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Assessing EAP students' language acquisition in higher education in Australia

Rachel Daniel[1] [1]Senior Lecturer, Federation University, Australia
Daya Weerasinghe[2] [2]Lecturer, Federation University, Australia
Kelly Hart[3] [3]Scholarly Teaching Fellow, Federation University, Australia

Abstract

This paper explores the efficacy of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs in developing academic language skills among Non-English-Speaking-Background (NESB) international students, or second language (L2) learners of English, by analysing changes in language proficiency across five, ten, fifteen, and twenty-week intensive EAP programs at an Australian university. Data comprised of students' results drawn from a collection of Pearson Versant English Placement Tests (VEPT) completed as an entry diagnostic and final assessment upon course completion. Data analysis indicated that Subcontinent Asian students' entry scores in speaking, listening, and writing were generally higher than the East Asian students, while East Asian students' entry scores in reading were generally higher. The improvements measured in speaking, listening, reading, and writing of East Asian students were higher. Participants benefited significantly through ten fifteen and twenty weeks of EAP study, but minimal improvements were observed in the five-week program. Overall, reading proficiency was the slowest skill to improve. Comparatively, writing skills dramatically improved following twenty weeks of EAP. Implications for EAP learning and teaching in the Asia Pacific context are discussed.

Correspondence
Rachel Daniel
r.daniel@federation.edu.au

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Background of the study and context

The efficacy of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs in preparing international students for tertiary studies demands scrutiny, as Australian universities attempt to forge a post-pandemic pathway for increasing international students. For students new to Australia, a successful transition into higher education (HE) relies on the effective acquisition of academic English reading, writing, speaking, and listening, alongside critical thinking and acclimatisation to local instructional practices and approaches to learning.

This paper focuses on the EAP program at a regional Australian university. The program prepares international students for tertiary studies in Australia, through building academic communication skills, disciplinary-specific academic writing, and academic reading skills, to support readiness for using English at university. International students from various first language (L1) backgrounds, including a majority of Hindi and Mandarin Chinese L1 students, learn the academic conventions essential for successful studies in Australian HE undergraduate, postgraduate, and higher degrees by research. The program focus is based on current global trend research, argumentative evaluation, independent research, and staff experience in lecture and tutorial environments.

The data considered for this research were from this well established, well ranked, public Australian tertiary education institution. The university has regional and metropolitan campuses, offering a full range of typical university degrees including Education; Arts; Community, Health, Sports, and Social Sciences; Business, Information Technology (IT); and Engineering. Annual enrolments range from 10,000–16,000, with international students accounting for almost one quarter of enrolments (with reducing numbers due to current national policies). The majority of EAP students in the program are bound for undergraduate or postgraduate degrees in Health Sciences, Business, Accounting, IT, and Engineering.

The EAP curriculum in this study involves constructivist teaching with intensive acquisition of skills and knowledge through collaboration between peers and instructors, while content is scrutinised through dialogue and activities engaging all four macro skills. The intention is that students develop not only language skills but also beneficial beliefs about themselves as a language learner and self-efficacy upon which to build their identity as a student in the new HE culture they are entering.

Prior to starting their EAP program, students were required to demonstrate a suitable level of English proficiency by completing the International English Language Test (IELTS) in their country of residence. Their score classified them as either intermediate or advanced, and determined the number of EAP course weeks they would need to attain the required IELTS entry score for their respective degrees, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
IELTS Score and the Program of EAP Study

Intermediate programs: exit IELTS 6	
IELTS 5.0 (no band less than 5.0)	20-week Intermediate
IELTS 5.5 (no band less than 5.0)	15-week Intermediate
IELTS 5.5 (no band less than 5.5) *OR* IELTS 6.0 (no band less than 5.0)	10-week Intermediate
IELTS 6.0 (no band less than 5.5)	5-week Intermediate
Advanced programs: exit IELTS 6.5	
IELTS 5.5 (no band less than 5.5) *OR* IELTS 6.0 (no band less than 5.0)	20-week Advanced
IELTS 6.0 (no band less than 5.5)	15-week Advanced
IELTS 6.0 (no band less than 6.0)	10-week Advanced
IELTS 6.5 (some bands less than 6.0)	5-week Advanced

Upon EAP program commencement, a diagnostic test was conducted on campus, invigilated by a lecturer, using the Pearson Versant English Placement Test (VEPT), an online test requiring USB headphones and microphones. The VEPT (Pearson, 2022) assesses candidates' language levels in relation to everyday topics in the following areas:

- Speaking: clarity and accuracy in producing consonants, vowels, phrases, and clauses; syntactic processing; meaningful use of vocabulary; rhythm, stress, phrasing and timing.
- Listening: comprehension and inference of main and specific ideas when listening to a conversational pace of English
- Reading: comprehension of and appropriate response to written texts at functional speeds
- Writing: production of written texts with clear and logical sequence, a wide range of vocabulary and sentence structures.

On completion of the EAP program, the students were required to re-sit the VEPT to acquire a final score. The diagnostic and exit scores of EAP students between 2014 and 2022 are analysed in this study. The research hypothesis endeavours to understand whether the EAP program duration and student L1 background significantly influenced the level of academic English language proficiency attained. With significant representation from Subcontinent Asia and East Asia, the dataset provides an opportunity to explore patterns of proficiency development across learners, shaped by differing prior educational and instructional backgrounds, to provide insight into language acquisition patterns, pace, and duration. In terms of length of study, Pearson (2020) notes the lack of data pertaining to EAP program length and student attainment. Thus, this research seeks to establish the recommended length of EAP study for developing academic reading, writing, speaking, and listening, particularly in relation to students with a Hindi or Chinese first-language background. This extended research aims to uncover how EAP students are positively affected by protracted time in EAP and reveal the skills' areas with significant gains. Moreover, the research attempts to identify if student L1 is significantly implicated in skill acquisition pace or duration in EAP HE preparation courses.

Literature review

Arriving in a host nation, international students are confronted with what Dooey (2010) describes as 'inherent challenges' as they acclimatise to local academic life. Critical reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking skills are considered as necessary components of academic writing in the western tertiary context. Preparing students for their studies in HE involves imparting "a range of advanced literacy practices that will equip them to engage effectively with their chosen fields of disciplinary study" (Thompson et al., 2013, p. 100). EAP programs focus on equipping students with the language and communication skills required to successfully comprehend academic content relevant to potential studies in an English-speaking country (Douglas & Rosvold, 2018). In addition, the purpose of EAP programs is "to improve students' overall language proficiency and to acclimatise them to the linguistic conventions and academic skills that they need for their university study" (Terraschke & Wahid, 2011, p. 174), with acclimatisation to academic cultures described as a "primary goal" of EAP programs (Bhowmik & Kim, 2018, p.502).

