

Transition and transfer: Effects of an EAP direct entry course on students' discussion skills at university

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ABSTRACT

Despite the significant growth in Direct Entry English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs (DEPs) in Australia, there is limited published research into the impacts of such courses on their alumni at university. Drawing upon learning transfer theory, this exploratory case study explored the perspectives of EAP pathway graduates about the speaking demands of their master's programs and how well-prepared they felt by their DEP for these demands. It focused on a group of six students from one cohort graduating from a ten-week DEP course at a metropolitan Australian university. The data, based on a series of interviews, revealed that there were four main types of speaking tasks required of these students in their first six weeks of university: large group discussion, questions posed to lecturers, on-campus interactions with staff, and small group discussion and collaborative group projects.

While a number of speaking skills needed for these tasks transferred from the DEP, students did not perceive the opportunity to apply some of the skills they had learned. Factors influencing transfer included perceptions of task similarity and transfer climate. Implications of these findings for course design, pedagogy and future research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The significant growth in international student enrolments at Australian universities has led to an increased demand for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) centres. In addition to fulfilling the academic requirements of a receiving institution, students without an assessable qualification undertaken and assessed in English must show proof of English proficiency (Murray & O' Loughlin, 2007). To date, this has been most commonly done by achieving a minimum score on an English language proficiency test set by the institution, in particular the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam (Brandon, 2013). However, many students are opting, instead, to enrol in a direct-entry EAP pathway accredited by a particular university. Successful completion of Direct Entry Programs (DEPs) waives the need for an additional language test score. Of the 68,302 international students who commenced higher education in Australia in 2013, 28% of them had prepared for their studies in an ELICOS centre in Australia (Australian Education International, 2013, pp. 5-6). The past year has seen a record number of enrolments at many university English language centres, the largest providers of such courses in Australia.

DEPs are designed to improve students' English proficiency and to introduce them to the academic language conventions and study skills which will help them to succeed in their tertiary studies, often with a focus on the Australian context or even of the receiving institution (Agosti & Bernat, 2009; Brandon, 2013). This comprehensive focus has led many to argue that DEPs may better acculturate students to the Australian tertiary setting and better facilitate their transition than the language exam pathway (Murray & O'Loughlin, 2007). However, the validity and reliability of DEPs has been questioned due to limited external regulations and standardisation of such courses in terms of content, making it difficult to determine the true level of English proficiency gained during any given course across Australia (Murray & O' Loughlin, 2007). Cope (2011) also points to the lack of validation research carried out on DEP assessments.

Research into the impacts of EAP courses on university students in Australia is limited but has grown in recent years. Several studies

have explored the relationship between academic performance and academic preparation in an EAP pathway course by looking at the grade point averages or Weighted Average Marks (WAM) of EAP pathway graduates compared to other students (Dyson, 2014; Floyd, 2015; Oliver, Vanderford, & Grote, 2012), with the first two studies also looking at qualitative data provided by students about their previous learning. Another lens through which to measure the effect of an EAP course on its alumni at university is 'learning transfer.' Learning transfer is the process by which "learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with another set of materials" (Perkins & Salomon, 1994 as cited in James, 2010, p. 133). By definition, transfer can be assumed to be the underlying goal of an EAP course. It is often taken for granted that students will simply apply skills and knowledge they have previously learned to a new situation, in this case, skills from the EAP course to the university context. However, many researchers agree that this is not the case and that transfer cannot be assumed (Barnett & Ceci, 2002; Perkins & Salomon, 1988).

While the study of transfer in education has a long history, from Thorndike and Woodrow in the early twentieth century (cited in Barnett & Ceci, 2002) to a resurgence in the study of transfer across subjects in higher education (Lightner, Benander, & Kramer, 2008), it is a relatively new area of inquiry in EAP and a number of the studies located in this area have focussed specifically on the transfer of writing skills from EAP courses to students' university mainstream courses (Counsell, 2011; De Palma & Ringer, 2011; James 2008; Kirkgoz, 2009; Leki & Carson, 1994; Ong, 2014; Storch & Tapper, 2009). An area which EAP transfer studies have neglected is speaking, though it is clearly a worthwhile area of investigation. Research has indicated that, despite meeting university English entry requirements, many non-English speaking background students (NESB) have expressed a lack of confidence in their oral abilities and are hesitant to participate in group and class discussions (Braine, 2002; Dooley, 2010; Yates & Wahid, 2013). Another area of concern is the facility of students to ask questions and seek help from their lecturers or tutors both in class and in office consultations (Krase 2007; Skyrme, 2010). Many EAP programs have attempted to address these weaknesses through the

development of courses based on the oral communication needs of students at university. These courses typically include tutorial style discussion skills, group work and presentation skills with related speaking assessments (Alexander, Argent, & Spencer, 2008.) Still, little is known about how effective such DEP speaking programs are and whether they target the skills and oral academic discourse that students really need in their university courses (Alexander et al., 2008; Basturkmen, 2003; Robinson, Strong, Whittle & Nobe, 2001).

The small-scale study presented in this paper aimed to fill this gap in research by exploring the perspectives of a small group of EAP pathway graduates about the speaking demands of their post-graduate degree programs at university and how well-prepared they felt by their DEP for these demands. It draws on learning transfer theory to develop understandings of the participants' experiences.

