# Widening Participation and Linguistic Engagement in Australian Higher Education: Exploring Academics' Perceptions and Practices

Rachel Burke
*University of Newcastle, Australia*

Language practices represent significant barriers to engagement in higher education for many learners from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. In Australia, such students may be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, students from rural and remote locations, learners who are the first in their family to access higher education, from non-English speaking backgrounds, learners with interrupted schooling due to refugee or asylum seeker experiences, or first language speakers of English dialects that vary from the dominant forms privileged in the academy. While subject-specialist language and engagement with text can present ongoing challenges for many learners, such linguistic barriers—and the practical implications for academics engaged in teaching—often receive limited attention in institutional policy. This article reports on research that sought to critically examine how ten academics from different disciplines and university contexts perceive their role in the linguistically diversified academy, particularly but not exclusively, in relation to students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. The experiences of the ten academics who contributed to this research offer a useful vantage point from which to consider the various ways in which language may be conceptualized in higher education, the possibilities for embedding linguistic support in content area instruction, and the need to ensure tailored and responsive language assistance for learners throughout their studies.

## Introduction: Widening Participation and Linguistic Barriers to Engagement

In recent decades, "widening participation initiatives"—efforts to increase higher education participation for students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds—have resulted in greater linguistic diversification of Australian universities. Outreach initiatives, targeted scholarship and admission programs, and the provision of bridging and enabling courses[1] have aimed to facilitate more equitable entry into higher education, resulting in increased enrollment of students from traditionally underrepresented language backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Gale & Parker, 2013; Gidley, Hampson, Wheeler, & Bereded-Samuel, 2010; Naidoo et al., 2014; Rissman, Carrington, & Bland, 2013). Such students may be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, students from rural and remote locations, learners who are the first in their family to access higher education, from English as an Additional Language (EAL) backgrounds, learners with interrupted schooling due to refugee or asylum seeker experiences, or first language speakers of English dialects that vary from the dominant forms privileged in the academy.

While targeted admission programs and the provision of alternative pathways to higher education

remain important foci, advancement of the equity agenda also requires critical examination of the challenges encountered by students as they move beyond university entry and the completion of enabling or bridging programs to participate in 'mainstream'[2] higher education. This understanding of widening participation in tertiary studies extends beyond the setting of enrolment targets, to encompass equitable participation in the educational, social, and cultural structures of the university.

Among the chief barriers to inclusion in higher education for many learners from underrepresented backgrounds are the hidden sociolinguistic norms and expectations surrounding academic engagement with specialist content knowledge (Ben Moshe, Bertone, & Grossman, 2008; Hirano, 2014; Silburn, Butcher, & DeMori, 2010). While often invisible to discipline 'insiders', each field of study is embedded within a specific linguistic context in which knowledge of specialist vocabulary, grammatical forms, text types, and certain ways of using language are required for engagement with content (Gee, 2008; Halliday, 1993; Mitton-Kukner & Murray Orr, 2014). While all students can encounter difficulties acquiring discipline-specific language, a growing body of research indicates that learners from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to experience significant and ongoing linguistic barriers to academic engagement in higher education due to contrasts between their primary linguistic practices and those privileged within the academy (Arkoudis,

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[1] Enabling courses provide an alternative pathway to tertiary studies for students who lack the qualifications required for entry. Bridging courses are offered to students who have completed high school but require assistance preparing for tertiary studies or meeting program entry requirements.

[2] 'Mainstream' is used here to refer to educational contexts where additional language supports are not typically provided.

Richardson, & Baik, 2012; Briguglio & Watson, 2014; Hartley, Baker, Fleay & Burke, 2019).

Despite its centrality to all learning, language is often considered separate to the core business of discipline studies in higher education and associated solely with learning support centers or enabling/bridging programs. However, failure to provide formalized, integrated, and ongoing linguistic support beyond initial bridging or enabling courses has significant equity implications. Students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds frequently gain access to higher education through targeted entry programs, only to struggle with the language required for engagement with academic content, participation in face-to-face and online learning, or demonstration of knowledge via assessment in the 'mainstream' (Gray & Irwin, 2013; Hirano, 2014; Jacobs, 2005; Murray, 2013; Naidoo et.al., 2014; Fagan, Baker, Irwin, Dantas, Gower, Singh, Taiwo, & Ross, 2018). The impact of these linguistic barriers on learners' academic progress is often misinterpreted as a lack of capacity or motivation for succeeding in higher education, fuelling deficit models of non-dominant language background students and undermining the transformative potential of tertiary education.

