

The Effectiveness and Transferability of a Block-Mode Discipline-Specific Academic Language Development Program. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

To address the demands from their courses, students with insufficient language proficiency who cannot attend the standard subject-specific academic language development program are directed to an alternative discipline-specific program – the Language Development Tutorial in Block mode, at the University of Technology Sydney. This practice report evaluates the effectiveness of the alternative program, and the transferability of disciplinary learnings to a subject and assessment level. The findings reveal that most students were satisfied with the program and agreed that it had helped to improve their confidence, discipline-specific language and literacy skills, subject content understanding, and ability to complete their assessments. Students who completed the program were also more likely to achieve higher subject results than those who did not attend/complete it. The findings reinforce the need to provide alternative discipline-specific support where subject-specific support is not viable. More in-depth investigation in future iterations will improve the program's impact.

Keywords: Academic language and learning; block mode; discipline specific support; academic language development; English as an additional language.

Introduction

The increasing diversity in the higher education student population over recent years can be attributed to widening participation and internationalisation of universities (Murray, 2016). A repercussion is the perennial issue of insufficient English language proficiency among some commencing students to meet the academic language and learning (ALL) demands of their studies (O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009). To address this issue, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) designed and implemented an innovative institution-wide Academic Language Development (ALD) Program in 2019, in which all commencing undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) students are screened using an online post-enrolment language assessment (OPELA¹) embedded in a core disciplinary subject. Those with unsatisfactory language skills as reflected in their OPELA results are directed to a compulsory weekly subject-aligned Language Development Tutorial (LDT) to support their subject-specific language development and learning needs (Edwards et al., 2021). However, not every student is able to access these LDTs because of timetable clashes or LDT cancellations (due to insufficient student numbers, which is not uncommon in subjects with small enrolments). Consequently, an alternative ALD program had to be provided.

¹ OPELA <https://www.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/learning-and-teaching/enhancing/language-and-learning/about-opela-students>



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This paper reports on the LDT (Block) (LDTB), an alternate discipline-specific ALD program designed for Business UG and PG students unable to attend the weekly subject-aligned LDTs. It outlines the key elements of the block program and investigates its impact; specifically: (1) Is the LDTB effective in helping students to develop their confidence and discipline-specific ALL skills? (2) Are students able to transfer their disciplinary learnings to meet the language and learning needs at a subject level? To assess the effectiveness and impact of the LDTB, quantitative and qualitative data was collected over three semesters in 2021. The data included 16 matched pre- and post-LDTB student surveys (i.e., students who completed both pre- and post-LDTB surveys), subject results taken from the same core disciplinary subjects in which the OPELA is embedded, student feedback comments, and an interview with the LDTB teacher. This research is part of the UTS ALD Program evaluation and aligned with its ethical considerations. All participants provided their informed consent, and their confidentiality was ensured. A comprehensive overview of the UTS ALD Program is outlined in Edwards et al. (2021).

