Chapter 6

Across the Four Domains:
Pathway Students’ Self–Reported
Perceptions of English Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

In many Asian countries, tertiary education remains a much desired but seemingly unattainable goal for high school graduates, due to rigorous unified national examinations. With that in mind, international students invest millions of dollars annually attempting to enter Australian higher education (HE). Students arrive with high expectations, but in the early stages of their study abroad experience, they face a range of transitional difficulties centered around ‘academic English’. An author-developed semi-structured questionnaire included the open-ended question: In your own words, how would you describe your English language ability in terms of (1) listening, (2) speaking, (3) reading, and (4) writing? The data set collected the ‘voice’ of 209 pathway students attending the Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT). Their self-reported narratives share personal perceptions of their own English language proficiency across the four domains largely within the context of their enrolment at the institute.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, ‘pathway’ institutions offer valuable partnerships for the Higher Education (HE) sector and it is beneficial to conduct research into this division to strengthen the overall teaching and learning experience of enrolled students. The

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pathway model that evolved in the 1980s-90s was developed to address the issue of attrition, whereby an innovative model tailored a learning solution that enhanced [international] student transition i.e., cultural and social integration with academic support. For the purpose of this chapter, there is scant literature on pre-university pathway students and the perceptions they have of their own English language capabilities across the four language learning domains. This chapter contributes to bridging that gap by drawing attention to narrative inquiry as a medium of personal learning and growth. In agreement with Rushton (2004), ‘lived experiences can be translated into rich narrative stories useful for both teaching and research’ (p. 62).

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology

The Eynesbury Institute of Business and Technology (EIBT) is one of a growing number of private providers partnering with universities to establish pre-university pathway programs throughout Australia. The Institute has established a strong profile as a pre-university pathway provider in South Australia where students benefit from the discipline-specific expertise and academic rigour the universities apply to their own curriculum (Velliaris & Willis, 2014; Velliaris, Willis, & Breen, 2015a). Cross-institutional lecturers—from other pathway and partner institutions—deliver approximately 40 courses across three back-to-back trimesters (-01, -02, -03). As a ‘second chance’ for prospective students whose academic results and/or English language proficiency are marginally below the requirements for direct entry into Australian undergraduate programs, EIBT offers pathways to either The University of Adelaide or University of South Australia with Diplomas in (1) Business; (2) Information Technology; or (3) Engineering (Fiocco, 2006; Velliaris & Breen, 2014; Velliaris & Willis, 2014; Velliaris, Willis, et al., 2015a).

Throughout this presentation, the term ‘international students’ or ‘students’ is specific to individuals enrolled at the Institute on temporary student visas and who are almost exclusively Non-English Speaking Background (NESB). Pathways focus on the individual and the development of their independent learning, offering additional teaching time, early intervention strategies and a range of support systems. According to Levy (2007, p. 11), such systems are typically ‘culturally diverse’, ‘learner-friendly’, and ‘less politicized’.
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