculties required their whole first-year cohorts (see Table 1) to take the two-hour assessment.

I speak English and only English, I was forced to do the DELNA test by the University of Auckland I am completely capable at communicating with the English Language (2003) ¹

They felt it was unnecessary and a waste of time.

¹ Please note that all students' feedback is from the anonymous online questionnaire and is quoted verbatim.

Testing students who speak English as a first language seems to me to be a waste of both time and resources, resources which could be far more effectively utilised on students who actually need the assistance (2003).

Table 1. *DELNA uptake 2002–2003*

	2002	2003
Screening	245	139
Diagnosis	1,111	1,904

This attitude changed considerably when, from 2004, the 30-minute Screening, now administered online, could be used as originally intended, to exempt proficient English users from further assessment. The introduction of an online booking site also meant students simply booked a session independently and attended. The ESB students even began to enjoy this rather novel language assessment (Read, 2008) and the uptake of the Screening, as can be seen in Table 2, improved.

Table 2. *DELNA uptake 2004–2005*

	2004	2005
Screening	2,524	3,964
Diagnosis	2,500	1,120

By 2006, the DELNA Screening had become a requirement; students took the Screening first and the Diagnosis only if it was indicated. Those students above two pre-set cut scores were identified as “Good” and “Satisfactory”; the latter being emailed advice about language enrichment at Student Learning Services. Students below those cut-scores were recommended to do the Diagnosis and then meet with the Language Advisor (Elder & von Randow, 2008).

While uptake of the Screening continued to improve, uptake of the Diagnosis did not, and although 28% of the first-year cohort was identified each year as needing to take the Diagnosis, only just over half complied.

Table 3. *DELNA uptake 2006–2012*

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Screening	5,487	5,602	5,681	6,713	7,190	7,543	8,141
Diagnosis	718	708	906	1,500	1,148	1,199	1,353

From 2009, however, more faculties began requiring their students to take the recommended Diagnosis, resulting in the change in those figures in Table 3 and the subsequent increase in the number coming to get the important language advice.

Student response to DELNA 2002–2012

At the end of each semester, the students who have been advised to take some form of English language enrichment post DELNA are invited by email to complete the anonymous online evaluation questionnaire and the response rate fluctuates between 20–23%. The figures and student comments in this paper come from this sample, which, though small, provides important feedback.

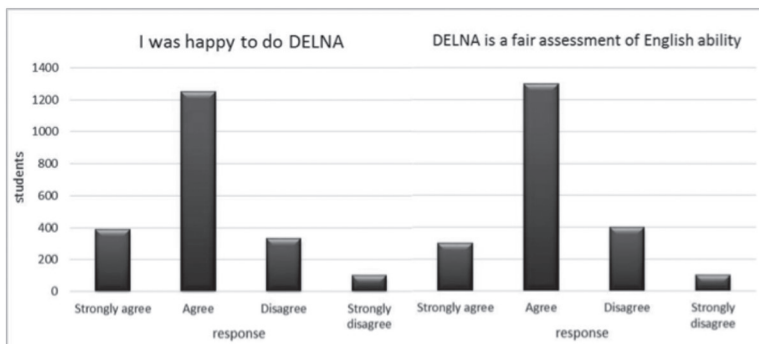


Figure 1. *Response to DELNA 2002–2012*

As can be seen from Figure 1, although there are a significant number of students who object to DELNA and their results, the majority are generally positive and find it a fair assessment of their English ability. Many students, particularly EAL students, welcomed it.

I really support the program. I think it's a good initiative to try and counteract with students difficulties especially those who don't have English as their first language (2003).

The fact that it was beneficial has been noted.

It is very helpful that the assessment is link with the learning support (2010).

In spite of the largely positive evaluation responses, half of the students who did the Diagnosis did not collect their results and meet with the Language Advisor, so from 2007, to find out what students thought about the advisory session, specific questions about that experience were added to the questionnaire.

The Advisory Session

The appointment of the Language Advisor

In 2005, when the DELNA Language Advisor was appointed, students were able to follow the Diagnosis with a one-on-one interview, which is seen as vital after a diagnostic assessment (Knoch, 2012), and which they had requested. Although recently such interviews have been criticised for not being “value for money” (Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012), they have been much appreciated by those students taking advantage of them in Auckland and have been described as “the crux ... the heart of good academic advising” (Fox, 2008, p. 342).