Developing academic literacy is a multidimensional process, and research indicates that L2 students frequently experience challenges with critical thinking, academic conventions, and the use of scholarly sources in higher-education writing (Kharchenko & Chappell, 2020; Thompson et al., 2013). The pedagogy in this EAP program accentuates the interconnections between language and culture, while centring classroom discussions around identities, values, and cultural practices that are expressed through language. This approach enables students to deepen their awareness of appropriate language use across diverse academic and social settings. Students bring multiple, and at times conflicting, cultural and personal identities into the classroom; thus, the ways in which language is constructed and identities are negotiated become central to their learning experiences (Zacharias, 2010). Morgan (2009, p. 90) argues that EAP classrooms require a critical orientation that encourages 'productive doubt' and questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions, enabling students to re-evaluate their perspectives as part of acquiring academic literacy. This leads to EAP classrooms becoming spaces for the exploration and renegotiation of culture, self, and identity, while simultaneously cultivating the linguistic and critical competencies essential for higher education success.

Previous Australian studies have identified some factors in HE language acquisition, such as the influence of students' mature-age background, ethnicity, language spoken at home, and the length of programs they participated in (Al Hamdany & Picard, 2015) on acquisition of register; however, there is insufficient research tracking the factors influencing EAP program participants in HE in Australia. The Australian Universities Quality Agency's (AUQA, 2009) report mandates that "Universities use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve their English language development activities" (p. 3). Thus, an interrogation of EAP program efficacy and factors impacting participants is warranted in actualising implementation of this AUQA mandate in Australian universities.

Findings concerning academic proficiencies development in EAP programs have been diverse. Predominantly, courses vary in length from only a few weeks to 20 weeks, making language skill development difficult to accurately observe. Pearson's (2020) UK study highlighted HE institutions planned an average of seven weeks to support attainment of a 0.5 IELTS band improvement and 12 weeks for an increase of 1.0.

Although scholars have increasingly called for culturally appropriate pedagogy in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs to better support diverse learners (Mazgutova & Kormos, 2015), there remains limited evidence measuring the overall effectiveness of EAP instruction and limited evaluation of differences in the acquisition of the four macro skills. Research that tracks students' progress through objective measures has produced inconsistent findings: some studies report noticeable improvements in academic language competencies following EAP instruction (Terraschke & Wahid, 2011), while others argue that the impact may be limited (Green, 2005). Furthermore, widely used standardised language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) are not designed to detect incremental gains developed over short EAP course durations, making them unsuitable tools for capturing the nuanced skills cultivated in the EAP classroom (Holmes, 2025). As a result, establishing clear empirical evidence for the efficacy of EAP programs remains a challenge within the field, since most institutions have in-house pre- and post-diagnostic testing, with varying results regarding the predictive validity of English proficiency tests (Banerjee & Wall, 2006; Steiger, 2022).

While some global research (Eyre et al., 2018) claims no differences in English language proficiency acquisition between diverse communities despite differing backgrounds and L1s, Jiménez-Castellanos and García (2017) argue that ethnicity and language acquisition intervene as displayed in Figure 1, thus necessitating organised instructional design to mitigate student language acquisition experiences. Jiménez-Castellanos and García's (2017) research is pivotal for clarifying how language competencies are attained across all four developmental skills areas. Examining the cultural background of the students, their learning beliefs, and the motives behind the acquisition of language proficiencies could assist educators to determine the most effective curricula, content, and pedagogy (Saha, 2021).

Within Jiménez-Castellanos and García's (2017) research attributes (Figure 1), multiple lived realities are insufficiently considered, as English language program and duration should be considered important influences for learners. Hence, Figure 1 can be augmented for this study, as shown in Figure 2.

The data analysed here encompass six years of EAP students' performance from the university EAP program, with data collection focused on program duration, student country of origin (with two distinct majority L1 influences) and skills including speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

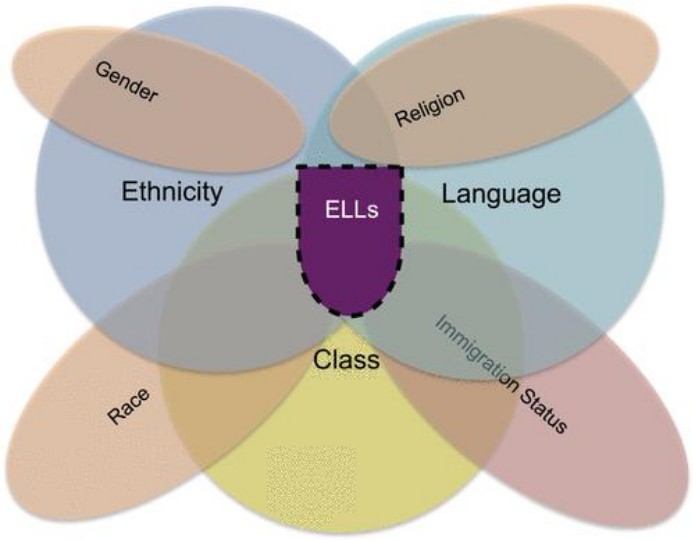
The research questions include:

1. Does the length of EAP program significantly influence the level of academic English language skills gained?

2. How does student L1 impact the acquisition of academic English?
3. What patterns of proficiency gains in reading, writing, speaking, and listening are associated with different EAP program durations?

Figure 1

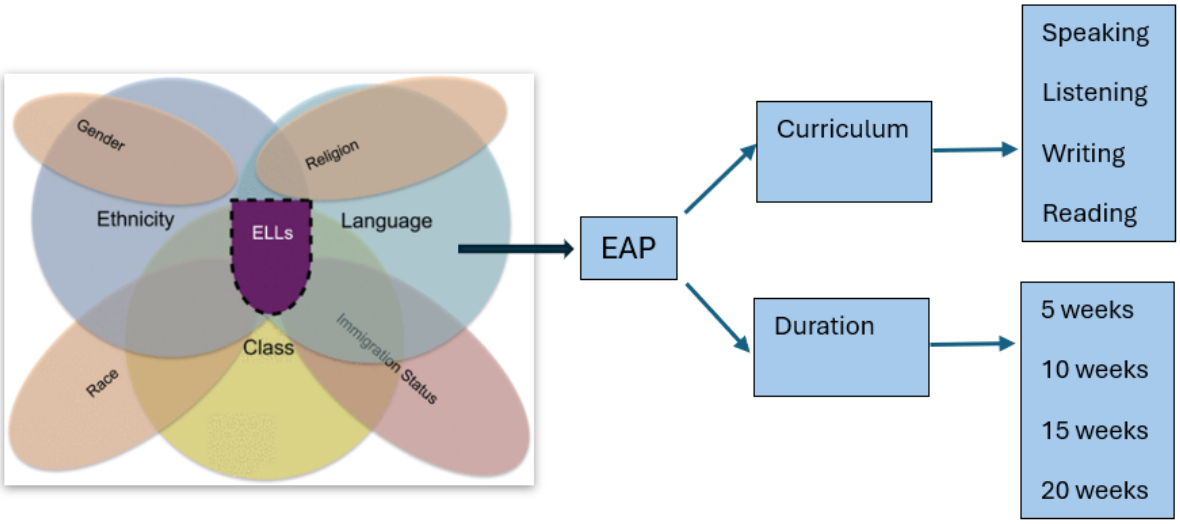
Mosaic Incorporating the Multiple Lived Realities of an English Language Learner (ELL)



Note. From "Intersection of Language, Class, Ethnicity, and Policy: Toward Disrupting Inequality for English Language Learners," by O. Jiménez-Castellanos and E. García, 2017, *Review of Research in Education, 41*(1), p. 436. Copyright 2017 by the American Educational Research Association.