Sociocultural theories of language acquisition emphasize the importance of an ongoing community of practice embedded within meaningful communicative contexts for the attainment of language proficiency (Gee, 2008; Luke, 1991). For higher education, this requires discipline specialists to explicitly deconstruct and co-construct relevant language forms with students as they simultaneously explore key content and specialist knowledge. By facilitating learner exploration of discipline texts in terms of purpose, intended audience, structures, and key features, academics can recognise and value students' existing linguistic repertoires, and assist them to become familiar with the expected forms and linguistic practices of the academy, the discipline, and their intended profession (Daddow, 2016; Hammond et al., 1992). Further, co-constructing subject-specific text types under the guidance of a discipline specialist allows learners to apply this linguistic knowledge to become increasingly independent text producers. This process of deconstructing, joint construction, and independent construction of discipline texts apprentices learners into shared understandings about the function and nature of language within the sociocultural context of their subject (Rothery, 1994). As Derewianka (2015) comments, this apprenticing of learners into disciplinary textual practices: "aims to provide the potential for all students, regardless of background, to have access to the powerful discourses of the culture" (p.78).

Accordingly, the role of the teaching academic necessarily involves assisting all learners, including increasing numbers of students from traditionally underrepresented language backgrounds, to navigate the linguistic requirements of the field. Yet, this important aspect of widening participation is often overlooked in institutional policy regarding equity initiatives, and it remains noticeably under researched, particularly in terms of the practical implications for discipline specialists engaged in teaching. Likewise, there is minimal critical scholarship to underpin institutional initiatives to better assist academics to provide linguistic support as part of inclusive practices in higher education.

This article reports on research that sought to critically examine how ten academics from different disciplines and university contexts perceive their role in the linguistically diversified academy, particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. The study focused on the practical implications of linguistic diversity for teaching in higher education with an emphasis on participant approaches to the provision of language support within content area instruction. Key foci included: academics' perceptions of specialist language and discursive practices in their discipline, their appraisal of the linguistic needs and strengths of learners, and their approaches to scaffolding learner engagement with language. Specifically, the study focused on the following research questions:

1. How do academics perceive the role of language within the knowledge base of their discipline?
2. As experts in their discipline, how do academics perceive their role in relation to linguistically diverse student populations?
3. How do academics support student engagement with the linguistic requirements of their discipline? What assumptions, values, and perspectives underpin this support?

The experiences and perceptions of the ten academics who contributed to this research offer a useful vantage point from which to consider the various ways in which language may be conceptualized in higher education, as well as the impact of these varying epistemological understandings on practical approaches to promoting language diversity and engagement within content area instruction. While the ten participants offered differing views of language and associated equity implications, they shared a common understanding of the interconnectedness between language and discipline content. Accordingly, this research offers a cogent response to the traditional disconnect between language support and discipline specific teaching, highlighting the possibilities for embedding linguistic support in content area instruction.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is framed by a sociocultural understanding of language, which considers all linguistic acts as forms of social practice that occur within

particular contexts and are subject to various power relations, epistemological understandings, and performance of identities. This sociocultural approach distinguishes between discourse, or language in use, and Discourse, or situated enactments of particular values and behaviors that contribute to the performance of identity(ies) (Gee, 1999). As Gee (1996, p.131) explains, Discourse refers to "...a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'." In this sense, linguistic practices are understood to be far more than decontextualized, cognitive transactions in which users receive and transmit information, but are bound to the contexts in which they are produced and interpreted, reflecting and also impacting social and cultural values and practices.

A sociocultural understanding of language considers textual practices to be "socially regulated, recurrent, and patterned things that people do with literacy as well as the cultural significance they ascribe to those doings" (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 342). Through the acquisition of disciplinary textual practices, students participate in "new Discourses", taking on or contesting associated values and ideologies (Burgess, 2004, p.41; Gee, 1999). For learners from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, the language privileged in disciplinary Discourses and higher education assessment and andragogy may be markedly contrasted with the language of their primary Discourses (Gee, 1990). Institutional assumptions of linguistic homogeneity and failure to acknowledge and value students' diverse linguistic repertoires can marginalize and restrict learners' engagement with knowledge, interaction with peers, and demonstration of understanding through assessment.

## Language, Higher Education, and Learner Exclusion: Existing Research

Research indicates that while many learners from non-dominant language backgrounds have a strong desire to contribute to and participate in the academy, linguistic barriers associated with specialist vocabulary, grammatical forms, and ways of navigating and producing text can pose a significant challenge (Hirano, 2014; Johnston, 2011, Murray, 2013, Naidoo et.al., 2014; Terry, Naylor, Nguyen, & Rizzo, 2016). Further, the removal of formal linguistic scaffolding following bridging and enabling programs contradicts theories of language acquisition that emphasize the ongoing and iterative nature of the process, as well as the need for meaningful, authentic, community-based interaction. As Wingate (2006, p.464) notes, engaging with and producing text are "cultural and social practices that depend on their context and tutors' and students' assumptions of what constitutes knowledge".