In this one-on-one session, the DELNA Language Advisor has to convince students of the benefits of developing their academic literacy and of consistently working on their language skills throughout their degree programme. It has been a challenge, but creativity, diplomatic perseverance and on-going collaboration with faculty staff and student learning services have played a role in gradually increasing compliance. In 2005, there were 88 advisory sessions, and in 2012, by which time there were also three part-time DELNA Language Advisors in the Faculty of Education, 829 advisory sessions took place.

While the increasing numbers are encouraging, there is considerable concern about those who do not take advantage of the advisory sessions, as the analysis of their GPAs shows that the majority are at the lower end of the grading scale (Read, forthcoming), suggesting that they need DELNA’s advice and guidance.

Students invited to the advisory session

The students invited to attend an advisory session are those who have an average DELNA band of 6.5 or lower over the three skills of listening, reading and writing. Students who have a writing band of 6, in spite of having a slightly higher average band, are also asked to come in. Table 4 broadly describes these bands; a more detailed description can be found in the DELNA handbook (see www.delna.auckland.ac.nz).

Table 4. *DELNA Bands*

Band(s)	Description
8 & 9	Will independently acquire academic literacy
7	Use of academic language enrichment opportunities recommended
6	Further instruction in academic English skills recommended
4 & 5	At risk of failure – English credit courses highly recommended

Student response to the advisory session

The first students to respond to the initial email asking them to make an appointment to collect their DELNA profile and discuss language enrichment are generally those with an average band close to 6.5, while students with average bands of less than 6, who are struggling with their courses, often need a phone call or a text reminder.

Many students are somewhat taken aback to be asked to see the Language Advisor:

I was shocked at first but then thought well it is better to know the truth and be able to do something about it (2003).

The advisory session, however, enables such students to talk about their own view of their language skills and be listened to:

She took time to listen to what I had to say about my thoughts on my language skill difficulties and she gave me excellent advice on how to work through these issues. I walked away feeling so confident in myself (2010).

Many are nervous and not quite sure what to expect. They may be ambivalent about their language ability and even defensive, so it is the Language Advisor's job to put them at their ease:

She was absolutely awesome. So helpful and very approachable (2011).

The advisors tailor their advice, working with knowledge of what a student's first language is, the length of time they have been in New Zealand, the university course they are enrolled in and possibly self-reported NCEA or IELTS results. For some ESB and highly proficient students, for example, a few writing workshops will be sufficient:

The advisor told me to join in the workshop to improve my English, and it does work (2009).

Even sceptical students who felt they did not need DELNA have realised that getting the right advice at the right time can make a difference:

Although my english is fluent, taking the courses that was recommended by DELNA has helped me- although others may think its recommended for overseas students with little English it does help others to improve their writing skills like myself (2010).

Student response to the advice

The majority of the responses from students attending the advisory sessions are positive. While the self-motivated and those who are required to act on the advice mostly do so immediately, others may wait until the following semester or the following year when they can, for example, fit an academic English credit course, in listening and reading, writing or presentation into their programme. The advice

given to many of these students is that they should take such a course (now with the acronym, ACADENG, previously, ESOL) so that they get 12 weeks of course work with constant written feedback and monitoring:

I took ESOL101 Academic English Writing paper last semester thanks to DELNA's help and advice. That was surely timely and appropriate guide for me. I received a great help through the class (2005).

As many students are unable to fit an ACADENG course into their degree programme, it is not surprising that students choose the workshops, consultations and learning resources available at English Language Enrichment (ELE) and Student Learning rather than a credit course. As Figure 2 shows, however, while some students report that they actually did take up one of the language enrichment options, others say they are intending to do this and may or may not follow up this good intention in the following semester.

