


MAKING THE TRANSITION TO STUDYING IN ENGLISH: IS EXTRA TIME IN EXAMINATIONS FOR NESB STUDENTS A DESIRABLE OPTION?

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Tertiary study in a foreign language is an enormous challenge. The extent of this challenge is reflected in the performance of NESB students. NESB students have a higher failure rate than their ESB classmates and tend to be under-represented at the higher end of the grade spectrum, although over time, as they adjust culturally and acquire greater tertiary literacy skills, their performance tends to improve. Examinations, in particular, would appear to discriminate against NESB students, who take longer to process text in English than their ESB classmates. Allowing NESB students extra time in examinations for their first three semesters would appear to be a logical and equitable solution which would go some way towards addressing the disadvantage that they experience. However, there are strong bastions of resistance to this idea within universities: many academics and administrators do not accept the concept of positive discrimination; others claim that university admissions requirements




should exclude students who have limited English literacy skills; others claim that allowing extra time for some students is too complex administratively. Indeed, there may be more constructive ways to address the disadvantages faced by NESB students. This paper will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of allowing NESB students extra time in exams as a way of helping students make the transition to studying in a foreign language.

Keywords: *NESB students, examinations, equity*

The adjustment of NESB students to studying in Australia can be difficult. Although attitudes appear to have changed considerably over the past ten years, and universities are now much more inclusive learning environments, the fact remains that NESB students are still disadvantaged. Hawthorne (1999, p.51) maintains that this is no longer the case, as the gap between NESB and ESB success rates has reduced. Indeed, the success ratio for Australian NESB students is 0.96 (DETYA 1999). Nevertheless, NESB students, and particularly international NESB students, are still underrepresented at the higher end of the grade spectrum, and over-represented at the pass end of the spectrum (Wilson 2001, p.3). This disadvantage is particularly true in the first few semesters of NESB students' experience in tertiary study in Australia.

For equity reasons, universities need to address this problem. There is, of course, no single easy answer. A raft of strategies needs to be in place including, above all, providing student support and staff development. However, from a policy point of view, one way to address this problem is to allow NESB students extra time in exams. This is a highly contentious issue, and one which raises strong feelings within the University.




In this paper I will discuss the arguments for and against such a policy and make suggestions for LAS advisers who may be considering trying to introduce the concept into their own institutions.

Why allow extra time?

LAS advisers are well aware of the problems faced by NESB students. To some extent these difficulties are cultural. The cultural web underpinning education in Australia, the expected roles of teacher and student, the expected outcomes of education, even the construct of learning itself may all be new to students who do not have much experience of the Australian tertiary environment. Exams in particular may require new skills and approaches. Cargill and Chanock (2000) point out that ESB students may be facing similar challenges of adjustment. Students making the transition from school to university, or making the transition from one discipline to another, all have to acquire competence in new cultures of learning. However, NESB students, especially those newly arrived in Australia, often have a greater leap to make as they are adjusting not only to the discipline and the tertiary institution, but also to the national culture.

The difficulties faced by NESB students are also linguistic, as the cognitive load of working in a second, and especially a foreign language, is considerable. Anyone who has had the experience of studying in a foreign language will corroborate this. Although working in the new language becomes easier with time and experience, the transition stage can be very hard.

Research substantiates that exams, especially those requiring strong literacy skills will take longer for NESB students. In terms of reading, for example, Strother and Uljin (1987) showed that Chinese and Arabic speaking students took three times as long as native speakers to read a Computing Science text. NESB students' reading comprehension has also been shown to be less accurate than ESB students'. Farrell et al (1992) found that NESB students had an average score of 73% in an ACER-developed academic reading comprehension test, whereas ESB students scored 89% on average.



NESB reading difficulties are exacerbated in exams, particularly multiple-choice exams, as NESB readers typically rely on top-down reading strategies such as guessing meaning from context, and picking out main ideas. However, reading exam papers generally requires a bottom-up approach because little context is given, yet precise understanding is needed. In Farrell et al's study (1992), NESB students scored an average of 55% as compared to 79% for ESB students on bottom-up processing tasks. The complex grammatical forms of multiple choice questions, which often depend on tricky grammatical relationships such as double negatives, tense usage, and subtle use of modal verbs (might/ should etc), are thus particularly difficult for NESB students.