LEARNING TRANSFER AND EAP

As earlier mentioned, transfer can be perceived as the application of skills or knowledge learned in one context to another. Transfer of learning is often conceptualised as either 'near' or 'far.' Near transfer refers to the transfer of skills to a similar activity and context (Barnett & Ceci, 2002) while far transfer is said to occur across dissimilar contexts or tasks and to require analogical reasoning. The definition of EAP, "the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p. 8), infers that the goal of EAP is far transfer; thus, for EAP instruction to be considered successful, far transfer should occur (James, 2014). However, research shows that far transfer is more difficult to achieve than near transfer (Barnett & Ceci, 2002; Perkins & Salomon, 1988). It has been noted that the transfer of learning from an EAP course may be particularly challenging due to the diverse and complex academic contexts to which they are expected to transfer skills (James, 2014).

Direct Entry Programs can be seen to promote both near and far transfer as they have the dual role of both training students for participation in the academic discourses of their discipline-specific courses and training students to take the end of course assessments which are aligned with learning outcomes. One criticism of such courses is that there is an overemphasis on near transfer (Ong, 2014). In a novel

study of both the near and far transfer of writing skills in one DEP course in Australia, Ong (2014) found that there were numerous instances of near transfer within the course itself, and in fact, the application of certain writing skills or conventions taught in the course were pivotal to achieving a pass mark on the writing assessments. However, far transfer of these skills from the DEP course to the university course writing assignments was limited and similar findings occurred in other studies of writing transfer (Counsell, 2011; Kirkgoz, 2009; Leki & Carson, 1997). The focus of the study in this paper is far transfer.

While EAP studies which deal solely with the transfer of speaking skills are lacking, several other transfer studies set in an EAP context have provided insights into the extent to which transfer has occurred in other EAP programs and which factors influenced this transfer. This knowledge is important as it can inform the design and instruction of DEP curricula.

EFFECTIVENESS OF EAP PROGRAMS

Though they do not explicitly mention transfer, two Australian qualitative studies (Dooley 2010; Terrashke & Wahid, 2011) suggest that students had indeed applied skills they had learned in their EAP courses in their tertiary studies. After the completion of one semester, participants in Dooley's study reported that their pathway program had been generally beneficial in helping them to transition to university, citing knowledge of academic conventions and study skills as being particularly useful. However, oral communication was highlighted as an area of concern. Difficulties reported included articulating complex ideas during group work and class discussions with some students reporting a general lack of confidence with intercultural interactions, particularly with local students. Coping with a variety of accents also proved challenging. Terraschke and Wahid's study (2011) compared the experiences of EAP graduates with students who had gained entry through an IELTS score. Those who had done a pre-entry course reported feeling more confident completing written assignments, better understood the expectations of their tertiary courses and, like the participants in Dooley's study, reported appreciation of learned study skills. Speaking was also a concern in both groups of students. They reported a lack of confidence, particularly in speaking about their field of study, accounting, though this confidence grew over time. Though both of these

studies are relatively small in scale and limited to self-report data, they are significant as they give insights into students' perceptions, which, as will be seen in the following studies, have been linked to transfer.

Factors of learning transfer

A small scale, year-long study by James (2006a), based on interviews, journal entries, classroom observation notes and samples of instructional materials and students' course work, also suggested that EAP students had transferred a number of academic skills to their mainstream courses. These included reading, writing and listening micro skills. Several students also specifically mentioned speaking skills and being able to communicate clearly (verbally) in class because of the EAP course. In his analysis of the data, James (2006a,) identified nine factors influencing transfer including "requirement for learning transfer in other courses," "affordances for learning transfer in activities in other courses," "existence of personal weakness that transfer can support," and "similarity" between the content, activities and texts of the EAP course and other courses (pp. 794-801). He concluded that learning transfer is influenced by a number of factors related to the situation including the individual learner, the task and the instructional context (see also Barnett & Ceci's taxonomy of transfer, 2002). As the EAP course in James' study was a content-based instruction course, there was some topical alignment of content from the EAP course to the mainstream course i.e. based on science and technology. In addition, the course was taken concurrent to students' mainstream courses. This raises the question of whether results would be similar in an English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) course, such as the one in my study.

Building on his previous research, a second experimental study by James (2008) indicates that it is students' perception of task similarity and difference, not just the task design itself, which affects transfer of learning. In his study of students enrolled in a freshman English as a second language (ESL) writing course, participants reported to have transferred more of their EAP writing skills to a task they perceived to be similar to one they had done before than one that they perceived to be different. This is despite the intended similarity and difference of the task design by the researcher. Similar conclusions have been drawn by researchers of transfer of writing skills from EGAP courses

to students' written mainstream assignments (Counsell, 2011; Ong, 2014). From her study based on students' self reports of transfer, Counsell concluded that generic writing skills are often not perceived by students as being transferable to discipline-specific writing.

In a later study, James (2010) adopted the lens of 'transfer climate' to investigate challenges that EAP students experience at university. Transfer climate in James' study is viewed as "the support for learning transfer that an individual perceives in the target context of instruction" (Burke & Baldwin, 1999 as cited in James, 2010, p. 134).

This can include aspects such as course content and assignments as well as the attitudes of classmates and staff. In his study, students perceived a varying degree of support for transfer in different situations. Examples of a negative transfer climate included comments that instructors did not expect strong writing skills or that grades were not linked to the quality of writing. The study suggested that learners' perception of transfer climate affects whether they transfer learning or not. Other studies have found similar results, though they did not explicitly mention transfer climate (Counsell, 2011; Ong, 2014; Wardle, 2007; Yates & Wahid, 2013). For instance, students in Yates and Wahid's (2013) study reported not using some of the presentation skills they had learned in their EAP class because other students were allowed to read their presentations verbatim and still received high marks in their mainstream class. Thus, transfer was not supported by the transfer climate.