Yet, existing research suggests that while discipline specialists are generally aware of the linguistic challenges encountered by learners from underrepresented and non-dominant language backgrounds, they are unsure how to support students to engage with the discursive practices of the discipline (see Bretag, 2007, Skyrme & McGee, 2016). Daniels (2013, p.238), in her small-scale investigation of Australian educators' perceptions regarding their roles in the diversified academy, describes "high levels of confusion and frustration in some teaching staff faced with the challenges of teaching students whose understanding of both English language and Australian higher educational purposes is limited." While some studies have explored institutional programs for assisting discipline specialists with linguistic inclusion (see Terry et.al, 2016), the prevailing image to emerge from the albeit limited literature suggests a general lack of formal planning to support educators with practical strategies for embedding customized language support within discipline studies (Briguglio & Watson, 2014; McWilliams & Quentin, 2014; Skyrme & McGee, 2016).

Skyrme and McGee's (2016, p.769) study of educators' perceptions and practices concerning international students attending a university in Aotearoa/New Zealand revealed tensions around issues of academic standards which they describe as having "appeared to threaten some basic disciplinary values manifest in pedagogical traditions which mark out for them university as higher education." Questions concerning the balance between linguistic accuracy and content knowledge in assessment, as well as guidelines for delineating how much and what type of assistance academics could provide to non-dominant language background students, were among the key issues raised in Skyrme and McGee's (2016) study. Other research suggests discipline specialists consider their andragogical responsibilities to be solely related to content knowledge and understand this to exist in isolation from the language used to convey, construct, and engage with the field (Dunworth & Briguglio, 2011).

Questions concerning the role of academics in the linguistically diversified academy, as well as possibilities for language support in content-area instruction, are of vital importance to the future of the widening participation agenda in higher education. Providing alternative pathways to university enrollment without also considering the need for ongoing, tailored language support or the implications for teaching practices, undermines the intention of widening participation initiatives and the opportunity to genuinely pursue a more equitable academy. Issues foregrounded within existing research, including concerns regarding the disenfranchisement of non-dominant language background students and staff, the peripheral positioning of language support, and the additional burdens on time-poor academics

unsure how to explicitly value and support linguistic diversity through content area instruction, carry significant equity implications. As greater numbers of students from underrepresented backgrounds access higher education, these issues take on increasing importance, generating an urgent need for sector-wide reflection and action.

## The Study

This research was undertaken at an Australian university comprised of metropolitan, regional, and rural campuses, with higher than average numbers of learners from groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in tertiary education, including students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, learners with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, and students from regional and remote locations. While each campus of the university features a unique sociocultural and linguistic environment, there is a shared equity agenda and institution-wide commitment to teaching excellence.

### Participants

The ten academics who volunteered to participate in the study teach at the regional and rural campuses of the university, working in a range of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and humanities-related fields, including the sciences, English, mathematics, performing arts, psychology, history, physical education, sociology, teacher education, geography, cultural studies, and research methodology. Participants ranged from lecturer level to members of the professoriate, with a mixture of tenured, full-time permanent, casual contract, and adjunct positions represented. At the time of the research, nine of the academics had doctoral qualifications, with the tenth undertaking a PhD. All ten academics had extensive experience educating students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Only two of the participants had formal qualifications in linguistics, although several others had been exposed to introductory theories of language acquisition and learning in their undergraduate degrees.

Three participants identified as speaking English dialects that differ from Standard Australian English. Six participants had foreign language learning experience, with two of these academics describing themselves as bilingual. These language learning experiences/identities were identified by participants as pivotal in shaping their understandings of linguistic diversity.

### Research Approach

The study occurred within a descriptive, qualitative approach to research. Each academic was invited to participate in a narrative-based interview focused on eliciting significant moments, important events, and teaching experiences that have shaped their understandings and practices regarding language. While this study was conceived within a sociocultural understanding of language (Gee, 1999), which considers all linguistic acts as forms of social practice that occur within particular contexts and are subject to various power relations, epistemological understandings, and performance of identities, no such theoretical frame was presented to participants. Rather, the ten academics were invited to define 'language' according to their own views and in their own words. This methodological decision was prompted by the desire to probe the various ways in which language is conceived, consider these notions in relation to disciplinary background, and explore how they translate into educational practices. Interview prompts were intentionally vague and intended to facilitate reflection on each academic's current practices and the theoretical perspectives, values, experiences, and attitudes informing their approach. This foregrounding of praxis was a response to the current dearth of theoretically-informed, systematically researched, practical recommendations for scaffolding learner engagement with discipline specific, academic language in higher education.