Figure 2

Program and Duration in the Multiple Lived Realities of an ELL



Note. Adapted from "Intersection of Language, Class, Ethnicity, and Policy: Toward Disrupting Inequality for English Language Learners," by O. Jiménez-Castellanos and E. García, 2017, *Review of Research in Education, 41*(1), p. 436.

Research method

This research study provides insights into students' achievement in Entry and Exit or pre- and post-tests of EAP programs. The existing entry and exit VEPT data available in the EAP archives of students who completed the EAP program between 2014–2022 are de-identified and analysed in accordance with correlation, *t*-tests, and ANOVA (Analysis of variance) using IBM SPSS Statistics 30.0 and interpreted to approximate IELTS scores.

The data were collected over several years with the intent of generalising findings. The dataset comprises over 200 international students enrolled in intensive English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs at an Australian university over multiple teaching periods. Students completed the Pearson Versant English Placement Test (VEPT) at both entry and exit, generating quantitative measures across six dimensions of academic language proficiency: speaking, listening, writing, reading, typing speed, and typing accuracy. Students were enrolled in one of four program durations—5-week, 10-week, 15-week, or 20-week EAP programs—reflecting institutional placement based on initial proficiency level. The dataset represents a naturally varying population of L2 learners at different stages of academic English readiness.

The students from four major regional groups formed a part of the data set:

- East Asia (e.g., China, Korea, Japan)
- South Asia/Subcontinent (e.g., India, Nepal, Pakistan)
- South-East Asia (e.g., Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia)
- Middle East/North Africa (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt)

Dominant L1s were present within these regional cohorts; however, as individual students' L1 were not included in the archival dataset, geographical grouping has been used as an indicative rather than direct variable. Quantitative analyses were conducted to investigate variations in students' academic language proficiency over time and to identify if proficiency gains differed by program duration or regional background. For evaluating student progress and skill improvement, autonomous samples *t*-tests were used to evaluate mean scores between entry and exit assessments for each EAP program duration. This methodology permitted evaluation of students' proficiency following program completion and identified demonstrated measurable gains.

ANOVA was employed to examine statistically significant differences between cohorts, and when ANOVA revealed a significant effect, Tukey's HSD post hoc tests were used to detect which specific cohorts differed from one another. This method supported the identification and understanding of difference in performance between diverse learner subgroups (Pallant, 2013). Furthermore, a split plot ANOVA (SPANOVA) was used to analyse proficiency gains according to both student background and time. This process facilitated the examination of the interaction within subject changes (entry vs. exit scores) and in-between subject groupings (origin or program duration), while providing a framework for interpreting differential development across learner groups (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Results

RQ1: To what extent do EAP programs lead to measurable gains in academic language proficiency?

Detailed examination of pre and post-test VEPT scores revealed that students across all the program durations exhibited positive gains in speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. Separate samples *t*-tests statistically identified substantial increases in language skills according to program length.

RQ2: How does student L1 impact the acquisition of academic English?

The analysis of variance using ANOVA that compared mean proficiency gains between regional groups (East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East/North Africa) uncovered considerable variations in several skill areas. In addition, the Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD).

RQ3: What patterns or proficiency gains are associated with different EAP durations?

A mixed-model analysis indicated substantial language gains across program durations, with differing magnitudes of improvement associated with course length. These patterns highlight the relevance of considering program duration when interpreting proficiency gains in EAP contexts. The overall entry and exit scores for speaking, listening, writing, reading, and average (mean) are compared in Figure 3. In this initial analysis process, the entry and exit scores are used without grouping for course duration.

Figure 3

Overall Entry and Exit Scores

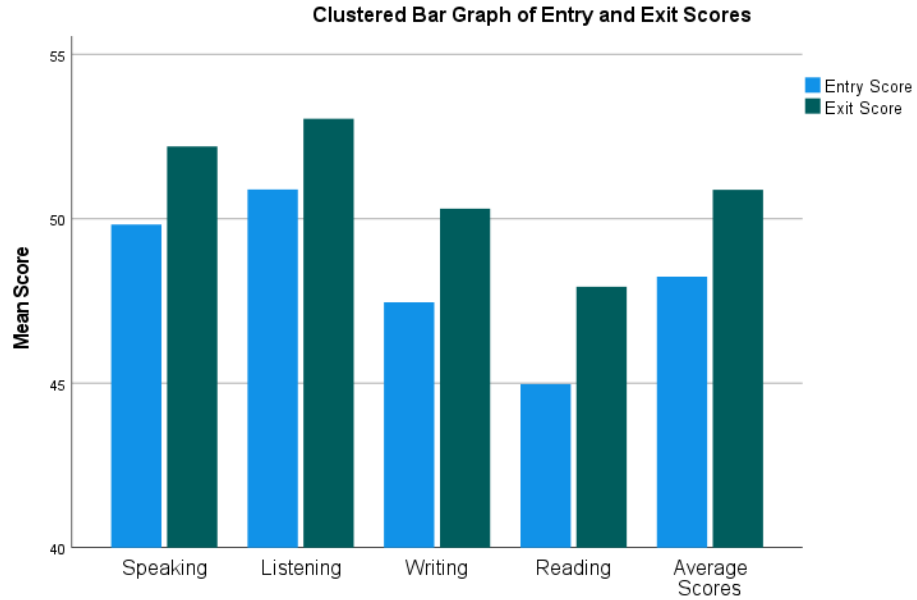


Table 2

Mean Differences of Average Entry and Exit Scores

	Mean Entry Score	Mean Exit Score	Mean Difference
Speaking	49.83	52.20	2.37
Listening	50.72	53.04	2.32
Writing	47.42	50.31	2.89
Reading	44.83	47.93	3.10
Average Scores	48.24	50.88	2.64

The analyses presented in Table 2 and statistical modelling directly address RQ1, as they examine whether students demonstrated measurable improvements between entry and exit assessments after completing the EAP program. There appears to be a moderately strong, positive correlation between students' average entry and exit scores in the study (See Figure 4).

Table 2 shows mean entry and exit scores across speaking, listening, writing, and reading, and reflects consistent positive mean differences for all four skill areas as well as for the overall average. These increases indicate that students, on average, improved their academic language proficiency over the duration of the EAP program evidence that contributes directly to evaluating the program's effectiveness (RQ1).