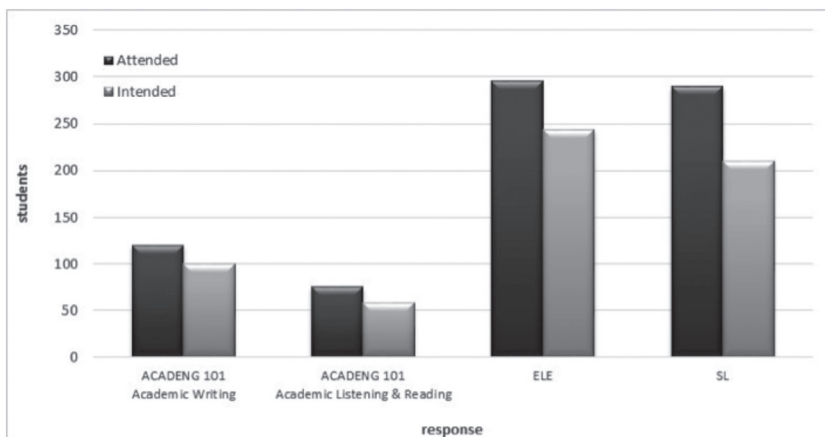


Figure 2. Responses to four language enrichment options 2002–2012

Required uptake

Over the 11 years only 54% of the respondents said that they acted on the advice given, which is disappointing. It has, therefore, been interesting to focus on the students who are now required to take the advice.

The engineering, pharmacy and nursing students take an online non-credit course, created in ELE in collaboration with DELNA. This involves the students in 10 hours online, two consultations at ELE, and an exit test (plus an oral assessment for pharmacy and nursing students), with many maintaining contact with ELE throughout their studies. Education students devise an independent progress plan with their language advisors and keep a learning journal that is shared with the advisory staff,

who monitor progress before an exit test. While not all students in these faculties initially acknowledge that they need assistance, with hindsight they recognise the benefits and express this in follow-up interviews:

In Semester one a friend and I went to about 10 workshops on writing and other things...may not have done that without the DELNA experience and talking to Jenni, etc. The workshops were really worthwhile (2011).

Special admission students in the Faculty of Arts, who may not have had recent experience of formal education, must take an English language credit course recommended by the DELNA Language Advisor after their Diagnosis. Almost without exception these students realise that these courses address some very real needs:

I needed this, it really took me back to basics (2010).

Business students are directed by the language advisor to the tutorials within their degree programmes. For those in the lowest DELNA bands there is an additional discipline-specific language tutorial which many may avoid by not attending the advisory session and thus, not getting the necessary information. Then before the beginning of Semester 2 there is often a rush of advisory appointments because those students have just failed one or more courses and are urgently looking for help:

I have to repeat a course. I know it is my writing. You can't get on without good writing (2012).

For the doctoral students post-Diagnosis, there is a language enrichment programme tailored to their individual needs that they follow throughout their first year of provisional registration and report on at the end of that year in an exit interview. For some, this entails an English credit course, which may at first seem like a burden but it is generally acknowledged to have been extremely helpful.

This semester SCIGEN101...very useful for me... useful for research degree. I think it is very helpful for my studying in future (2012).

Both the students and the supervisors value the time that the Language Advisor spends to make the provisional year language goals attainable and worthwhile. As one supervisor said:

I am fully supportive of the DELNA and ELE schemes and am happy to work with my student to improve all aspects of her English comprehension and writing...the English language enrichment programme will be of great benefit to her in both her PhD and beyond (2012).

No uptake

The students who do not collect their DELNA profiles or who do not take the advice generally believe that they have no time for this (see Figure 3). They need time to find their bearings at the beginning of their first year, to travel to the university and to fit in their part-time jobs, their families and their sporting commitments. Timetables in many programmes make it impossible for students to take an ACADENG course and students already dealing with language difficulties are taking up to four courses in their first semester, which makes time a major issue.