The face-to-face interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Following member checking, inductive content analysis was undertaken to establish the presence and frequency of key themes within the transcripts (Berg, 2001). Recurring lexical items and phrases related to language were then identified through a conceptual analysis and considered in terms of related themes discussed in the text.

## Findings

### Varying Definitions of Language

Each interview commenced with an invitation for the participant to reflect on their own conceptions of language and to provide an overview of the linguistic practices relevant to student engagement in their discipline. While only two participants had formal qualifications in linguistics, all ten interviewees expressed awareness of language as an important mediator of learning and emphasized the responsibility of every academic to support students' linguistic development. These views are perhaps unsurprising given the participants' willingness to contribute their experiences to research focused on linguistic inclusion in higher education. Likewise, all ten participants recognized that while engagement with discipline specific language practices can be challenging for all learners, the greater the contrast between the students' primary linguistic Discourses (Gee, 1999) and the dominant language of the academy, the more likely

they were to encounter difficulties. In this sense, each of the participants noted that students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds tended to be at greater risk of linguistic exclusion.

Yet, despite a shared understanding of the relevance of language to academic engagement and success, as well as the need for academics to scaffold language development in content area instruction, the ten participants offered varied definitions and understandings of language and the related equity implications. These contrasting conceptions occurred on a continuum ranging from a mostly instrumentalist understanding of language to more socially embedded views of text as sociocultural practice. These conceptualizations of language informed each academic's understanding of the processes via which students may develop proficiency in academic Discourses (Gee, 1999), their engagement with the associated equity implications, and their views regarding the roles and responsibilities of academics in the linguistically diversified university. For all ten academics, there was notable cohesion between conceptualizations of language, their self-reported classroom practices, and the roles they assumed in relation to student language development.

For several participants, language was defined chiefly in terms of grammatical accuracy, emphasizing comprehension of specialist terminology and metalanguage, syntactical precision in written text, and adherence to the formal conventions of spelling and punctuation. For these participants, language practices in higher education were defined mostly in the traditional sense of reading and writing, with linguistic expertise thought to be attained through the mastery of, and compliance with, underlying rules. Participants expressing a predominantly instrumentalist view of language in higher education considered knowledge of the grammatical aspects of language to be essential to students' future professional status and disciplinary membership.

> I've always, in my written work, particularly with undergraduates, spent a lot of time correcting grammar and spelling and whatnot because I used to be just horrified to think that we would send a teacher out there who couldn't spell or write a proper sentence. It's just embarrassing (Participant 8).

Accordingly, discipline specialists were perceived to have a responsibility to uphold the standards of formal academic language, not only in language-focused courses, but across the curriculum. For instance, four participant teacher educators working in the humanities, including two who also engaged with more socially embedded notions of language, conceived of their role as equipping future generations of teachers to maintain the expected standards of grammatical accuracy. One

participant suggested: "If they can't write well themselves, they don't really have a hope of being able to teach others" (Participant 4), while another added, "Everything they read, everything they write, has the possibility of impacting on their own future students, so it's quite possible for them to be a very poor role model in terms of literacy practices" (Participant 8). The need to ensure future teachers are equipped with formal grammatical knowledge was considered an important issue for the academy, necessitating "a systemic and consistent response" (Participant 2).

All ten academics identified grammatical accuracy, knowledge of subject-specific terminology and metalanguage, and understanding of structural and stylistic conventions of text as essential to academic success.

> It's mainly the writing that we notice, that their grammar can be quite poor, they're not great at sentence structure, and spelling can also be an issue, despite, you know, them having to word process their assignments and having the ability to use grammar check, spell check, etcetera (Participant 2).

However, eight of the ten academics also expressed the view that considerations of language in higher education extend to notions of identities, power, and epistemological engagement. For these academics, who work in a range of STEM and humanities-based fields, language was described as "communal" (Participant 7), "emotional" (Participant 6), "about belonging," and "wrapped up in a cultural world view" (Participant 1). As one participant stated, "It's language that tells people about whether they fit within a certain cultural grouping" (Participant 5). This understanding of the socially and culturally embedded nature of textual practice informed these academics' views regarding linguistic equity, as well as the relationship between learner background, linguistic identities, and engagement with higher education. As one of the humanities-based participants explained:

> …for some of our students…many of whom are first in family, many of whom come from financially and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, many who may come from rural environments where the written language is not necessarily privileged in their home or community life, I do find that those students do need additional support…(Participant 3).