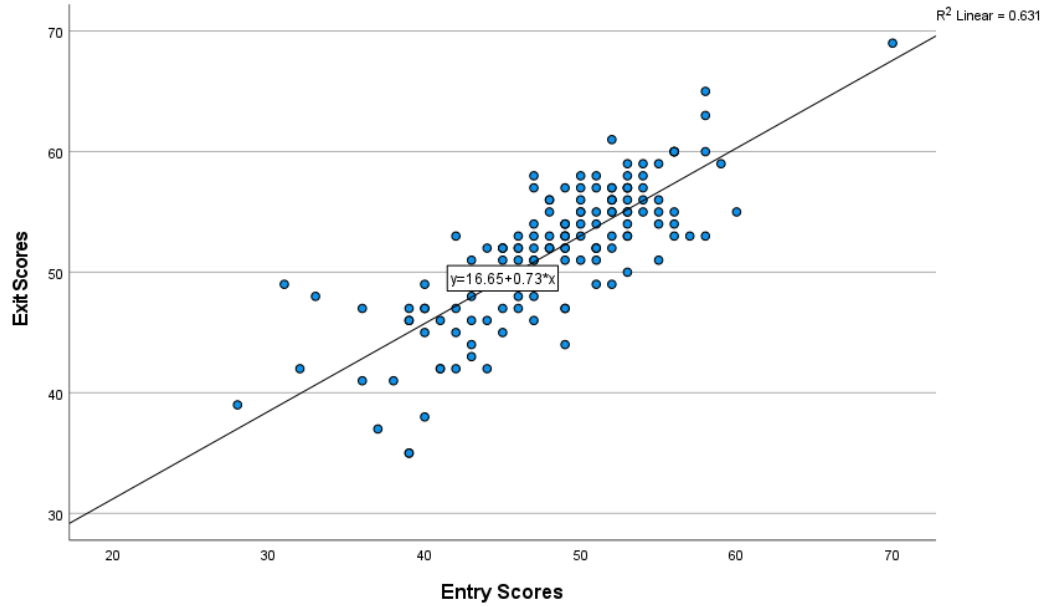
The scatterplot in Figure 4 aligns with RQ1, as it demonstrates the correlation between students' entry scores and their exit scores. The relatively positive correlation modelled by Equation 1 below indicates that students with higher entry scores achieved higher exit scores, which validate the pattern of overall improvement.

$$\text{Average: } Exit\ score = 0.73 * Entry\ score + 16.65 \quad (1)$$

The slope of 0.73 signifies that language acquisition develops across students regardless of starting point, at evolving magnitudes regardless of other factors. Correspondingly, the linear models for individual speaking, listening, writing, and reading skill areas provide supplementary evidence for RQ1, revealing predictable positive relationships between entry and exit score gains.

Figure 4

Average Entry and Exit Scores



Similarly, it is possible to model linear relations for speaking, listening, writing, and reading separately as shown below. Even though such relations provide approximate values, these models can be used as predictors to estimate exit scores of any student when entry scores are known.

$$\text{Speaking: } Exit\ score = 0.60 * Entry\ score + 23.10 \quad (2)$$

$$\text{Listening: } Exit\ score = 0.68 * Entry\ score + 19.34 \quad (3)$$

$$\text{Writing: } Exit\ score = 0.69 * Entry\ score + 19.22 \quad (4)$$

$$\text{Reading: } Exit\ score = 0.61 * Entry\ score + 20.91 \quad (5)$$

The dependent *t*-test, or paired-samples *t*-tests, directly address RQ1, comparing the mean differences between the entry and exit scores to identify that all p-values were < .0005, well below the .05 threshold, indicating that gains across all skill areas are statistically significant. This demonstrates that the EAP program led to measurable improvements in students' academic language proficiency, thus addressing RQ1, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Paired-Samples t-test of Entry and Exit Scores

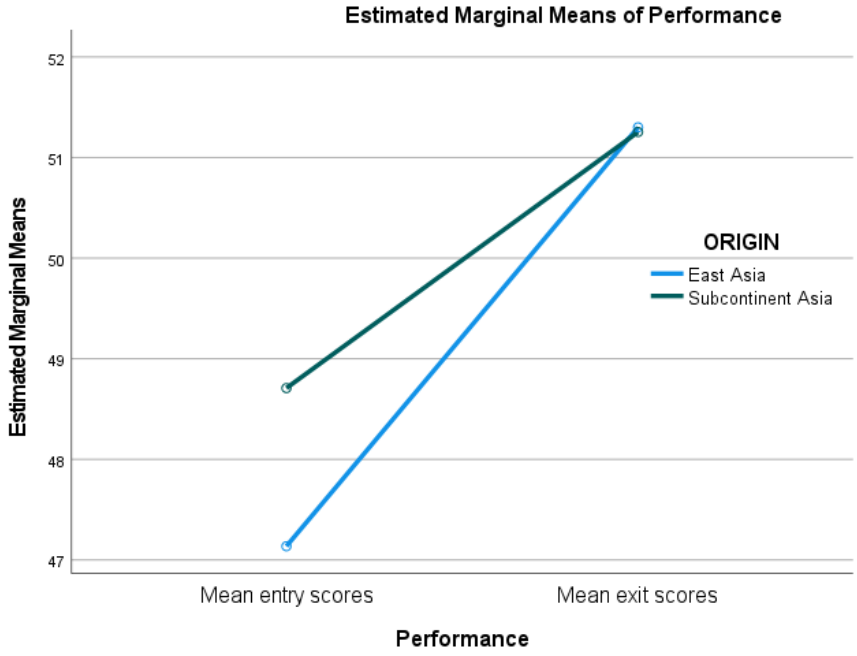
	Paired Differences					*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)
				95% CI				
	M	*SD*	*SEM*	Lower	Upper			
Pre-Speaking – Post-Speaking	-3.143	6.895	.569	-4.267	-2.019	-5.527	146	.000
Pre-Listening – Post-Listening	-3.188	5.359	.439	-4.056	-2.320	-7.261	148	.000

Pre-Writing – Post-Writing	-4.356	6.048	.495	-5.335	-3.377	-8.791	148	.000
Pre-Reading – Post-Reading	-3.275	5.961	.488	-4.240	-2.310	-6.706	148	.000
Mean Entry Scores – Mean Exit Scores	-3.490	3.868	.319	-4.120	-2.859	-10.938	146	.000

To investigate whether changes in academic language performance varied by students' background, a mixed between within subjects ANOVA (SPANOVA) was conducted using country of origin as the between subjects factor (East Asia, $n = 73$; Subcontinent Asia, $n = 55$) and entry/exit performance as the within subjects factor. As mentioned, students' placement into 5-, 10-, 15-, or 20-week EAP programs was determined by their entry proficiency scores. Consequently, Subcontinent students in this dataset generally began with higher average entry scores, whereas East Asian students often commenced with lower entry scores and therefore tended to be placed in longer-duration programs. These patterns are characteristics of the dataset and should not be interpreted as outcomes of the EAP program itself. Regional groupings are thus interpreted as contextual indicators shaped by institutional enrolment patterns, rather than as direct representations of L1.

