

Lemongrass room
12.45-1:10pm

Supporting the English Language Needs of International Graduate Students

FONG Yoke Sim

Centre for English Language Communication

elcfys@nus.edu.sg

National University of Singapore (NUS), a multicultural learning context, offers Graduate English Courses (GEC), which are essentially English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, to support its international graduate students (IGS) in their English language learning needs. As a new coordinator of one of the GEC, I decided to revisit the language needs of the IGS based on the following rationale.

Over the two decades that the GEC had been offered, there had been many changes at faculties/departments. Thus, students' English learning needs had evolved. Thus, a needs analysis would be a step in the right direction to better support the IGS in transitioning to their new learning context in NUS. Accordingly, I conducted a needs analysis with the following objectives:

- (1) to analyse the English language needs of IGS in NUS
- (2) to recommend enhancements to the GEC and similar courses for IGS in other higher education contexts

A review of literature on international students indicate that they often face academic, linguistic and sociocultural obstacles (Bamford, 2008; Byram & Feng, 2006; Forland, 2006; Huang, 2012; Norton, 2000). More recent studies on IGS, however, suggest that those who have undergone EAP modules are better equipped to discuss their learning strategy use, seem more confident with written assignments, and appear to have a better grasp of the requirements of their graduate courses (Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). Moreover, factors other than linguistic skills also seem to have a strong impact on IGS in their learning journeys, such as motivation, academic and research cultures, supervisor-supervisee engagement, and family issues (Son & Park, 2014).

For my study, I invited IGS from two consecutive semesters to participate in a needs analysis via a questionnaire survey. The participants ranked a list of academic tasks (categorised according to the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening) in order of importance for their graduate programmes. In addition, they ranked a list of factors, such as motivation, intercultural communication, and academic and research cultures that impacted their studies. These responses were analysed to surface the academic tasks and language skills perceived by the IGS as highly important and the areas of concern that impacted them most.

Based on the results, I made recommendations to provide greater support to the IGS in their learning needs. These recommendations are as follows: incorporate more writing tasks such as book/article reviews and presentation slides into the GEC; incorporate more aural-oral tasks such as discussions and presentations; tap on NUS's Writing and Communication Hub and local/competent conversational partners; and consider offering a new module with more speaking and listening components. Besides their language needs, the study shows that the IGS were affected in their learning process by their motivation, NUS's academic and research cultures, and intercultural communication. In this respect, the support of the NUS community will certainly enhance the learning journeys of these IGS. While this study was conducted in NUS, the results and recommendations may apply to other (international) Higher Education contexts so that our ELT practices can better support our students to manage their language learning needs.

Keywords

International graduate students, needs analysis

References

- Bamford, J. K. (2008). *Improving international students' experience of studying in the UK*. The Economics Network. Retrieved from www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/showcase/bamford_international.
- Byram, M., & Feng, A. (2006). (Eds.) *Living and studying abroad: Research and practice*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Forland, H. (2006). *The international student learning experience: Bridging the gap between reality and rhetoric*. Going Global 2: The UK International Education Conference, Edinburgh, 6-8 December 2006.
- Huang, Y. (2012). Transitioning challenges faced by Chinese students. *Adult Learning*, 23(3), 138-147. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1045159512452861>
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. London: Longman/Pearson Education.
- Son, J-B., & Park, S-S. (2014). Academic experiences of international PhD students in Australian higher education: From an EAP program to a PhD program. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 9(1), 26-37. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18334105.2014.11082017>
- Terraschke, A., & Wahid, R. (2011). The impact of EAP study on the academic experiences of international postgraduate students in Australia. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 4(2011), 173-182. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2011.05.003>