As will be discussed later, participants espousing a sociocultural understanding of language described how they seek to encourage learner expertise in disciplinary discursive practices via exploration of the many textual practices that students perform both inside and outside of higher education. In this approach, diverse text types

are valued and understood to be located within particular social contexts, and acquisition of the linguistic conventions and practices of higher education is not a subtractive process in which students replace existing linguistic repertoires. Rather, this approach emphasizes the responsibility of all academics to unpack the textual practices of the academy – and of students' future professions – while also drawing attention to learner agency to question, contest, and shape textual practices in all aspects of their lives.

Accordingly, the ten academics who participated in this study articulated varying definitions of language. These conceptualisations did not correlate with disciplinary background or career stage, but they were strongly aligned with self-reported classroom practices and understandings of the way that language may act as a potential barrier to engagement in higher education.

## Academic Responses to Learners' Linguistic Strengths and Needs

During the interviews, each participant was invited to provide an overview of their perceptions regarding learners' linguistic strengths and needs, and recount critical incidents that illustrate how language practices impact student engagement in their discipline. All ten participants were careful to note that broad categories, such as 'English as an Additional Language/Dialect' (EAL/D) or 'international student', are not necessarily helpful in anticipating learners' linguistic strengths and needs. In fact, all participants reflected on the potential for such categories to deny the diverse educational and linguistic experiences and repertoires of learners:

> I think it's impossible to say, "All of my international students are like this," because in fact some of them, their English skills are as good as the domestic students in terms of the academic discourse, but there are other students that I've had, both in the past and present, that have had to be heavily scaffolded… (Participant 3).

Several participants perceived some EAL learners to have greater syntactical knowledge of formal English than monolingual English users, suggesting: "[T]hey come here speaking better English than locals will because they've been through very formal education systems … [T]hey don't face the same challenges as some of our students who are English speakers" (Participant 1). Likewise, some EAL students were thought to transition into academic Discourses with greater ease than their monolingual/monodialectal peers due to their familiarity with the processes of language learning and their ability to switch between different codes.

Interestingly, despite being invited to discuss learners' linguistic needs and strengths, all ten interviewees focused their responses on student needs.

This focus may have resulted from the invitation to recount key incidents or experiences that the participants identified as illustrative of the role of language in mediating discipline area instruction. Further, as mentioned previously, these academics volunteered to participate in the study due to their views regarding the importance of language and literacies in higher education. As such, participant emphasis on learner needs may reflect their commitment to ameliorating language barriers through responsive and tailored instruction. However, beyond this study, it is also important to consider broader conceptions of linguistic diversity in higher education in general, where traditionally emphasis has been placed on challenges rather advantages of linguistic diversity. In this way, well-intentioned institutional approaches to support student language development can fail to engage with learners' existing linguistic repertoires and overlook important opportunities for enriching the linguistic practices valued within higher education.

## Scaffolding Engagement with Subject-specific Language

Each participant was asked to provide an overview of the practices they implement to assist students to engage with the linguistic practices required for disciplinary membership. Despite their different specialist backgrounds, all ten participants identified subject-specific vocabulary, metalanguage and academic jargon, and discipline-specific uses of regular English terms, as key to student engagement with content:

> It was the first thing anyone said in any of the lectures or tutes, that they found the language difficult…there was something about the jargon, there was something about the appropriation of everyday words that then get used for different meanings, or the fact that …you'd use the same word in three different papers, and they're being used for entirely different purposes because they're coming from three different discipline backgrounds (Participant 9).

Participants working in STEM-related fields identified how each discipline has "its own sort of grammar…its own sort of alphabet" (Participant 6). Academic engagement with discipline knowledge in these subjects was described as "dependent on the capacity to unpack that jungle of symbols" (Participant 6). The ability to decode complex symbolism was also associated with understanding metaphorical uses of language within disciplinary instruction, where abstract concepts are personified in narratives to assist student learning:

> You're talking about trying to traverse a landscape and discovering unexpected vistas and getting

through obstacles and finding ways over and around things…killing off this guy, liking that guy, this one lives here. So, they would even sometimes use gender pronouns, you know, this guy lives in this space. This other guy lives in this space. Those two don't talk to each other, you know, all of that sort of stuff. And I think it's important somehow in enculturation [in the discipline] (Participant 6).