Promoting transfer

Research suggests that transfer can also be facilitated through instruction. One framework for "teaching for transfer" was coined "bridging" and "hugging," by Perkins and Salomon (1988, pp. 28-29). This framework addressed their conceptions of transfer which were referred to as "low road," and "high road transfer"; the former is said to happen semi-automatically when the learning and target domains are similar and the latter requires "mindful abstraction" of knowledge from one context to another (Perkins and Salomon, 1988, p. 25). 'Hugging' aims to facilitate 'low-road' transfer by increasing the resemblance of similarity between the learning context and the target domain. However, bridging strategies encourage students to reflect, plan and monitor their activities and to anticipate future applications

of their knowledge (Green, 2015), i.e. in the university context. Bridging can help learners to see connections between tasks which may have no apparent similarity, such as some types of discipline-specific tasks that DEP graduates may encounter in their tertiary study. Green (2015), who studied a group of Thai students with EAP courses parallel to their mainstream classes, found a positive correlation between students' recognition of their EAP instructors' hugging and bridging techniques with the transfer of skills to their other course. Other researchers also recommend the promotion of metacognitive strategies with students to help them achieve 'far' or 'high-road transfer' (James, 2010; Lightner et. al., 2008; Wardle, 2007) and teaching students to generalise their knowledge. The findings in this literature review reinforce the idea that far transfer does not automatically occur but suggest that students' perceptions play an important role. It also suggests that EAP teachers can play a role in facilitating transfer.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

This research studied graduates of the University Direct Entry Course (UDEC), a pseudonym, at a university English language centre at a metropolitan university in Australia. The overwhelming majority of those enrolled in the UDEC have been accepted on conditional offers by the receiving institution. They are able to fulfil the English proficiency entry requirement of 6.5 IELTS (or equivalent) overall, with a minimum of 6.0 in writing (for most courses), through the successful completion of the course. Students may complete fifteen or twenty weeks of the UDEC depending on their IELTS scores but it is the ten-week course, UDEC 10, which is recognised for direct entry to degree courses at the receiving institution. This course requires an entry of 6.0 IELTS score in all skills. The study in this paper focusses on the content of the UDEC 10 only.

The UDEC is an EGAP course, approaching academic literacy from a multidisciplinary perspective. In such courses, language skills and knowledge taught are assumed to be transferable across different disciplinary contexts and purposes. In addition to improving English proficiency and developing academic literacy skills like other DEP courses, a clear goal of the UDEC course is to orientate students to the receiving institution itself. Curriculum documents show that new course material was written in 2011 based on current EAP research and

methodology as well as input from stakeholders, including a reference group of faculty members from the receiving institution. This resulted in a closer alignment with the goals of the university including the integration of some authentic materials as well as UDEC's mapping of its assessments against the Graduate Attributes of the receiving institution. These features, among others in the curriculum, can be identified as hugging and bridging strategies (Green, 2015), designed to facilitate transfer of skills from the UDEC course to students' university courses.

UDEC adopts a communicative language teaching approach with speaking and discussion incorporated into all lessons as well as including a regular writing consultation with the teacher, reflecting the type of advisor/advisee interaction that may occur in the target context (Krase, 2007; Skyrme, 2010). There are two dedicated speaking components in the UDEC 10 course: seminar presentation and discussion skills, both with assessments. In the presentation course, student build skills to present a research-based presentation on their future field of study and to lead a discussion on their presentation.

The discussion skills component mirrors trends in EAP courses to represent the types of interaction and collaborative tasks common across university campuses such as tutorials (Alexander et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2001). The learning outcome of this component is for students "to participate effectively and confidently in group discussions." Combining a skills and task-based approach (Robinson et al., 2001), the course is scaffolded to teach strategies such as initiating and sustaining a conversation, supporting claims with evidence, turn taking and strategies such as body language and eye contact. Exponents for different functions such as agreeing and disagreeing, interrupting, responding to someone's comments and follow-up questions are included in each unit. Other inclusions are analysis of taped discussions (former students' and their own), self-reflection and peer feedback. The discussion course culminates in an assessment, with students participating in a twenty-minute simulation of a tutorial discussion in response to questions related to issues in the course. Students in each group (four or five) receive the same grade.

Due to the time line of this research (the first six weeks of university) to meet my own assignment deadline, this study focused more on discussion

skills and the UDEC discussion assessment rather than presentation skills.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DESIGN

Building on the body of literature and given the relatively small amount of published research about speaking task types at university, the study aimed to address two research questions, focussing on the UDEC course.

The research questions are:

1. Which types of speaking tasks (in English) do UDEC graduates need to perform in their post-graduate study in the first six weeks?
2. To what extent do students transfer discussion and speaking skills from the UDEC course to perform these tasks?

Methodology

In addressing these research questions, I used a qualitative research design based on a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a group of six UDEC graduates. The literature review suggests that learning transfer is determined by the perceptions of individuals of the transfer climate, of the similarity and difference of tasks and of their own unique experiences (James, 2006a, 2008, 2010; Lightner et al., 2008). Thus, the insider or 'emic' view (the students' view) was sought of the research setting and the activities that take place there (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Patton, 2002). This perspective of the students could not have been obtained through other methods such as observation or through interviews of lecturers, though it is acknowledged that other sources of data would have added to the depth of this research, in particular, analysis of course outlines and assessment tasks.