Figure 5

Average (Mean) Entry/Exit Overall Performance with Country of Origin



The SPANOVA results indicated a significant interaction between student origin and entry/exit performance, Wilks' Lambda = .99, $F(1,126) = 5.48$, $p = .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, as well as a substantial main effect for time, Wilks' Lambda = .57, $F(1,126) = 94.07$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 =$

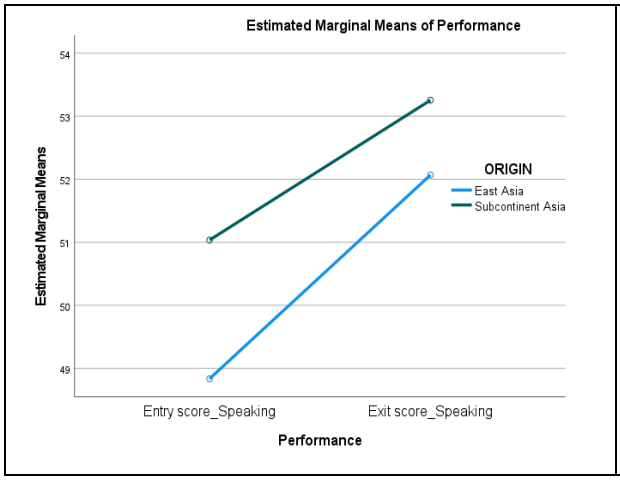
.43. Both groups improved significantly from entry to exit (see paired-samples t tests in Table 3), but the pattern of change differed slightly. South Asian students initially started with higher-than-average entry scores, while East Asian students who commenced with lower scores, demonstrated pronounced improvements. Therefore, their mean exit score slightly exceeded the South Asian students. Figure 6 demonstrates a comparable pattern across speaking, listening, writing, and reading, skill areas, even though these inclinations should be interpreted thoughtfully, considering that the program duration is closely tied to entry proficiency, which is not controlled for in this analysis. This section therefore provides descriptive insight into how different learner groups progressed over time, while acknowledging that observed differences may be partially attributable to placement-related factors rather than geographic origin alone.

Another set of 'mixed between-within subjects ANOVA' was conducted to investigate the impact of course duration on students' performance using mean entry and exit scores. Here, there are two independent variables: between-subjects variable (Duration: 5 weeks, 10 weeks, 15 weeks, and 20 weeks) and within-subjects variable (Performance: mean Entry score and Exit score). The following graph in Figure 7 shows an output assessing the impact of course duration: 5 weeks (n = 39), 10 weeks (n = 28), 15 weeks (n = 43), and 20 weeks (n = 33) on mean entry and exit scores.

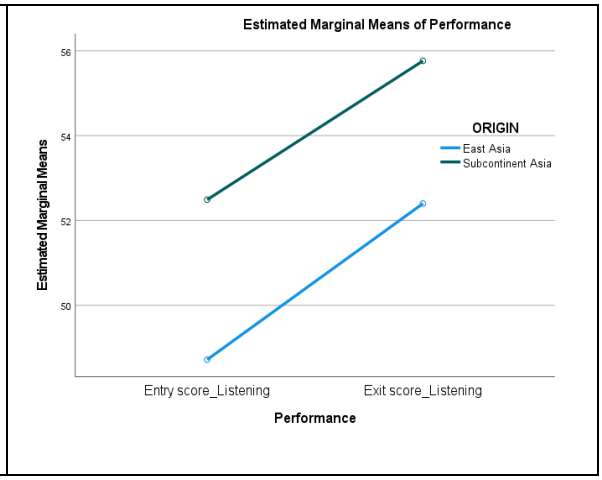
Figure 6

Mean Entry/Exit Speaking, Listening, Writing and Reading Performance with Country of Origin

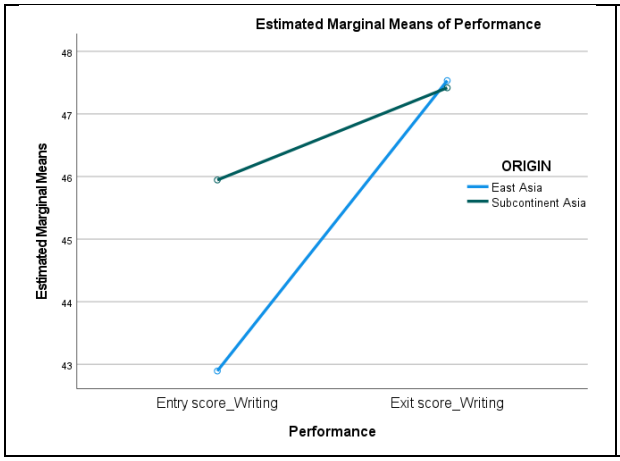
Speaking



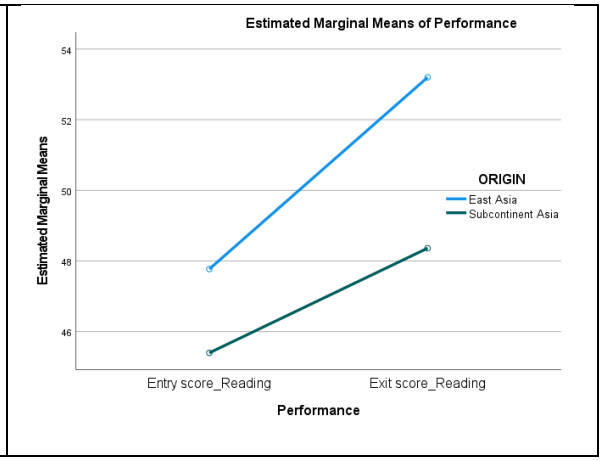
Listening



Writing



Reading



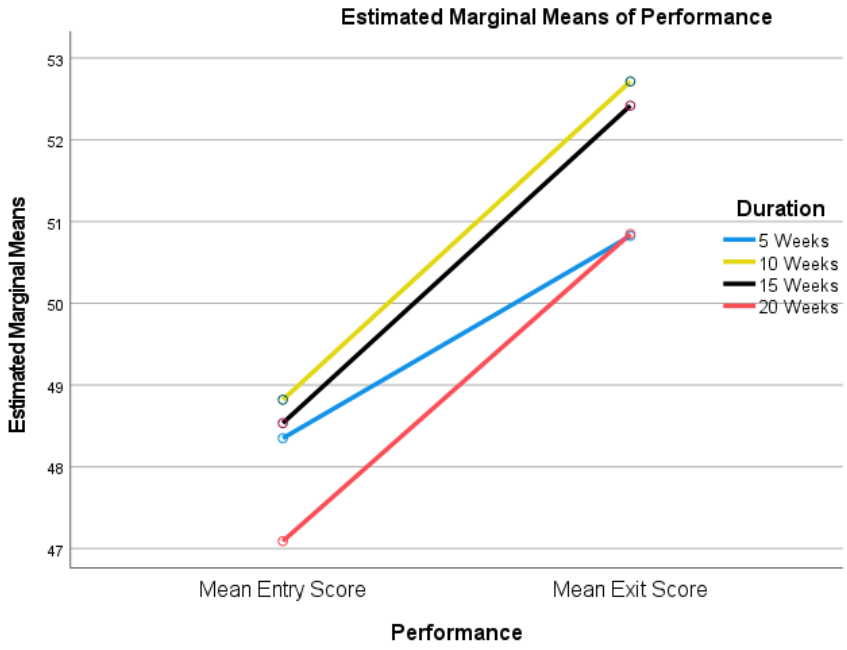
To explore whether changes in academic language performance varied across different program lengths, a mixed between--within subjects ANOVA (SPANOVA) was conducted using course duration (5-, 10-, 15 and 20--week programs) as the between-subjects' factor and entry/exit performance as the within-subjects' factor. As mentioned, course duration is determined by students' entry proficiency, with lower-proficiency learners typically placed in longer programs. Course duration is thus not independent of initial proficiency; therefore, the results are interpreted as descriptive trends rather than causal effects of course duration.