Associated with the need to understand metaphorical uses of language, the same academic working in a STEM-related discipline described how failure to engage with subject-specific specialist terms can be problematic for classroom processes and learner affective states:

One of my colleagues was teaching the class and noticing the students were behaving really, you know, freaked out at various points and was wondering why, and it was a class where he was talking about…the error in the estimation, so he's saying, "Okay, we can bound the error, we can do this with the error, we can do that with the error," and what the students were hearing was "I've got it wrong, I've got it wrong!" (Participant 6).

Participants referred to a range of strategies they implement to assist all students with subject-specific vocabulary acquisition, including the use of pictures and animations. Other academics in both STEM and humanities-related fields described strategies for assisting learners to decode symbols and structures of language, including using 'nonsense' texts to draw attention to the systems of language, reassuring learners that "even if you don't know the details, you can sort of start to unpack the grammar of this, so don't be scared to try" (Participant 6). Another STEM-based academic relayed how students— particularly those with little experience in language learning— often react to activities that seek to unpack and denaturalize subject-specific language practices, recounting how one learner observed:

You take apart the language, and then we get really angry and frustrated because suddenly we don't know what we're doing anymore, and then when we put it back together again, suddenly we're better at it than we were before (Participant 7).

Other strategies described by participants as central to their efforts to scaffold engagement with subject-specific language indicated a strong awareness of the need to provide students with authentic and meaningful communicative contexts. One academic working in a STEM-related field described how students are often resistant to including written text with calculations, despite the fact that providing such rationales is a necessary textual practice when producing industry reports. In seeking to "model the practice that I'm hoping to encourage" (Participant 6), the academic described tutorials in which students work in groups to solve problems, showing their calculations on whiteboards, while class members explain the underlying theories. The academic describes this activity, which seeks to encourage spoken language as a foundation for the written rationales to accompany calculations, as a strategic way to prompt students to use subject-specialist terminology for meaningful purposes: "In that context, it's a really positive vibe, and they're laughing and they're talking together, and it seems to be a more verbal context" (Participant 6). The academic also described how the activity takes on additional meaning due to the authenticity of the communicative purpose: students are genuinely explaining theory to peers rather than to a lecturer who already understands the concept. Such activities provide interactive, meaningful, and scaffolded linguistic engagement for all students, with the academic reporting increased attendance at tutorials and enhanced learner outcomes.

**Modifying spoken language to assist comprehension.** Listening to academic English was also identified as challenging for some students, especially EAL background learners, and several participants described how they consciously slowed the pace of their speech or modified aspects of their dialect to assist with comprehension:

- I intentionally soften my language of communication with my colleagues and with the students, but I inform them of that so that they can recognize that they need to meet people halfway as well. We should model what we do (Participant 5);
- I dialect shift with them to make sure that they're understanding what is going on (Participant 7).

Here, an awareness of the need to assist with learner comprehension is paired with attempts to explicitly discuss how language varies according to social context, location, and purpose.

Several academics also described how they scaffold learner engagement with spoken language by employing teacher recasts in which they paraphrase student responses or their own statements in order to simplify or rephrase complex language. As one participant who works in a STEM-related field explained:

I try to say, 'So we've got to check that this thing is a vector space, that means we've got to check that addition holes, that means that ... you know, close

your own addition holes' …so just using different words for saying the same thing (Participant 6).

The notion of providing varied explanations of the same concept was also evident in academics' use of subject-specific language via different modes, including visual and multimodal formats:

If I put two concepts together, the language students or the students that battle with their language or literacy, they may find that confusing. So, what I will then do is just break that down and then put it back together again in a different way or the same way… [S]ome of my students will say, "I didn't really understand that until you changed the whole thing to some other way" (Participant 10).

Embedding recasts within teacher talk and offering varied explanations of the same content are important means of providing integrated assistance regarding specialist vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, or academic jargon. While these strategies are typical instructional devices used in language learning settings, the humanities and STEM-based academics in this study had incorporated these scaffolds into their practice without any professional development or guidance regarding such techniques.

**Assisting learners to engage with academic text.** Academic reading, in particular navigating journal articles, was identified by all ten participants as one of the most important textual practices for all students. The pace with which EAL students were able to read academic text was identified as disadvantageous to their preparation for lectures/tutorials and for their completion of assessment tasks. One academic from a STEM-related field reported how a colleague in the same discipline uses readability software to ensure the accessibly of language in class materials.

In particular, the marked transitions in academic reading required of learners as they progress from school to tertiary education were emphasized as problematic: "[T]hey come to university and then all of a sudden…the stakes are upped again, because they don't understand the structure, they don't understand the language and the way that it's been written for an academic audience" (Participant 4). When faced with challenges accessing content through journal articles and other academic texts, students were thought to "switch off", further disadvantaging them in terms of assessment, and rendering them "already a step behind the others" (Participant 4).