The participants were recruited for the study from a cohort of 350 UDEC students studying in May and June 2015 (See Table 1). The sample size of six was chosen in order to gain detailed information from each participant, whilst also allowing comparison between different students. The participants were reasonably representative of this UDEC cohort in nationality, which was 90% Chinese and 4% 'other Asian.' All students proceeded on to postgraduate study, half of whom were studying engineering, the predominant areas of future study among UDEC students according to curriculum documents. All of the students, except for Van, lived in an environment in which they spoke mainly their native language. Ethics approval

was sought and given before undertaking any data collection and students have been given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

TABLE 1.
Profile of participants in the study

Nickname	Age	Gender	Nationality	Course of study	Entry Point of UDEC
Belle	26	F	Chinese	Master of Engineering	UDEC 10
Van	26	M	Vietnamese	Master of Engineering	UDEC 10
Laura	23	F	Chinese	Master of Engineering (Material Science)	UDEC 10
Michael	25	M	Chinese	Master of Information Technology	UDEC 20
Quin	28	F	Vietnamese	Master of Science (Food Science)	UDEC 20
Jewel	28	F	Chinese	Master of Design	UDEC 20

**The first language of all of the Chinese students is Mandarin.*

Students were individually interviewed face-to-face three times: immediately after UDEC finished and in weeks two and six of their first semester of university study, thus permitting observation of changing attitudes (if any). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The semi-structured interview format allowed detailed exploration of the experiences and perceptions of the students and, due to the interview protocol (Appendix A), ensured consistency of questioning among the participants, allowing easier coding and comparison between participants (Patton, 2002). The interviews aimed to address the two research questions and asked targeted questions about the similarity between the UDEC speaking tasks and the university speaking tasks based on the premise that perceptions of similarity between tasks facilitate transfer (James, 2006a, 2008). All of the interviews were

audio-recorded and transcribed. Holistic thematic analysis (Holliday, 2010) was conducted on the interview data. This involved, first, coding the data based on the research questions, i.e. types of tasks that students do at university and reports of transfer from the UDEC course, as well as reports that students did not apply particular skills. However, information outside these two categories was also coded, for example reasons for not participating in large group discussion. These broad categories were then analysed for recurring themes and subthemes such as the discussion assessment task being perceived as different from university group assignments. Within these themes, I highlighted extracts that illustrated the findings and supported my arguments in line with the research questions. To explain why transfer had or had not occurred, I also searched for evidence that referred to factors in the literature review: similarity and difference of task and transfer climate as well as other factors. I went back to the data a number of times to reassess the codes and refine the themes until I felt these were valid reflections of the students' interviews.

Before moving to the results, it should be acknowledged that there are some limitations to using self-report data. Participants may have inaccurately remembered their experiences or they may have answered questions to meet my expectations as the interviewer (Patton, 2002). In addition, the study can only account for the transfer that participants noticed. Thus, 'transfer' in this study is determined only by what students reported in their interviews.

RESULTS

The initial interview in this study took place immediately after the UDEC course had finished and participants had been notified that they had passed the course. The purpose of this interview was to establish students' perceptions of which speaking skills they had acquired and how they anticipated these would help them in their university studies.

Pre-transition: Oral communication skills in the UDEC course

All six students reported improvements in speaking proficiency during the UDEC course. They all reported having had little practice discussing issues in English prior to the course and all lacked confidence to some extent, with one student, Quin, describing her

English as 'terrible,' before the course. Participants appreciated the opportunity to practise their speaking, citing improvements in fluency and grammar. All of the students anticipated needing to use discussion skills at university in lectures, in group work projects and on campus.

Areas of the UDEC which students noted as being particularly useful include the following:

- collaboration and interaction;
- interactive listening;
- discussion management strategies;
- supporting opinions with evidence.

The transition period: Speaking tasks for postgraduate study

In the Week 2 interview, students seemed overwhelmed by the workload, as well as by the number of different tasks that they needed to manage. Speaking in class was not a priority for most of the students. By week six, however, students were required to speak more and all were involved in group projects. By this time, students reported feeling more confident with their speaking and listening than in week two.

In this part, I will address the first research question: Which types of speaking tasks (in English) do UDEC graduates need to perform in their post-graduate study in the first six weeks?

According to the interview data, four main speaking tasks were required by the students in their first six weeks of university study:

- large group discussion (lectures and tutorials);
- questions posed to lecturers;
- on-campus interactions; and
- small group discussion and collaborative group projects.

Large group tutorial/lecture discussion

The majority of the classes taken by this group of students were reported to be lectures, though the course outlines suggest that some of these were, in fact, tutorials. They were described by students as mainly teacher-led with a focus on content though lecturers (or tutors) sometimes initiated discussion or asked questions. This was similar to the experiences of students in the study carried out by Terraschke and

Wahid (2011). All six students reported difficulty with comprehending their lectures mainly due to unfamiliarity with the content, the accent of the lecturer and the pace, also substantiating the findings of two Australian studies (Dooley, 2010; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). This difficulty was particularly prominent in the first two weeks. Students commented that it was much more important to concentrate on the content and take notes than to answer questions or take part in open-group discussion. Also mentioned was the difficulty in responding quickly enough to keep pace with the lecturer and with other students. In her second interview, Belle, who had previously described herself as a confident speaker at the end of the UDEC course, expressed great frustration at wanting to speak but finding it difficult to formulate a question or respond quickly enough, particularly before a native speaker had answered the question. She lamented:

To be honest, it is not like I was thinking... Before the class (university), I thought the pressure would be from the teacher or from the assignments but for now the pressure is from...stressful feeling is from classmates. The native speakers are being too quick and when the lecturer asks a question, I respond in my mind but they answer out loud and after they answer all the questions and when the answer comes out of my brain, they have already finished and the lecturer has already started another topic.