The study revealed no significant interaction between course duration and entry/exit performance, (Wilks' Lambda = .98, $F(3, 140) = 1.21$, $p = .31$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$) signifying that the scale of language development from entry to exit did not significantly differ across the four course durations. On the other hand, the focus on time (Wilks' Lambda = .55, $F(1, 140) = 113.78$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .45$) revealed that students across all four program durations had meaningful gains in academic language proficiency.

Figure 7 demonstrates improvements gained by learners based on program length. The 5-week course had the lowest average progress, which aligns with their shorter period of academic language exposure. Furthermore, Figure 8 indicates performance patterns for all four language skills separately, with each duration category indicating positive growth across all skills. These patterns align with the expectation that all students, regardless of program length, will benefit from EAP instruction. The influence of initial placement levels on observed performance should be cautiously considered.

Figure 7

Duration of the Course and Overall Mean Entry/Exit Performance



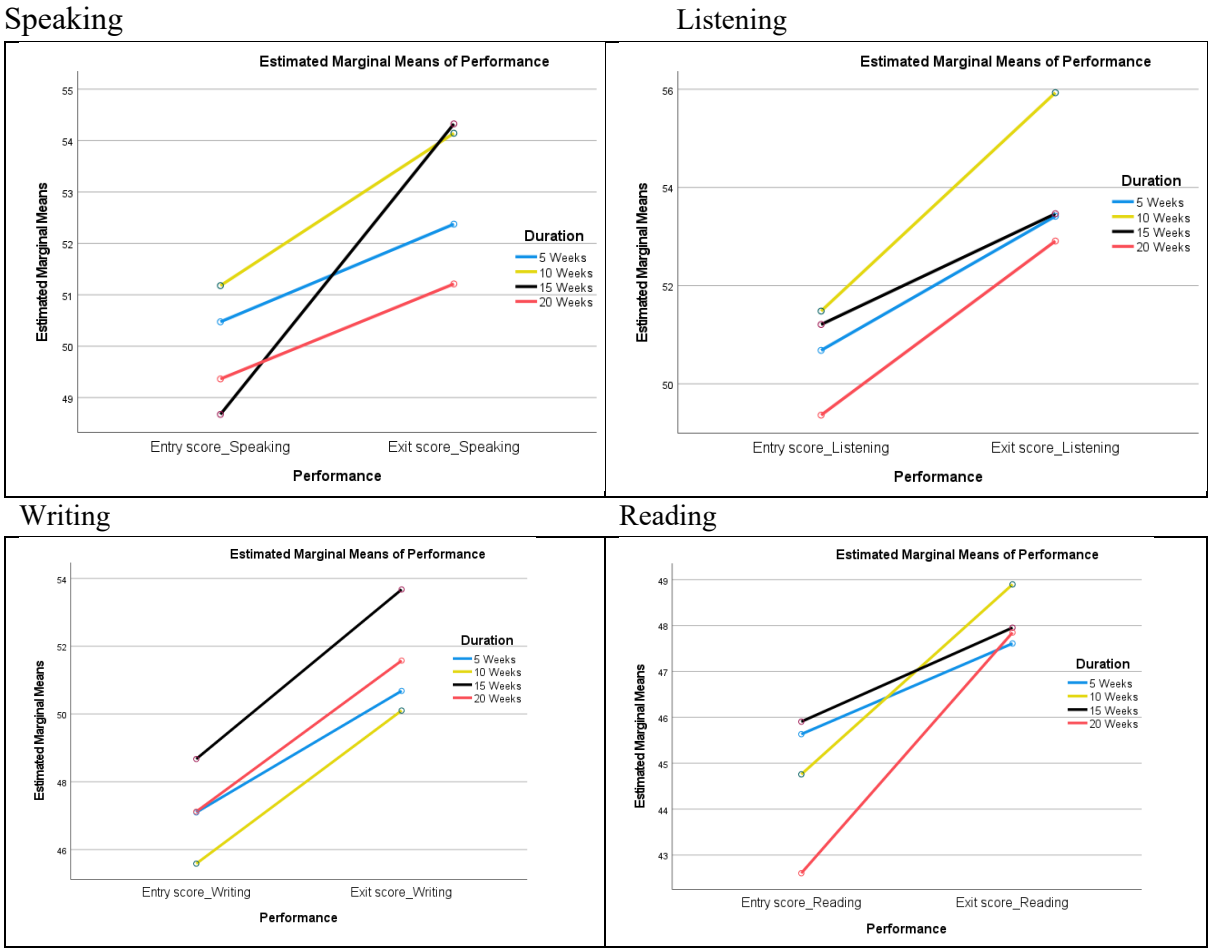
As part of addressing RQ1, the gradients of the lines connecting mean entry and exit scores in Figure 8 was investigated and the obvious patterns of language gains were observed across course durations. Across the four macro skills, the highest gradients demonstrating the main relative improvement, are evident in different durations: speaking skills exhibited the most improvement in the 15-week program duration, while listening was in the 10-week program. However, writing improved equally in the 10 and 15-week programs and reading was the stand-out in the 20-week program. As expected, the 5-week program resulted in the least gains overall, which aligns with the higher entry language proficiency of students placed in the shorter program.

The examination of relative language gains, through analysing the variations in mean exit scores, exposed skill specific patterns. The highest mean exit score for speaking is achieved by the 15-week course, while the lowest is the 20-week course. The highest mean exit score for listening is the 10-week course and lowest is the 20- week course. For writing, the highest mean exit score is 15-weeks and lowest 10-weeks. In contrast, the 10-week course indicates the highest mean exit score for reading while the lowest is 5-weeks. Accordingly, the best results

were evident in both 10- and 15-week courses. Nevertheless, these results must be viewed cautiously in the context of the influence of entry language proficiency on course placement. These results address RQ1 by indicating that students across all program durations attained measurable gains in language skills; nevertheless, the degree and range of improvements varied by individual skill areas and seemed to be influenced by the students' initial proficiency levels.