In response, one of the participants working in the humanities avoids using journal articles altogether, opting instead for textbooks that offer greater scaffolding through more accessible content, subheadings, definitions for key terminology, and clearly structured paragraphs. Other

academics continue to use journal articles for course readings, identifying these as important text types in their discipline; however, they also attempt to scaffold engagement with journal articles via joint deconstruction activities. For one humanities-based participant, this involved assisting all learners to navigate journal content by providing annotated and color-coded hard copies of the text to highlight the various sections and key points. Commenting on the general lack of scaffolding for the textual practices embedded within higher education, the academic noted that while learners are expected to engage with journal articles from the first year of their degree, they are usually provided with minimal preparation: "I don't know if they're actually taught explicitly how to engage with the structure, with the language, that unfamiliar terminology, the fact that it's written for sort of more academic audiences…" (Participant 4).

Other participants described similar approaches to deconstructing text that they had adapted from EAL pre-reading activities, with an academic working in STEM explaining:

Biology textbooks have a particular structure, and the author has signposted their meaning in the chapter through the use of hierarchy of emphasis…And if you don't read the passage but just pull out the hierarchy of emphasis, you can produce a graphic overview (Participant 7).

In describing the benefits of such activities for learner outcomes, the participant recalled how students who had previously failed biology courses "because teaching in undergraduate biology is very didactic… and nobody will talk to them about their textbook" (Participant 7), started to succeed in their studies once they received this tailored language support. Discussing the obvious equity implications for students, the academic added:

If nobody tells the students this, then how are they supposed to know? And what happens then, of course, is the kids who succeed are the ones who catch on to…the way the content is being presented through the language that they're being exposed to…So I try to use the language issues to open up the academic community that's going to be producing the stuff that they're going to have to draw on (Participant 7).

**Supporting academic writing.** Similar approaches to scaffolding academic writing were described by participants who drew attention to rhetorical style, discourse organization, and the need to elaborate and support a point by deconstructing model texts in tutorials. As one participant explained, "The verbal feedback that I got from those students was that it was so useful because

no one had actually taught them how to write…they just did what they did…" (Participant 4).

Further, participants reported that students were often expected to adopt a critical approach to the production of academic text, yet were provided with minimal explanation or modelling to apprentice them into such culturally-situated, disciplinary practices. Academics in the humanities described how expectations regarding the critical use of a text pose a particular challenge for students attempting to produce a literature review that is "a critical analysis, not just a reporting of facts…and weaving that into the analysis of data" (Participant 8). In response, participants described the necessity of the following:

> …giving them seriously scaffolded understandings of what it means to write a synthesis, because they just don't understand…what that might even look like, and without really scaffolding what you get is this kind of series of summaries of, you know, this paper said this, and this paper said that ... and they're not doing anything with the knowledge, they're just reporting on what they've read (Participant 9).

All participants described spending considerable time providing students with detailed feedback on written assessments, modelling the expected linguistic forms, and explaining grammatical rules. This provision of language-rich feedback was offered to all students but was reported as being particularly useful for traditionally underrepresented background learners: "I will edit their work to show them, 'This is how it should be written.' I offer to meet with my students if there's a particular area that they're working on, to talk to them about it…" (Participant 3).

However, the depth of guidance academics could conceivably provide students concerning written language was restricted by overall workload and employment conditions, particularly for participants employed on casual contracts.

Some participants also described how they dedicate time at the start of each tutorial – regardless of course content – to focus on a different grammatical point, such as the use of apostrophes, in order to explicitly address structural aspects of language "because you can't know what you don't know" (Participant 3). This additional guidance was provided to the whole class, with grammatical topics chosen to reflect areas of concern or confusion identified in student writing. Other academics took a more relativist approach to grammar:

> I try to encourage students to use a registered tone that is formal rather than be so specific about types of spelling unless they're completely out of the way, because I think there's a difference between the two. And I am not a prescriptive, I am much

more a descriptive linguistic user obviously because I feel that language should be fluid and flowing and it's changing (Participant 5).

**Negotiating linguistic transitions in higher education.** The need to critically engage with the meaning and purposes of disciplinary textual practices, rather than simply mimic the style or vocabulary, was also emphasized by participants who discussed various instances of students using subject-specific language inappropriately or in ways that obstruct meaning because of their desire to sound 'academic'. This situation was identified as particularly problematic for assessment, when, in an attempt to appropriate academic discursive practices, students fail to articulate the depth of their content knowledge. One humanities-based participant recognized this as a common situation for students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds "who came in [to university] without a strong academic background, now are loving theory … and the jargonistic style of writing" but in turn, engage in so-called "overwriting" (Participant 8). As another academic suggested:

> [T]here is a distinction between those who understand a research discourse and those who are trying to emulate a research discourse…You start talking to them about research and you ask them to write about research, and they go into this other discourse which I think they believe is an academic discourse but is not quite ...They would be better off…not then trying to emulate what they think an academic discourse looks like (Participant 9).