Both Quin and Van had a similar experience to Belle and noted that in UDEC, the 'lecturers' cared that everyone understood, 'but here [at uni] they do not.'. However, all but Quin reported more confidence in lecturers in the third interview, partly due to preparing for them.

Asking questions to lecturers

Clarifying content with their lecturers was considered important as all six participants found comprehending the lectures difficult. Although the group confirmed there was often a call for questions during lectures or tutorials, four of the participants reported asking questions after the lecture had finished, outside of the classroom, because they felt self-conscious about their English and were fearful of not being understood in front of the group. Other comments included not wanting to waste lecture time (Laura) and not knowing how to formulate a question well (Jewel). Quin, who expressed low confidence in her level

of oral proficiency, reported feeling self-conscious about speaking directly to the lecturer and said that she mostly relied on listening to the recorded lectures a second time, as well as asking questions on Moodle and reading the questions and responses of others. As with the large group discussions, students expressed more confidence in the sixth week and three students commented that their lecturers were very helpful in clarifying content and helping international students.

On-campus Interactions

Students were required to speak some English out of class in their daily campus interactions. This included asking for help in the library (Van and Laura) and setting up a Wi-Fi connection. Michael described having a 'communication breakdown', partly due to the fact that both he and the IT staff member were both non-native speakers and that they could not understand each other's accents. Two students met with new classmates after class to discuss course content in the first two weeks.

Small Group Discussion and collaborative group projects

Only Laura and Jewel reported having small group discussion within their actual classes in the first six weeks. In her compulsory core communication class, Jewel mentioned specifically being encouraged to engage in discussion within the class to analyse points from an article to help her get ideas for her own research. Laura also reported having small group discussions in her tutorial that were similar to discussions in the UDEC course, including the discussion of case studies (included in the UDEC reading component). She reported the most difficult aspect about this was 'the thinking' because she sometimes had no ideas, compared with the other students who she perceived were able to generate 'good' ideas very quickly.

In the Week 6 interview, all of the students mentioned that they were working on at least one group assignment, which seemed to commence in week three. These tasks were diverse and varied in terms of the complexity and length of the task as well as the inclusion of different speaking requirements (Appendix B). For example, Van's design project comprised an entire semester and involved a range of speaking tasks including task-based group work, conducting an interview, consultations with a tutor, a question/

answer session to describe and defend a design plan and a group presentation. Quin's group assignment was less explicit in terms of the oral interaction required: produce a ten-page paper with a partner.

Despite the differences, all of the tasks were reported to involve regular meetings involving interactive discussion including analysis of assignments, negotiation of topics, division and allocation of work, research and a final report or presentation (or both).

All of the students reported being active in their groups. Although some difficulties were noted in the initial weeks, students used coping strategies, such as preparing well for the meeting and simply taking risks. For example, Van reported communication problems in the first few weeks of his project.

They (the other students) speak fast and (use) lots of slang... I can't keep pace with them and understand their jokes so I feel like I'm being ignored at first but things are better now as we work together.

When asked what he did to improve the situation he responded, 'I'm just trying to work with them as much as I can and keep up with them and try to contribute to the practice as much as I can.'

Reports of transfer

This section addresses the second research question: To what extent do students transfer discussion and speaking skills from UDEC to perform these tasks?

Analysis of the data indicates that the UDEC discussion course generally had a positive impact on student's ability to engage in university speaking tasks. A number of specific skills were mentioned as having been transferred from UDEC. Three of the students - Van, Michael and Quin - mentioned that they purposefully used body language, gestures and eye contact to facilitate group discussion and work on their group projects. They mentioned that it was helpful to signal turn-taking, to convey meaning and also to show that they were actively listening. Both Van and Michael mentioned that they gained awareness of these strategies in UDEC and did not use these strategies when speaking with individuals from their own cultures.

A number of general 'working in groups' strategies were also mentioned. Michael, for example, remarked on the fact that in his

group task, participants had to take turns acting as the 'project manager.'. He felt fairly confident assuming this position and remembered the importance of the role of the 'leader' in the UDEC discussion class. Laura mentioned that having a leader might have been useful in her group as all the members of the group are quiet and someone needs to 'organise'. Other strategies mentioned were setting deadlines, distribution of tasks, and general interaction. Laura mentioned paraphrasing as a useful strategy. Though not unique to the speaking courses, Laura said that 'brainstorming' with others was very useful in helping her to plan and carry out research.

Four students mentioned that they had or would use their presentation skills. Jewel, who had already given a group presentation by the third interview, noted that some other students who had not done UDEC were less prepared and less confident than her. Interestingly, she referred to the group presentation she had given in UDEC 15. Michael rated the presentation skills as the most useful skill he learned in UDEC and was confident about his upcoming presentation because of this experience. He notes

A lot of things you can't do just because you've never tried it before but if you finish it one time, then it's very easy. It's not as hard as you imagined before.

A final impact mentioned by students of UDEC was confidence and practice in discussion which could also be equated with increased speaking (and listening) proficiency, consistent with research from James (2006a). Asked to rate the discussion course from 1-5 (least useful to most useful) in terms of preparing them for their university speaking tasks, Belle and Van rated the course 3 and 3.5 respectively and the other four students rated it 4 or 5 in terms of usefulness. Each student mentioned that practice in speaking in the UDEC was a major factor in their ability to interact and participate in their group projects and in their general English proficiency.