Figure 8

Duration of the Course and Mean Entry/Exit Speaking, Listening, Writing, and Reading Performance



VEPT scores separately address RQ3 by indicating quantifiable proficiency increases in all the course durations, while the IELTS-equivalents were tabulated as an additional benchmark to understand the degree of improvements indicated and justify the validity of scores with a globally recognised testing scale. The VEPT–IELTS conversion formula from 'Aligning IELTS and PTE-Academic' (Elliott et al., 2021) established the relationship between IELTS and VEPT scores when it was applied to the entry and exit scores in speaking, listening, writing and reading. However, since these calculated results are grounded on linear models and assessed from scatterplots, the concluding IELTS values are approximations only.

Table 4

Comparison of Improvements in VEPT Entry and Exit Scores and related IELTS

	Duration	VEPT Entry	IELTS	VEPT Exit	IELTS
Overall	5 weeks	48.35	5.44	50.82	5.64
	10 weeks	48.82	5.48	52.71	5.80
	15 weeks	48.53	5.45	52.42	5.77
	20 weeks	47.09	5.33	50.85	5.64
Speaking	5 weeks	50.48	5.59	52.37	5.78
	10 weeks	51.18	5.66	54.14	5.97
	15 weeks	48.67	5.40	54.33	5.98
	20 weeks	49.36	5.47	51.21	5.66
Listening	5 weeks	50.68	5.64	53.41	5.94
	10 weeks	51.48	5.72	55.93	6.21
	15 weeks	51.21	5.69	53.47	5.94
	20 weeks	49.36	5.49	52.91	5.88
Writing	5 weeks	47.10	4.55	50.68	4.83
	10 weeks	45.59	4.43	50.10	4.78
	15 weeks	48.67	4.67	53.67	5.06
	20 weeks	47.12	4.55	51.58	4.90
Reading	5 weeks	45.63	3.99	47.61	4.26
	10 weeks	44.76	3.87	48.90	4.43
	15 weeks	45.91	4.03	47.95	4.30
	20 weeks	42.61	3.58	47.85	4.29

If x = IELTS score and y = PVEPT score

Average (overall)	$y = 12.057x - 17.209$ →	$x = (y + 17.209) / 12.057$
Speaking	$y = 9.6787x - 3.5957$ →	$x = (y + 3.5957) / 9.6787$
Listening	$y = 9.1438x - 0.8625$ →	$x = (y + 0.8625) / 9.1438$
Writing	$y = 12.893x - 11.551$ →	$x = (y + 11.551) / 12.893$
Reading	$y = 7.395x + 16.122$ →	$x = (y - 16.122) / 7.395$

The results from VEPT to IELTS demonstrate that the improvement in IELTS score varies from 0.19 to 0.71. While the lowest improvement 0.19 is shown in speaking in the 20-week course, the highest improvement 0.71 is shown in reading in the same course. On average, 10-, 15-, and 20-week courses show an IELTS equivalent improvement slightly higher than 0.3, while the 5-week course has an improvement of only 0.2. Brown's (1998) IELTS research report investigated and compared multiple 10-week IELTS preparation as well as EAP courses with no IELTS focus, where it was identified that students gained an average of 0.9 of a band on the Academic Writing module, from 4.3 to 5.2. Green (2005) argues the study's findings offer evidence for the proposition that "two months of study may translate approximately into a score gain of one band" (p. 46). This study concurs with previous findings which indicate that maximum language proficiency is gained through a minimum of 10 weeks of intensive

EAP study. The number of weeks spent learning English was meaningfully connected to score gains. This echoes Green's (2005) findings that one band does not equate to 200 hours (10 weeks) of intensive study but 400 hours (20 weeks). It also aligns with Green's (2005) research, as students who undertook 20 weeks of EAP benefitted the most in reading score gains.

Discussion

The data evaluation assessed relationships and patterns of improvement between East Asian and Subcontinent Asian students, revealing that, on average, East Asian students demonstrated a higher rate of improvement in exit scores than Subcontinent students, despite commencing with lower mean entry scores in speaking, listening, and writing. This addresses RQ2 on how student L1 impact the acquisition of academic English. However, the South Asian cohort demonstrated higher entry scores in these three language skills. This supports the statistical conclusions, which imply that the Subcontinent cohort are inclined to exhibit higher listening proficiency on entry, although East Asian learners commence with comparatively stronger reading proficiency (Bolton & Bacon-Shone, 2020). These tendencies provide context for interpreting group-based variation in academic language development across the EAP program.

All students have varied learning factors and approaches to knowledge irrespective of ethnicity and background, as "Learners come to an English classroom with individual differences, but with the same goal: to acquire and to be proficient in the target language" (Koad & Waluyo, 2021, p. 49). The role of student ethnicity, and the related L1 and L1 environment, is considered a vital antecedent influential in predicting L2 learners' reading comprehension for the context and cohort (Ismail et al., 2018; Li & Clariana, 2019).

On average, a higher improvement is shown in exit scores by East Asian students than Subcontinent Asian students. This aligns with the progressive analysis which reveals that the Asian subcontinent students demonstrated stronger listening skills than East Asian students, with the reverse observed in reading. While these cohorts are commonly associated with particular L1s within the program, due to limited data, we are cautious about assuming linguistic homogeneity, as we evaluate the geographical differences in the data. Ismail et al. (2018) indicates that a learner's first language, and the linguistic environment in which it is used, can have measurable effects on the development of English reading proficiency. At the same time, the curricular traditions of the educational system in which learners are schooled, particularly in East Asian context, place strong emphasis on analysing and interpreting academic texts (Green & Phan, 2026). This focus can further shape learners' reading comprehension skills in English. Together, L1 background and prior curriculum exposure contribute to the differing reading profiles observed among students entering EAP programs (Ismail et al., 2018).

While the dataset cannot establish causal links between cultural learning traditions and EAP performance, patterns observed in RQ2 may be tentatively interpreted in the context of

previous research. Studies such as Koad and Waluyo (2021) and Saha (2021) suggest that learners' culturally shaped beliefs and orientations influence learning. For example, some East Asian educational contexts emphasise text-based analytical reading, which may contribute to the comparatively higher reading entry scores observed among East Asian students in this study. However, such interpretation must be considered cautiously as the breakdown is extended to contextualise the group-based patterns associated in the statistical scrutiny and the data did not permit for conclusive assumptions on cultural causality.

The dataset indicated that the East Asian cohorts, with the comparatively lower writing scores at entry, exhibited significant advances over the term of study (mean entry score of 43 improved to a mean exit score of 48). Although Subcontinent Asian students began with higher average writing scores, the extent of improvement among East Asian learners resulted in both groups achieving similar exit-level performance. A similar pattern was observed across other skills, with both cohorts showing measurable development between entry and exit assessments. These findings suggest that, irrespective of linguistic or cultural background, students demonstrated substantial growth in the academic language skills targeted by the EAP program.