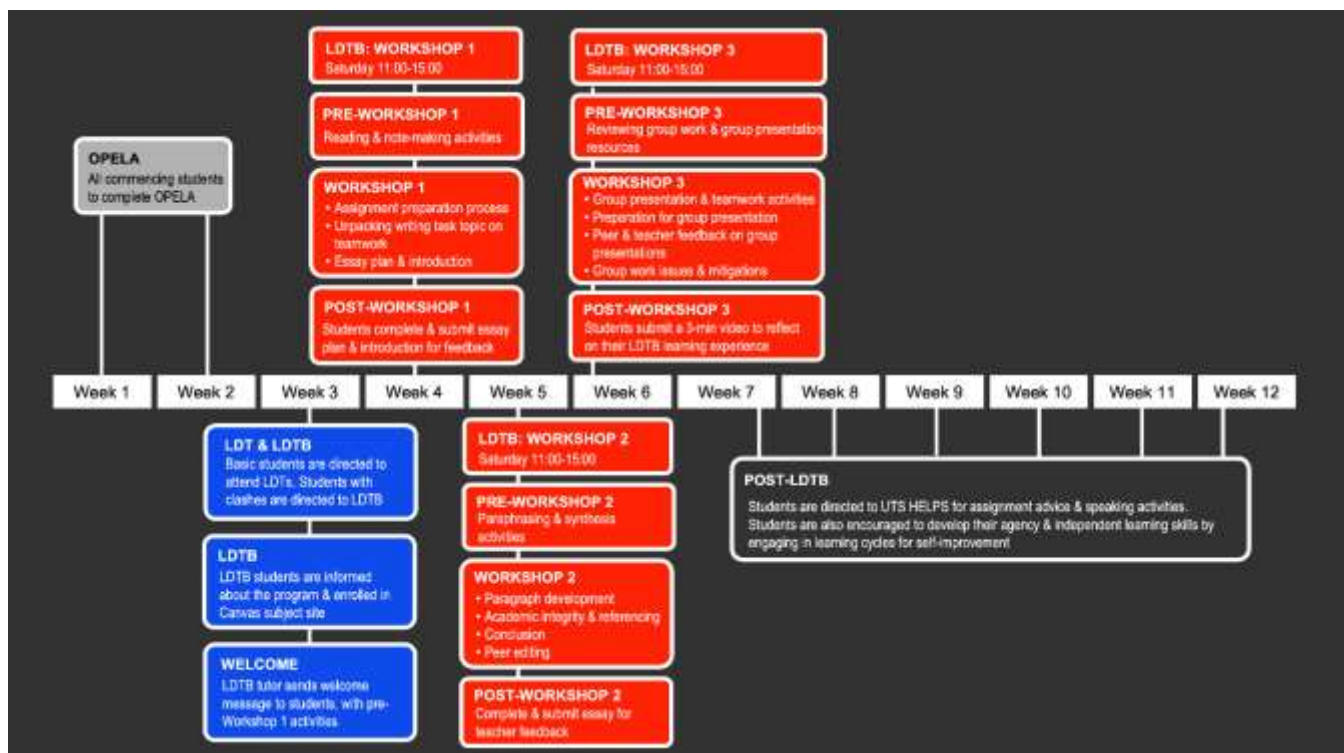
In the context of this initiative, discipline-specific ALD refers to the developmental nature of English language and literacy practices with a specific focus on the academic context, disciplinary discourse, and professional communication (Edwards et al., 2021, p. 55). Block mode, a form of intensive mode, is understood to be a learning and teaching modality that involves students participating in structured learning activities on fewer days and for longer each day than is traditional for the discipline during a teaching period (Male, 2018).

The Language Development Tutorial (Block): Overview

The LDTB is a discipline-specific 12-hour ALD block-mode program held over three consecutive Saturdays, from Week 4 to Week 6 in a 12-week semester (see Figure 1 for the timeline and program structure). It is different from an LDT in that the LDT aims to support those with unsatisfactory language skills to meet the ALL needs in a core subject, and is delivered over a 10-week period, from Week 3 to Week 12.

Figure 1

Timeline and Elements of the Business LDTB Program



The LDTB was designed to cater to a spectrum of Business UG and PG students and was implemented in 2021 over three semesters: Autumn, Spring and Summer. In total, 65 commencing students were identified to attend the LDTB: 20 in Autumn, 13 in Spring and 32 in Summer, from 4 PG subjects and 5 UG subjects.

The Language Development Tutorial (Block): Elements and Impacts

Block Design

In recent years, several universities have developed a range of mandatory ALD programs to address the ALL needs of students, especially students with low levels of academic English (e.g., Edwards et al., 2021; Fenton-Smith et al., 2017). However, not every in-need student is able to access the ALD programs due to logistical and/or personal challenges. In response, alternate ALD programs and modes of delivery should be considered and offered. Across the university sector, block-mode delivery has become an increasingly popular choice due to its appeal to students seeking more flexible study options (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). Block-mode delivery is also a sound pedagogical choice, with evidence suggesting that the impact on students' learning in block or intense mode is comparable to learning in traditional modes (Dixon & O'Gorman, 2020).

One of the critical elements of the LDTB was the use of block-mode delivery. In the trial in 2020, the three workshops were delivered in the beginning, middle and end of a semester. However, in 2021, the program ran over three consecutive Saturdays in the first half of semester. It was hoped that this change in delivery would sustain student interest and retention, and allow students to acquire the essential discipline-specific ALL skills in the relatively more relaxed pace of the first half of a semester, so that they could transfer and apply the acquired skills to their subjects and subject assessments in the second half of the semester when the teaching and learning pace intensified and higher-stake assessments were due. These changes in delivery appear to have had a significant impact on student retention rates: the percentage of students who completed the LDTB in 2021 was 75%, as compared to 43% in the 2020 trial. The LDTB teacher commented on the benefits for students of having the LDTB at the beginning of the semester: "They're not too worried about assessments yet. I think they would get less out of it, if they were attending but spending the whole time working on an assignment and not doing the ... workshop." Furthermore, the teacher noted the value of having three consecutive Saturdays in helping students to recall information and building rapport within the group: "... having the three weeks in a row, I liked that. It's easier to remember what you did last week rather than two, or four weeks ago."