Reported lack of transfer—the UDEC discussion assessment task

There was a reported lack of transfer of skills related to the discussion assessment task. This was a surprising finding as UDEC graduates' perceptions of the discussion course were largely positive upon

graduation from the course and in the second interview. When asked to discuss the similarities and differences between their group assignments and the UDEC discussion task, students focussed more on the differences rather than similarities. While the discussion course was deemed useful in terms of discussion practice and exposure to discussion conventions, the UDEC assessment task was described as inauthentic and 'very different' from their 'real' discussion tasks and group projects. Three aspects were noted and recommendations for change were given by the students.

First, Michael, Jewel and Laura rejected the transfer of the 'academic' exponents introduced in the UDEC discussion course when speaking in their groups as they felt these were not necessary or even appropriate. Jewel noted that the 'style of speaking,' taught in the UDEC discussion course is different in 'reality.' She noted that, 'it's weird (using this language) if we just chat with each other, not very formal. We don't have many formal situations we need to speak.' She recommended more speaking and the introduction of more natural discussion phrases. Belle recommended an additional speaking course where students could speak more spontaneously, rather than stick to the specific topics of the course, 'like IELTS speaking'.

Also noted were students having too much time to practise and not enough pressure. This criticism stemmed from the fact that students knew the choice of topics and their group members for at least four weeks before the assessed task. In addition, students were given ten minutes on the day of the task to prepare with their given question.

Laura suggested that this time to practise decreased the challenge of what happens in a real discussion.

In real time, we will get many more problems and breakdowns so I think (UDEC) students need to have the chance to feel these break downs and problems in the group discussion.

She suggested instead receiving the topic or issue only 30 minutes before the task and perhaps some background information from which to draw evidence. She stated that, '...if we prepare too much, it's not really discussion, it's more like a performance.' Michael also described the discussion task as being 'a performance.' Quin said that in her

'real' discussions, she had to speak much longer to negotiate, meaning 'several hours' in some cases, 'not twenty minutes!'" she laughed.

Finally, Michael and Belle criticised the discussion task as having no 'real' outcome as in their group projects in which students need to write a paper or give a presentation. While Michael said he found the discussion course to be useful, he said the assessment task was 'not the best way' to measure the ability of someone to take part in a discussion. Belle said her group interaction at university was freer and much more demanding

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to investigate the impacts of a DEP speaking program on its alumni at university. It investigated the types of tasks required of UDEC graduates in their first six weeks of university and to what extent UDEC prepared them for these tasks.

Mismatch of speaking tasks?

In terms of the first research question, the UDEC graduates in this study had to perform a number of speaking tasks in their first six weeks including large group discussion, interactions with lecturers, social interaction on campus and small discussion and group assignments. Group assignments appear to be prevalent across the majors and vary enormously from class to class. The group projects mentioned by the participants in this study comprised a range of speaking task types including giving presentations, interviews, question and answer and general collaboration to plan and produce a product collectively. The number of participants in each group ranged from two to sixteen.

What is notable about these results is that these tertiary speaking tasks are not strictly representative of the UDEC speaking assessment tasks, which are the individual seminar presentation and the group discussion, a simulation of a tutorial discussion. While presentations were well-represented, only two participants mentioned having small group tutorial discussions in the first six weeks of university. UDEC 10 also does not include a task-based group assessment though the discussion assessment could be said to be an example of this as students did prepare together and received the same grade. Though not assessments, there are collaborative tasks within lessons throughout the course. While there are some apparent differences between the

required speaking tasks at university and the DEP course, does this mean that the content of the UDEC speaking course was not useful or relevant for these tasks? According to the conception of far transfer, students would be able to take what they have learned in the UDEC and to apply it to their seemingly disparate tasks (Ceci & Barnett, 2002). Turning to the second question, we can see to what extent this occurred.

Perception of similarity and difference of task: a reason for transfer?

According to the data, UDEC speaking components generally impacted positively on students' ability to complete these oral communication tasks and many students attributed their increase in oral proficiency as well as confidence to this course. A number of particular skills were reported to have transferred from the DEP context to the target context of university.

Analysis of the transcripts reveals that similarity of tasks, activities and texts may have played a large role in participants' transfer of UDEC skills to their tertiary context. Three factors from James' study (2006a), all of which are related to 'perception of similarity' can be mapped against students' reports of transfer. In some cases, learning was transferred because it 'required' the application of something students had learned in the UDEC. This is evident in comments about presentation skills and of Michael's comment about having to assume the role as project manager (see previous section). A description of paralinguistic skills to facilitate turn taking is an example of 'affordance for transfer' as is Laura's comment about brainstorming. Though students were not 'required' to apply learning outcomes from UDEC, the activity or context 'afforded' them the opportunity to apply the skills from the UDEC. Finally, there were several reports of similarity of task from the UDEC to the tertiary tasks. Both Michael and Jewel said that the discussions they were having whilst working on their group assignments were similar to the UDEC course but more complex.