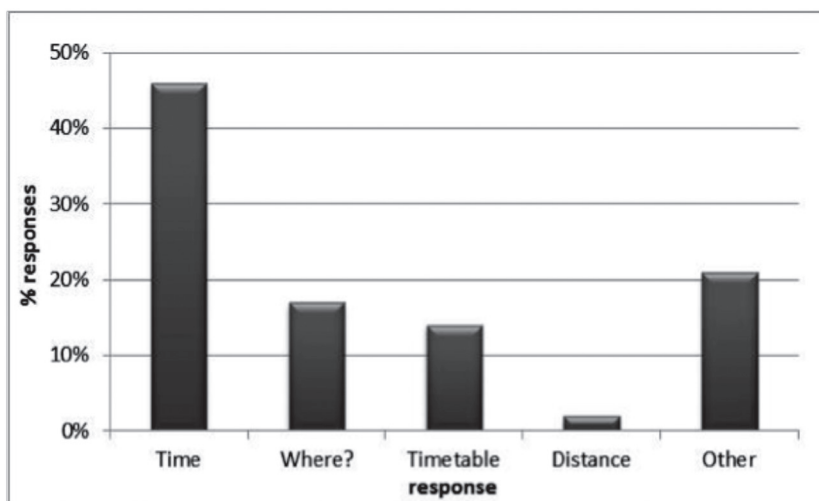


Figure 3. *Students' reasons for non-uptake of language enrichment*

Those asking 'where' are also a concern. The advertising, the talking and the information in faculty and course handbooks and on the university websites should alert students to the services available and where they can be found. Those who come to the advisory session have this question answered immediately.

For the students who are our focus, however, coping with all the demands of university study and weak language skills simply increases their burden. The time that they felt they did not have is spent repeating courses, with all the added stress that brings in terms of cost: social, financial and psychological (Banerjee, 2003; Bright & von Randow, 2008).

Time well spent

Those students who do collect their DELNA profiles and get the appropriate language advice, on the other hand, tell us that it is time well spent:

My English language adviser told me to attend some useful language enrichment sessions regarding to my listening and this is turns out to be very good. Now I am almost OK with the listening and understand the NZ English (2012).

During the advisory session they are helped to plan their language learning:

I was given a website to search for work shops that were available at the student learning centre, very helpful and i made sure i took advantage of it to improve goals that i had set out for the semester (2012).

The issue of compulsion

Originally we wanted to leave the initiative up to the students to do DELNA and take up language enrichment, but gradually it has become clear that in order for many students to help themselves, there has to be a little pressure to motivate them:

I knind off knew what i was expecting but still it was helpful to hear from another person's perspective ... this is a good wake up call, giving me that extra push to do something about it ... to improve myself and better yet for my future (2010).

This need for some pressure was observed in a study of four students who had received advice post DELNA and followed it conscientiously (Magalhaes, 2010), and the faculties who require DELNA and insist on uptake of advice also understand this. Language acquisition requires input and effort; it does not happen by osmosis.

Yes, I thought that when I just come from Iran here, I just think that my English will be magically better – with just being in an English country speaking. But it is not magicking! (2011).

Conclusion

The University of Auckland implemented DELNA to identify students with language needs and enable them to get the language input that is needed to further develop their language skills and increase their chance of academic success. Over 11 years, as this paper shows, DELNA has played a significant part in this process.

Through frequent consultation with the principal stakeholders, notably students, some critical changes have been made. The DELNA team has learnt from the students' anonymous online evaluation comments over 11 years, making improvements in the administration of the assessment, and passing on students' experience to their peers so that they too will be encouraged to improve their own language skills. Furthermore, the overwhelmingly positive response from those students who have benefitted from

the DELNA advisory session suggests that helping students help themselves brings results. The advisory interview therefore is time well spent, as getting the best advice as early as possible means time saved in the long run.

There are certain limitations to this study. Its relatively small scope and the voluntary nature of student responses, such that students with more positive experiences of the advisory session were more likely to complete the questionnaire, suggest that more research is needed to follow up the issues raised here. The fact that a significant minority did not take advantage of the advisory session, and thus missed the advice and assistance that is crucial following such an assessment, raises the question of compulsory follow-up. As faculties gradually have come to understand something of the prolonged process of academic literacy acquisition, they have also become aware that leaving uptake to the students' initiative is not always productive. This is a belief shared by the DELNA team, in spite of the original philosophy that uptake of language enrichment should be left up to the students.

English-medium universities across the world are currently grappling with the question of how best to address the language needs of their increasingly diverse student populations and have established a number of ways of addressing this issue. Amongst these, the value of language advising is now widely recognised as a means of raising the quality of an institution's academic outcomes. A crucial aspect of this development, as this paper suggests, is now to ensure that the benefits of the advisory sessions are taken up by all students who need language assistance on their path to learning success.

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