

***iDeaL*: Deakin's English language diagnostic tool**

Ms Lynn Morrison and Ms Marie Gaspar
Division of Student Life, Deakin University

Introduction

Deakin University students come from diverse contexts, with a range of cultural perspectives, study experiences, disciplinary backgrounds and English language competence. English language proficiency requirements for entry into Deakin can be met in a number of ways, including through successful completion of English language pathway programs or TAFE courses or by achieving a minimum score on an approved English language proficiency test, such as IELTS. Furthermore, students who have achieved the required ENTER score are accepted into Deakin without the need for specific demonstration of English language proficiency. This diversity of student backgrounds, coupled with the lack of a common standard for a minimum level of English language proficiency, has made the task of identifying students who may need language development extremely difficult.

To better identify students who may need language assistance, Deakin proposed to provide commencing students with a post-entry English language diagnosis. After determining the requirements for the Deakin context and cohort and undertaking a comprehensive survey of existing tools that might be used, it was decided that Deakin would develop its own. Development began in 2008 and a prototype was completed in early 2009. Piloting of the tool, *iDeaL*, commenced in March 2009. A poster session was presented at the FYHE seminar in Brisbane in February 2009, outlining *iDeaL*'s progress up to that time. This paper updates the information submitted in Brisbane, with the "Nuts and Bolts" presentation providing

1. a description of *iDeaL*'s components, including a look at the tool online--15 minutes
2. a question-answer session to give attendees the opportunity to discuss specific areas of interest, eg. attendees may want to know how Deakin's *iDeaL* experience might apply in their own situations or discuss how the use of a diagnostic tool could be applied in different contexts of study--15 minutes.

Description of *iDeaL*

iDeaL comprises a screening component, a diagnostic tool and corresponding language development resources. The screening component is a short, timed section which identifies students whose English language skills appear sufficient to undertake university study. Students who score well on the screening items are 'exempted' from further action but are invited to access the diagnostic tool if they would like to.

The diagnostic tool covers 10 subcategories across reading, writing and listening (see Table 1). Diagnostic feedback is given at this subcategory level.

The choice of diagnostic subcategories reflects the assumption that language ability includes both linguistic knowledge and strategic competence (Bachman & Palmer 1996), and thus includes categories such as "making inferences" and "critical reading," which require readers to call upon strategic skills or contextual knowledge. The limitations of the electronic

environment and the requirement to provide students with immediate, automated feedback also shaped the choices made. In particular, the writing section was limited to item types which involved text manipulation and discrete choices, rather than items which reflect the productive nature of “real” writing.

Table 1
The 10 diagnostic subcategories

Macro skill	Subcategory	Description
Reading	1. Understanding information	Comprehend informational aspects such as main ideas and details, key vocabulary items, logical relationships within a text
	2. Making inferences	Read “beyond the words” to understand meta-features such as tone, attitude, audience, purpose, context
	3. Critical reading	Use a range of skills and strategies to understand gist and details and to infer and/or comment on a longer text
Writing	4. Grammar and punctuation	Locate errors in grammar and punctuation
	5. Vocabulary and spelling	Use vocabulary appropriately and spell correctly when writing
	6. Expressing logical relationships	Show clear relationships between/among ideas at the sentence level
	7. Cohesion and coherence	Use cohesive devices to clarify the progression of ideas in a text
Listening	8. Listening for details	Identify specific details in short exchanges
	9. Making inferences	Understand meaning beyond the text, e.g. tone, attitude, audience, speaker, purpose, context
	10. Following extended speech	Use a range of skills and strategies to understand gist and details and to infer and/or comment on a longer text

Language development resources

Students receive immediate feedback in the form of a percentage score for each of the 10 subcategories. Resources and development strategies are linked to each subcategory so that students can choose which areas to focus on. Resources include links to websites, direction to computer-based or text resources and information on relevant workshops.

Key features of *iDeaL*:

- available at no cost to all students, including international, domestic, undergraduate, postgraduate, on- and off-campus
- accessible online
- random generation of items allows multiple access during students' qualifications so they can track their results over time and attempts
- will provide both academic and professional versions
- gives an immediate indication of language development needs and directs students to relevant language programs and resources within and outside the University
- interfaces with Deakin's database (Callista) to provide institutional reports.

Issues encountered and areas for improvement

Following are some of the major issues that were encountered during the development of *iDeaL*:

- determining the overall framework, or "shape" of the tool
- defining the subcategories for diagnosis
- communicating needs to IT developers
- communicating the purpose, limitations, etc. of *iDeaL* to staff and students
- item writing within the constraints of the framework and medium

Areas for further improvement were made clear from the piloting, which was conducted with all commencing (on and off campus) undergraduate students of the Faculty of Business and Law in term 1, 2009. Managing the data and generating reports were two key areas highlighted for further work.

Documentation for Phase 2 development has been submitted. The expectation is that *iDeaL* will be available to all Deakin students by Trimester 3, 2009. Key objectives for 2009 include a comprehensive analysis of the data and existing items and work has begun on developing the professional version which is designed to help students develop skills for graduate success.

Deakin University is excited about the potential the *iDeaL* English language diagnostic tool affords to teaching and learning, student success, graduate outcomes and targeted support of students at risk and looks forward to the full implementation of the tool.

Reference

Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.