This argument can also be sustained with the participants' reports of the UDEC discussion assessment task. As can be seen from the results, participants viewed the discussion assessment task as being different rather than similar to their group assessment tasks and participants claimed that they did not transfer particular skills. This can be linked to James (2008) which highlighted the fact that perceptions of similarity or difference affect transfer of skills. However, this finding also highlights

the fact that students may not see connections between tasks (James, 2014; Lightner et al., 2008) and that teachers and course designers may perceive a task differently than students (DePalma & Ringer, 2011; Wardle, 2007). Indeed, as a teacher researcher, I would have expected students to see the similarity between the discussion task and their tertiary group tasks. In fact, the curriculum documents show that this task was explicitly mapped against several of the university's graduate attributes focussing on communication, collaboration and team work and respect for diversity. The fact that participants were not cognisant of the similarities suggests that either there should be some amendments to the curriculum or that bridging strategies (Green, 2015) should be implemented to assist students in making connections.

Interestingly, there were several strategies and tasks which students did reportedly engage in at university but did not note as being transferred from the UDEC or as being similar to a component of that course. For example, Belle explicitly stated having to take a turn at leading her group and both Van and Belle were required to give peer feedback, both skills emphasised in the discussion course materials, thus 'similar' tasks. When talking about their group projects, students also described strategies such as negotiating meaning, asking for clarification, and summarising but also neglecting to mention any similarity. One explanation for this points to the nature of self-report data as previously mentioned. Another explanation for this 'failure to notice transfer' is that students may not notice the accommodation of a particular skill or practice as they see it as already part of their repertoire of skills. Wardle 2007 argues that a "limited" search for skills is often why transfer is not found, using the analogy of, "looking for apples when those apples are now a part of an apple pie." (p. 69). Likewise, Larsen-Freeman (2013) recommends that transfer should not be viewed as a shifting of intact knowledge or skills from one context to another but as a "transformation" of this learning by the learner (see also DePalma & Ringer, 2011). These conceptions may form the basis for a more useful framework for future studies of transfer of EAP skills.

Transfer climate

As in the study by James (2010), support for transfer varied among these UDEC graduates in their tertiary courses. A number of examples

were given which pointed to a perception of a positive transfer climate, including assignments that encouraged transfer and marking criteria that valued skills and strategies from the DEP. Participants reported positive interactions with their peers and staff, and as mentioned earlier, they received positive reinforcement from their general interaction in groups and when asking questions of professors. Even Quin, who had reported difficulties in many of the activities, relied on strategies from the UDEC, including the use of Moodle. This perception of a positive transfer climate indicates that the UDEC is fairly well aligned with the expectations and learning culture of the receiving university, promoting transfer. The perceptions of lack of support for transfer that were mentioned mainly dealt with the UDEC 10 discussion assessment task.

Many of the difficulties that students mentioned having such as comprehending lectures and slow response time do not seem to be a problem of learning transfer but a larger issue with language proficiency itself. Despite meeting the language requirements of the DEP, all participants recognised the need to improve their oral proficiency and listening. As Belle expressed in week two, 'We need time to adapt'. These findings are consistent with studies by Dooley (2010) and Terraschke and Wahid (2011) who studied similar cohorts of students, suggesting that these UDEC graduates are on a normal trajectory of transition from a DEP course to university. Students' confidence in their academic and English ability grew over the semester and this seems very likely due to some extent to the foundation, confidence and coping strategies that students gained in the UDEC.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the results of this study suggest that the UDEC does to an extent fulfil its aim of preparing students for the speaking tasks required of them in the first six weeks of university and of facilitating far transfer of particular speaking skills. However, there were several areas, namely the UDEC discussion assessment, which could be addressed. In light of the current research, a number of recommendations have been made regarding DEP courses in general and specifically for the UDEC in order to facilitate far transfer of speaking outcomes. These concern both course designers and teachers.

First, continuous research of the variety and breadth of

communication tasks required of students in the target context should be carried out and reflected in course materials. This could be done through small case studies such as the one described in this paper, focus groups and surveys of graduates upon different points in their university career (already a part of UDEC's evaluation process) and analysis of course outlines and assessment tasks in different fields of study. Transparency of the results of such research may also promote understanding and acceptance of resulting curriculum changes among teachers of these courses (see Brandon, 2013).

In addition, more access to information about students' future courses and assignments should be provided to both teachers and students. For teachers, this could include opportunities to sit in on lectures, greater access to students' discipline-specific course outlines and assessment tasks and collaboration with discipline-specific staff. Students, too, could benefit from question and answer sessions from former DEP students. This information can help both students and teachers to note similarities between the UDEC and the future context as well as creating positive perceptions of the transfer climate.

Thirdly, the participants in this study did not always perceive the transferability of skills from the UDEC, particularly from the discussion assessment task to their university group assessments. This does not mean that that the current discussion task is not relevant to what students are doing at university but rather students did not make connections between tasks in the two contexts. Thus, teachers could encourage more metacognition strategies and incorporate more bridging strategies into lessons (Green, 2015; Lightner et al., 2008). As Wardle (2007) notes, 'We cannot prepare students for every genre, nor can we know every assignment they will be given...' (p. 82). However, students can be taught to generalise knowledge and to anticipate applications of what they are learning. For example, drawing on authentic group assignments from different faculties, DEP students could be asked to discuss the similarities between the tasks they have done and to identify skills they might apply or 'transfer' to these tertiary tasks. Likewise, students could be asked to reflect on their performances after assessments, such as the individual presentation, and to consider what they have learned from the experience and to

anticipate how they might prepare differently for similar tasks. Teachers should also be given more explicit training in recognising and exploiting hugging and bridging strategies (see Green, 2015; James, 2006b).