It is sometimes claimed that these difficulties do not apply in exams in Mathematics and Information Technology, as the linguistic load is less. However, the presentation of mathematical and computing problems often involves complex grammar, and may be very confusing for NESB students.

Writing also takes longer for NESB students. They face challenges both at the level of sentence grammaticality and text level coherence. At the level of coherence, a growing body of literature highlights cross-cultural differences in rhetorical organisation of ideas (Hinds 1987; Kaplan 1987; Kirkpatrick 1997). Students who are capable of writing well-organised, clearly expressed assignments may find it hard to compose coherent text under the time constraints of an exam. Unfortunately, there appears to be little research on the effect of time constraints on NESB students' writing. Kroll (1990) compared the essays of NESB students in a college writing class written in-class (with time constraints) and out-of-class (with no time constraints). She discovered that there was no significant difference in accuracy or in content. However, she did not ascertain how long students spent on their out-of-class essays or specify how severe were the time constraints of the in-class tasks. Further research needs to be undertaken in this area.




What are the precedents for extra time in exams for NESB students?

The practice of allowing extra time in exams for students with disabilities is well-established. However, it is much less common for NESB students. Bartlett (2000) conducted a survey via the Unilearn network and discovered three universities which have policies allowing NESB students extra time in exams: the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), the University of South Australia and Flinders University. In each case the extra time allowed is ten minutes/hour. Flinders University and the University of South Australia overcome any possible difficulties in defining who is eligible for extra time by allowing any students who self-identify as 'NESB' on enrolment to apply for extra time. UTS has a more complex system by which students have to apply through the ELSSA Centre. At UTS, students are only eligible for extra time in their first two semesters, or if they have been attending ELSSA workshops, for their first three semesters. Both systems are working well and have been well-received by the university community (Barthel, A., pers comm., 3/4/01; Barker, P., pers. comm., 21/8/01).

What are the arguments against allowing extra time?

Interestingly, some of the strongest opposition for allowing extra time in exams comes from students and graduates who themselves come from non-English speaking backgrounds. Their main argument is that they do not want special treatment; they would rather compete on equal terms with English-speaking background students. To me, this argument stems from a lack of understanding of the concept of equity. That is, in compensating for disadvantage, this policy would allow students to compete on a more equal basis. However, perhaps it also stems from the desire to avoid casting second language students as having some sort of disability.

Inevitably there are die-hards around the university who argue that, as there are specific English language admission requirements, special conditions for NESB students are unnecessary. If students cannot handle the exam conditions, that is because they should not be studying at university in the first place! In other words,




the admission requirements should be tightened up. The same people are likely to argue that if NESB students were seen to be given special privileges, there would be a backlash from English-speaking background students. Even more distressingly, this attitude is associated with a conviction that NESB students cheat widely on take home assignments and that exams are the only way to reveal their true worth!

An argument which is persuasive to senior management is that allowing extra time would impose an extra financial and administrative burden on the university. However, the scheme in place at University of South Australia, for example, involves minimal administration; and, as lecturers can choose how long their exams last and whether to hold an exam at all, the cost of extra time for employing invigilators would seem to be irrelevant.

A rather more confounding issue is that it is difficult to determine which NESB students need extra time. Some students who can be classified as NESB have actually attended school in Australia or other English-speaking environments for many years, and their language difficulties, if any, are more akin to their English-speaking background colleagues. Others who have been in Australia for many years and would not meet the DETYA definition of NESB (arrived in Australia less than 10 years ago) may be completely unfamiliar with academic English. Complex administrative arrangements like those in place at UTS can go some way towards overcoming this problem, but are not popular with the University administration. On the other hand, broadbrush arrangements like those of the University of South Australia may allow many students an unfair advantage.

From a pedagogic point of view, it can be argued that exams should not be set as a race against the clock. If exams are to have academic validity, care should be taken to ensure that they are not testing time and stress management, nor the ability to write legibly at speed. Instead, ample time should be allowed for all students to complete the exam tasks, no matter what their language background, learning style or handwriting ability.

However, perhaps the most compelling argument against allowing extra time for NESB students is that an extra ten minutes/hour is a token time and does little to compensate for the language and learning difficulties experienced by some NESB




students. Furthermore, students who have used inappropriate study techniques, such as relying on rote-learning, will certainly not be helped by this policy. For this reason, it is more important to focus on enhancing NESB students' skills rather than to reify their disadvantage.