While Saha (2021) notes that some Subcontinent Asian learners hold beliefs about language learning being tied to innate ability, such attitudes can only be considered tentative contextual factors rather than explanations for the performance differences observed in this study. Saha's (2021) research discusses Subcontinent students' beliefs' which emphasise a focus on speaking and listening above reading and writing skill acquisition. According to Saha's (2021, p. 91) data, Subcontinent Asian students believe "Speaking is the most difficult skill which requires sufficient practice and language socialization to improve," while acquiring writing skills is considered to be relatively easy. This could reduce the speed of progress in acquiring required proficiencies in reading and writing, where there is also hesitance and more difficulty in learning grammatical conventions. Such beliefs among the Subcontinent cohort may decrease effort in learning grammar, practicing, and acquiring writing competencies. An excessive focus on speaking could also potentially lead students to underestimate the importance of reading, which is equally problematic, as reading-to-write is "essential to much academic performance in higher education" (Doolan & Fitzsimmons-Doolan, 2016, p. 718). Learner beliefs were not explicitly examined in this study, however prior educational and cultural context around English language learning could be implicated in the difference in observed patterns of development across the four macro skills in the cohorts.

Earlier studies conducted in Australia and New Zealand which considered IELTS score gains (Brown, 1998) recognised contradictory evidence. Read and Hayes's (2003) report of IELTS preparation courses identified an average improvement for reading, writing, and listening skills of 0.35 of a band, subsequent to one month of instruction, which was not a statistically significant gain. This aligns with the findings of our research, as recorded in Table 4, indicating the overall approximate improvements.

Conclusion

Based on longitudinal diagnostic assessment data from an Australian higher education institution, this study sought to examine whether program duration and learner background influence measurable gains across English macro skills. The evidence indicates variation in students' language proficiencies acquisition rates among EAP students from different geographical regions, undertaking different course durations. Overall, test results analysed showed significant gains across all four macro skills, with predictably the smallest gains in 5-week courses. The uneven acquisition of macro skills across time is notable, with findings pinpointing that reading skills warranted more time for development compared with writing, speaking and listening. An unexpected finding emerged with the 10- and 15-week courses outperforming 20-week courses in all macro skills aside from reading. The East Asian students demonstrated strong gains across the macro skills despite lower entry scores, paving the way for further research into the drivers of these results and how similarly strong gains across time might be elicited from the South Asian cohort through changes in pedagogy, practice, duration or focus. The findings demonstrate that in contrast with initial scores, the length of time between entry and exit tests is comparatively a reliable predictor of outcomes. This limits the inference we can derive from score gains; there are undoubtedly reasons other than changes in ability as a result of studies that can account for an individual's score gains or losses.

Furthermore, tests are intended to measure individuals' language ability at a particular point in time and not intended to be sensitive to moderate short-term gains in proficiencies. Within the context of this study, gains observed across the four macro skills suggest that EAP programs support academic language acquisition beyond short-term test score improvement. EAP programs focus on imparting local knowledge, cultural assimilation, critical dispositions, mindsets and specific academic language skills that benefit in improving student chances of success in higher educational settings, some of which are not directly measured by language tests. However, these findings regarding skill acquisition over time serve to inform future revisions of the EAP curricula that could substantially address the needs of different skill acquisition and diverse L1 learners. Further research could investigate previous educational and cultural contexts and their implications for learner beliefs that impact macro skill acquisition in in-country EAP programs. This would provide valuable data to inform educator strategies to mitigate counterproductive beliefs and could inform program adjustments. Programs that currently give equal time to all four skills may benefit from redesign to allow for an elongated time for maximum reading proficiency gain. Embracing the results of the study and considering the data, future research is warranted to understand the role of learner beliefs among students from differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and ideal EAP durations, pedagogies and other strategies, such as metacognitive and reflective practices to optimise learning for all students across all four macro skills.

In the Western higher education sector, EAP programs play a crucial role in equipping an ever-increasing number of NESB students for programs in undergraduate and postgraduate studies where English is the medium of instruction. Subsequently, there is significant demand

from NESB students and EAP course providers for an easily adaptable formula relating to language proficiencies score gains that can be clearly measured, such as IELTS, as this would benefit TESOL educators towards curriculum development and course scheduling. Nevertheless, charting IELTS score gains to defined lengths of language instruction could be counterproductive and misleading as the pressure for results on instructors and students could induce rote IELTS preparation rather than overall academic language proficiency development. Hence, the higher education sector that is responsible for developing and implementing policies relating to language test scores should be cautious in interpreting test score gains and pursue varied sources of evidence of individual learners' language capabilities where required.

Within the scope of this study, the use of VEPT as a pre- and post-program diagnostic assessment demonstrated its utility for capturing incremental academic language development over short instructional periods or varying durations. The supplementary conversion of VEPT scores into IELTS equivalent values was included as a familiar reference only, not to imply that IELTS should be used to evaluate short-term program outcomes. Test score gains should however be interpreted cautiously, with policy, pedagogy and practice instead informed by triangulating multiple data points including diagnostic assessments, classroom performance, academic literacy indicators, and staff and student observations and feedback. Overall, this study contributes longitudinal evidence around academic language acquisition over time, across the macro skills, and highlights the need for research incorporating learner background and beliefs.

While this longitudinal data makes a valuable contribution to EAP literature, several limitations should be acknowledged, including the small sample size and the fact that language acquisition also inevitably takes place outside of the classroom when students live in the L2 environment; thus, not all measured gains can be attributed to the program. The length of time spent living abroad regardless of instruction would have some bearing on language acquisition. Furthermore, some learners frequently socialise in groups communicating in their L1, while others may not, which directly impacts L2 acquisition. An additional limitation was the lack of L1 data in the archival dataset. Although dominant L1s were well understood within the teaching context, geographical origin was used only as an indicative grouping variable, not as a definitive indication of L1. Nevertheless, invaluable information has been identified from the data encompassing different facets and issues in EAP. For balanced, equal opportunity learning to occur in the classroom, fostering an inclusive learning space is integral, where teachers consider the diverse needs of learners while being patient, creative, and adaptive in the curriculum implementation process, with empathy and cooperation being imperative for teaching language.

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Dr Rachel Daniel is a lecturer and course coordinator in education at Federation University, Australia and her areas of expertise include TESOL, EAP, academic writing and higher education transition. Rachel's research interests are in Teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL/ELICOS); Literacy and numeracy in transition into higher education; Bilingual education; Child rights in education; Literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary education.

Dr Daya Weerasinghe is a Lecturer at Federation University, Australia, and he has advanced expertise in mixed methods, especially explanatory sequential design of qualitative and quantitative methods. He has expertise in the areas of questionnaire design, thematic analysis, meta-analysis, and statistical analysis methods. He enjoys working in collaboration with national and international researchers to disseminate information to the wide world of educational research.

Kelly J. Hart is a scholarly teaching fellow in education at Federation University, Australia, with a background in English language teaching in Australia and China. Her areas of expertise include English language, literacy, TESOL, enabling education and primary education. She has a special interest in supporting diverse learners' needs, with a particular focus on ensuring barriers to learning are actively removed for our EAL, CALD, dyslexic and dysgraphic students in the classroom and in assessment, both at Federation university and in Australian schools.