Finally, based on the participant feedback, minor changes should be considered in the UDEC 10 course. One criticism of the discussion assessment was that there was too much group preparation, which decreased the challenge and authenticity of the assessed discussion. The participants' comments can be linked to research by Basturkmen (2003) on the nature of discussion in master's courses. According to her research, the aims of EAP course discussion should go beyond the requirement to present preformed ideas and should include the ability to "engage in extended exchanges until a satisfactory outcome is achieved" (Basturkmen, 2003, p. 240). Taking this into account, perhaps the extensive practice with the topics in the weeks leading up to the assessment and the ten-minute preparation immediately before the discussion task should be omitted or reduced, leading to more authentic and meaningful discussion.¹

Less emphasis on 'formal' discussion exponents, replaced by more natural exponents could also be considered. This would ideally be done through the analysis of discussion discourse in students' courses (Alexander et. al, 2008; Basturkmen, 2003) though it is clear that this is an area in need of research. More authentic tasks where students need to complete or create something together could be incorporated though this type of task is already attended to in the earlier UDEC 20 and 15 modules. Other additions could include strategies for effective interaction with lecturers including the formulation of appropriate questions (Skryme, 2010) as well as more opportunities for students to 'think on their feet'.

It is acknowledged that there are several limitations of this research including the small sample size, the primary reliance on self-report data and the time-line of the study. A replication of this study over an entire semester would give additional insight, particularly into the speaking tasks that may occur towards the end of a semester, most likely presentations. Having students' grades of their university assessments could add a quantitative element to the study.

Despite the limitations, this exploratory research has given

insight into the communication needs of DEP graduates and their perceptions of the usefulness of their EAP course as well as a snapshot of students' transition from DEP graduate to university post graduate in their first six weeks of university. This information may be useful to the stakeholders of the organisation referred to in this study as well as those at similar institutions. Large-scale research at Australian universities about the types of speaking required and assignments is also a rich area for future research and would benefit all university English language centres in planning DEP courses.

NOTE

¹ Since this article was submitted, the process of assigning groups in the UDEC discussion assessment task has been changed. In the revised model, students are not assigned groups until the day of the assessment. This change was made to discourage detailed planning of the discussion assessment task and to encourage more authentic engagement in class discussions and during the assessment. Based on Basturkmen (2003), this may result in a more reliable assessment of discussion skills.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Protocol

Interview 1 (carried out immediately after the completion of the course)

Demographic information:

What is your nationality?

What is your future faculty?

1. Think back to before you started the UDEC course. How would you describe your English speaking skills? How has your speaking proficiency changed since then?
2. What did you learn from the discussion skills course and the preparation for the assessment task?
3. How do you think you will use these skills at university?
4. How prepared do you feel for the speaking you will need to do at [university]?
5. Besides the UDEC course, is there anything that has helped you to improve your speaking?

Interview Protocol- Interview 2 (week 2 of the semester)

1. What types of speaking in English have you had to do in these first two weeks: in class and out of class?
2. What have been the greatest challenges?
3. What coping strategies have you used?
4. Are there any similarities between your current courses and UDEC? What are the biggest differences?
5. Have you used any speaking strategies or skills from the UDEC course in your studies? Which ones?

Interview Protocol- Interview 3 (week 6 of the semester)

1. What type of speaking have you been required to do in class? What affects your participation?
2. Tell me about a group project that you have in one of your classes.
Probe: What has been challenging/easy about this project?
Are there any similarities between this project and the UDEC discussion assessment task or other activities in that course?

- Have you employed any strategies from the discussion task?
3. Have you experienced communication breakdown in any of your communication tasks? What strategies did you use to try to resolve this?
 4. Now that you have been at university for ½ semester, how useful have you found the UDEC course in preparing you for speaking tasks? Rate it 1-5.
 5. What suggestions do you have about the UDEC speaking components or discussion task that would benefit future students?

APPENDIX B: Description of group assignments by participants

Participant	Group assignments
Van	<p>Class: Mechanical Design 2</p> <p>Project: Major Design Project (group of seven)</p> <p>Task: create and present a design based on the requirements of an industry partner.</p> <p>Involves interviewing the client, planning and writing a design report, question and answer session with the lecturer (bear pit), consultations with the tutor, a presentation of the design to the client, a reworking of the design based on feedback and a group presentation to the class. Peer assessment included in grade.</p>
Michael	<p>Class: Engineering Project Management (group of four)</p> <p>Task: Case study analyses done in groups (alternation of project management role).</p> <p>Much communication done via Moodle in a private communication forum set up by the tutor for each group.</p>
Laura	<p>Class: Material Design (group of four)</p> <p>Group report and presentation based on case study analysis (Question: Choose the most appropriate material for a product based on a case study.)</p>

Participant	Group assignments
Jewel	<p>Class: Human-Centred Design Methods (groups of four)</p> <p>Task: Design and demonstrate a product for dementia patients.</p> <p>Interview of industry partner, general group collaboration for the design, group demonstration of product and presentation</p>
Belle	<p>Class: Research skills</p> <p>Collaborative Research Groups (group of 16)</p> <p>Task: Choose and research an 'engineering future challenge'; write a report of 6,000 words; presentation by 3 of the group members.</p> <p>Complete sub-tasks throughout the course culminating in a written group report of 6,000 words, alternation of project manager role.</p> <p>Peer assessment included in grade.</p>
Quin	<p>Class: Wastewater Treatment</p> <p>Task: Design appraisal for the inclusion of secondary wastewater treatment (groups of two)</p> <p>10 page report 30%</p>