Reflections

Allowing extra time in exams for NESB students is clearly a debatable concept. When I was asked to prepare a paper on the topic for my university I thought it would at least raise awareness of NESB issues, even if the idea itself was not accepted. The university-wide discussions which ensued were certainly very interesting and along the way revealed pockets of Hansenism which did not surprise anyone. In the end the proposal was turned down. I think there were four main reasons why the proposal was not embraced.

First of all, allowing extra time for NESB students in exams would introduce yet another complexity into the university bureaucracy. Any such proposal has therefore got to be as streamlined and straightforward as possible, and all the possible administrative loopholes have to be ironed out before the proposal is put forward for discussion. The proposal I made was based on the UTS model rather than the simpler, 'cleaner' University of South Australia model. The UTS model has the advantage of putting NESB students in direct contact with ELSSA (the Learning Centre), as students have to get approval from ELSSA before applying to their faculty for extra time in exams. A third semester of extra time is also dependent on attending ELSSA workshops. However, this model was perceived as administratively clumsy and too dependent on personal interpretation. There were also niggling questions such as 'What does a third semester mean?' 'What about part-time students?' Similar petty administrative questions about how to organise the extra time dogged the discussion and should have been resolved before my paper was circulated; for example, 'Won't the students be disturbed if some leave earlier than others?'


Second, as with any proposal in the university, it is always necessary to get high-level support before throwing it open to public discussion. At the University of



Canberra, it was unfortunate that the Pro Vice Chancellor who most strongly supported the concept left the University before the matter was resolved.

Third, there is simply not enough hard evidence to support the proposal. There is a need for much more research into NESB assessment issues in tertiary environments. Most obviously, there is the question of whether extra time in exams has any effect on NESB grades. We also need to know more about the performance of NESB students in different types of assessment: do some types of assessment (multiple choice exams for example) discriminate against NESB students? In addition, we need to know more about the effects of different kinds of preparation programs. For example, do academic literacy courses have a significant effect on NESB students' performance on exams, or would one-off examination preparation sessions have a comparable effect? It would also be important to establish which assessment items lead to the most effective learning outcomes. And the list goes on.

Finally, allowing NESB students extra time in exams is a bureaucratic solution to what is in reality a pedagogic problem. For this reason, raising staff awareness and developing students' academic skills are higher priorities than twitching university regulations. In particular, subject convenors need to be more aware of how to set exam papers which do not discriminate against students from non-English speaking backgrounds. This means using language which is clear, concise and free from obscure idiom; setting multiple choice questions which do not depend on tricky grammatical nuances; and allowing plenty of time for all students to complete the exam paper. LAS staff with expertise in language could assist by reviewing exam papers for their colleagues in the disciplines. A second important issue is for staff to understand that exams are not an appropriate arena for testing their students' knowledge of grammar. While it is acknowledged that good communication skills are one of the generic attributes expected of graduates, it is more appropriate to assess such skills in other ways, and to use exams as a means of testing discipline knowledge and analysis rather than grammatical competency. Lecturers also need to realise that it takes time and hard work to acquire high level academic English competency, and that the English language admission requirements are a starting point, not an end point. Finally, there is a need for more flexibility in assessment



procedures to accommodate different learning styles of both NESB and ESB students.

Students, too, whether NESB or not, need to be made fully aware of what to expect in exams; how their answers will be assessed; and how to prepare for the exams. Of course, there should also be opportunities and encouragement for students to strengthen their academic English skills through a wide range of support mechanisms - in particular, early referral of students who may be at risk. At the same time, the university community has to recognise that the 'medical model' - a 'dose' of English language - whether it is administered through an entrance test, an accredited English subject, workshops, or individual consultations, will not in itself be an answer to the difficulties of studying in a second language.


Conclusion

In conclusion, allowing extra time in exams is certainly a generous, inclusivist gesture towards NESB students. However, in terms of addressing equity, there are other more compelling, and less contentious, issues which LAS lecturers need to confront, particularly in terms of staff and student development. Proactive strategies of staff and student development will lead to long-term gains in terms of student learning outcomes. In contrast, introducing extra time in exams for NESB students may be seen as mere tokenism, or even a reification of disadvantage.

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