The intensity of block-mode delivery can be ameliorated by quality teaching and course design. Samarawickrema and Cleary (2021) outline the principles for successful block-mode design which include: pre- and post-class activities, encouraging active learning and student-centred practices, opportunities for peer feedback and collaboration, "making connections" to other courses and careers, and "personalised and adaptive learning" (p. 16). Likewise, Ajayan and Balasubramanian (2021) also identify the inclusion of pre-learning activities, opportunities for social interaction, and active learning techniques as key elements in successful block design, as well as identifying other factors such as teacher experience and small class sizes.

The LDTB was designed to include a range of activities to support students in managing the demands of learning in block mode. These included short pre- and post-workshop activities to introduce and consolidate the workshop themes (see Figure 1 for details). Whilst recognising that not all students completed these activities, the LDTB teacher commented that they provided students with additional practice which could be completed at their own pace and convenience. The LDTB also included opportunities for pair, group and class collaboration which helped students develop academic and communication skills, and maintain motivation. Alongside these opportunities for collaboration, there was also ample time allocated to more independent and self-paced activities, where peer and/or teacher feedback was provided. The small class sizes also contributed to a more personalised and convivial learning environment to support students in the block-mode delivery. The survey data suggests the positive impact of the program on the students, with almost 80% of students agreeing that they would recommend the LDTB to other students, and more than 90% of students stating they were satisfied to very satisfied with the LDTB.

Discipline-Specific Content and Skills

There is strong consensus that discipline-specific approaches are a targeted and effective way to support English-as-an-additional-language students in developing appropriate ALL skills that are relevant to their discipline. Discipline-specific programs simultaneously allow students to meet the "dual challenge" of developing English language proficiency and subject content (Tann & Scott, 2021, p. 493). Additionally, discipline-specific programs not only provide students with the targeted ALL support required to meet the demands of their subjects, they also have been found to increase the overall

confidence, motivation, and academic identities of these students (Edwards et al., 2021). In the LDTB, it was hoped the discipline-specific approach would equip students with the required ALL skills for their Business courses.

The UTS Business School's graduate attribute on communication and collaboration entails the assurance that its graduates can convey written and oral information clearly, fluently, and appropriately for their audience, and interact and work effectively with others in an inclusive manner (UTS, 2021). With that in mind, the LDTB was designed to support the development of Business UG and PG students' disciplinary writing, speaking and teamwork skills by taking a scaffolded approach to guide them individually in the process of unpacking, researching, reading, note-making, and writing about teamwork issues. Concurrently, explicit group work instructions and opportunities were designed in for teams of 3 or 4 students to collate their research on teamwork issues (from their individual writing task) and culminate in a group presentation. The LDTB teacher remarked that some students had expressed their concern about group work at the start, so the group presentation activities and tasks were beneficial:

I think the nice thing about the LDTB is that we do touch on each of those skills ... even though it is only three workshops ... showing students a framework for doing each of those thing ... plants a seed.

The LDTB students were asked to rate their language skills on a 5-point Likert scale in the pre- and post-LDTB surveys, in terms of what they believed was needed to be successful in their studies before and after the LDTB program. Of the 16 matched responses, 69% of students rated their post-LDTB language skills at a good or very good level – a significant increase from the 25% in pre-LDTB; none of them reported a very low or low level. When asked to rate their confidence levels on a 5-point Likert scale in a range of ALL skills individually, the proportion of students who felt somewhat/very confident more than doubled at 52% (up from 23% in pre-LDTB), while those who felt not at all/not very confident fell almost threefold at 11% (down from 32% in pre-LDTB). The impact is nicely summed up in this qualitative feedback from a post-LDTB survey:

It's a beneficial experience... (The teacher) has provide us with an interactive content in class, engage us to ensure that we could do better in academic writing skills and presentation. For that. I thank you this program develop to full fill the gap within my study blindspot.

In the same student surveys, when asked to rate their agreement with specific positive aspects of the LDTB experience, of the 16 matched responses, the majority agreed or strongly agreed with all the statements (see Table 1). Interestingly, 79% agreed/strongly agreed that they had developed skills to help them understand their subject content and they had gained strategies to help develop their language skills, learned to set language learning goals, had benefited from teacher feedback on their oral and written language skills, felt more confident as a student, and would recommend the LDTB program to their peers.

Table 1

Students' Post-LDTB Feedback on Specific Aspects of the Program

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
In the LDTB, I have developed skills to help me understand my subject content	0%	7%	14%	43%	36%
In the LDTB, I have gained strategies to help develop my language skills	0%	0%	21%	50%	29%
As a result of the LDTB, I have learned to set language learning goals	0%	0%	21%	50%	29%
In the LDTB, I have benefited from teacher feedback on my oral and written language skills	0%	0%	21%	36%	43%
The LDTB has helped me complete my assignments	0%	0%	36%	36%	29%
As a result of the LDTB, I now feel more confident as a student	0%	0%	21%	50%	29%
As a result of the LDTB, I have attended at least one activity organised by HELPS (the UTS learning centre)	0%	7%	36%	29%	29%
I would recommend the LDTB to other students	0%	7%	14%	43%	36%

Note. The percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number

At the conclusion of each of the three semesters, the LDTB students' performance in their core disciplinary subject results were collected and analysed. A Welch's t-test (see Table 2) was performed to test the hypothesis that students who completed the LDTB ($n=46$) would outperform those who did not ($n=13$) in the core disciplinary subject results. The p -value of 0.0954 indicates a 90% confidence of the said hypothesis – students who fulfilled the minimum attendance requirement of 70% (i.e., completed LDTB) would achieve on the average 5 marks more than those students who did not fulfil the minimum attendance requirement (i.e., did not attend/complete LDTB) in the overall subject results. This suggests that in addition to achieving the aims of the LDTB, the program helped students to understand subject content and they were able to transfer what they had learned in the LDTB to other subjects. If the sample sizes were bigger ($n>20$), the statistical significance of the impact would have been more pronounced.

Table 2

T-test Results (n=59)

	Less than 70% Obs.	Less than 70% Mean	Above 70% Obs.	Above 70% Mean	Std Dev.	Stat Diff.	p-value
Subject mark	13	62.231	46	67.457	3.022	-5.226*	0.0954
***, **, * significance at the 1, 5 and 10 percent levels, respectively.							

Safe and Supportive Learning Environment

Widening participation initiatives to enhance equitable access to higher education, as well as the need to generate more income by increasing international enrolments, have led to a rise in the number of commencing students with insufficient “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1992) to meet the intellectual, linguistic, and social demands (Mann, 2008). The under-preparedness in some of these students can lead to diminished self-esteem and self-confidence (Pym & Kapp, 2013), stress and anxiety, and struggling with academic success and socialising (Telbis et al., 2014). In the face of such challenges, it is critical to provide and support students with a safe learning environment to maximise their learning.

Learning environment encompasses all formal and informal staff-student, student-student, and student-content interactions within the physical, social, and psychological contexts (Shochet et al., 2013). A safe learning environment provides students with opportunities to fail without judgement, learn from mistakes through constructive feedback from staff and peers, and acquire the necessary knowledge and skills within sufficient time and given all the support they need (Young et al., 2016). In the qualitative feedback collected in the post-LDTB survey, students commented that the LDTB was “very good and helpful”, “the teacher was lovely”, they “can make friends here”, and “to be relax everyone could help you”. The LDTB teacher speculated that such an environment was made possible due to the small class size with opportunities for interactions among classmates and with the teacher, personalised feedback, and working with students of a similar language level and facing similar challenges.

Personalised teacher feedback in a range of formats is woven into the fabric of the LDTB program – in all the pre- and post-workshop activities, as well as throughout the individual writing process and group presentation preparation process. In fact, almost 80% of students claimed to have benefitted from teacher feedback on their oral and written language skills (see Table 1). As explained by the LDTB teacher:

With the pre and post activities, I gave feedback ... If it was written work, I gave written feedback, if it was a recording, I gave recorded feedback. There was individual feedback on each of the activities (pre and post activities). In class, students worked in groups for the presentation ... they did some peer feedback on their writing (in pairs, in levels), there is a whole section in one of the writing workshops, where they do some writing and share with a partner, with some specific questions/checklist ... I grouped them with level.

The LDTB teacher reflected that she had found the teaching experience rewarding, in particular watching students spend time on the process rather than the product, and that the LDTB activities and tasks designed to foster interactions, social connections, and reflections on previous workshops were important to building student-student, student-teacher and student-content connections. The teacher commented that they thought increased confidence was the lasting impact of LDTB on students: “My guess would be the increase in confidence is the biggest lasting impact ... for (the student) to know it's OK to speak up, she can work with other students, and they'll understand her.”

Conclusion

This report has outlined the effectiveness and transferability of the LDTB at UTS, a discipline-specific ALD program which provided alternative, adaptive, and flexible support to in-need Business students who could not access the standard subject-specific semester-long ALD program. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, this report highlighted the key features of the LDTB and how they might have contributed to students' disciplinary language development, confidence, and academic success. While our initial findings are encouraging, there is a need for further research and more nuanced data to improve on the design and delivery to enhance student experience and success. However, given the ongoing need for adaptable and flexible ALD support, this initiative may be of keen interest to academics and institutions who are considering alternative modes of ALD programs.

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