These observations reflect the complex linguistic transitions required of students as they engage with disciplinary studies and the challenges associated with appropriating unfamiliar Discourses and approaches to text. Despite the rich, responsive, and innovative strategies employed by academics in this study to scaffold such linguistic transitions, all ten academics emphasized the need for more extensive language support to be provided for learners throughout their degree. In particular, assistance with the complex identity shifts required for the appropriation of expected linguistic forms associated with academic and discipline membership was seen as essential. Several participants discussed the impact of these linguistic shifts on students' lives and the need to explicitly address the associated "identity work":

> The social stats about break ups and divorces and that sort of thing is very, very high…and I believe there's a linguistic aspect to that as well in that they are talking differently, they're talking about different things…You don't realise that your vocabulary's

shifting and then by third and fourth year you're at the pub with your mates and they're going, "Oh, who do you think you are with all those long words?"… I think there's a really, really big linguistic shift that takes place with students that come from a particular kind of background. And there's very little support for them (Participant 1).

This particular academic described how she undertakes to talk explicitly about these linguistic transitions, to work with students in tutorials to unpack associated issues of power and identities, and to assist them to make sense of the social impact of their engagement in higher education.

**Future Directions for the Provision of Language Support.** All ten academics were emphatic about institutional responsibility to support students with language development, with one participant stating: "They got into this program. We need to support them when they're in, not just fail them and say they're not good enough" (Participant 10). Such assertions reflect an understanding of the need for widening participation efforts to focus on supporting student engagement throughout the entirety of their degree, rather than solely concentrating on providing alternative pathways for entry.

The implications of failing to provide responsive and subject-specific linguistic support were recounted in detail by participants who identified linguistic challenges as a source of significant stress for many learners. One academic described an EAL-background international student's situation, which was identified as representative of many other learners in similar circumstances:

I don't know how she's going to get through, actually. She's an international student and feels very pressured with regards to paying for her degree... She's failed several subjects, and really, I find it distressing a little because she pleads with you about passing…but, you know, ethically we're not going to pass her if she's not doing what she should be doing. But I do know that she has failed quite a few other subjects, but I put a lot of extra work with her to get her through one of the subjects… (Participant 10).

While "language issues" were cited as one of the main reasons for student academic failure and subsequent attrition, for all ten academics interviewed in this study, the sector-wide emphasis on expanding learner recruitment did not necessarily translate into the provision of ongoing, tailored, and responsive language support. Failure to recognize the fundamental role of language in mediating learning was identified as a contributing factor in the lack of assistance provided to students from non-dominant language backgrounds. As one academic advised: "[I]f you're not sensitized to the language issues, then you interpret every student misunderstanding as either recalcitrance or stupidity" (Participant 7). A need for greater professional development for all staff regarding linguistic diversity was therefore an important factor to emerge from the study.

In addition to a lack of awareness regarding linguistic issues, participants emphasized the complex and structurally entrenched power relations at play in terms of language, access, and inclusion in higher education. Several academics – from STEM and humanities-related disciplines – recounted instances in which colleagues refused to simplify the language required to engage with assessment tasks, relating the view: "If they can't understand me, then we'll lock them out of the community" (Participant 7). Here, familiarity with language forms is erroneously equated with capacity for engagement with discipline content, and language becomes an instrument for conferring or withholding membership to disciplinary communities.

Participants also described systemic failure to provide language assistance in higher education as partly the result of erroneous assumptions concerning the universality of students' background educational experiences. The language practices embedded in higher education were thought to be neglected in 'mainstream' instruction because of an assumption that all learners had been provided with such input at school. This, of course, belies the diversity of educational experiences and learner backgrounds, particularly within the context of widening participation.

Several participants also noted the need for more explicit and centralized mapping of degrees to indicate when (and if) students have opportunities to explore linguistic practices as part of their programs. A failure to plan for such learning can mean that academics assume students are informed about disciplinary expectations for language use:

And to be honest, I didn't realize how little they were getting of this... I just assumed that they'd be taught these things over their degree…[but] There's not as much being done about, well, how do I critically analyze, how do I compare...how do we structure an effective essay, and how do we interrogate sources? We get a little bit of that, but not as much as they should have (Participant 4).

## Conclusion

While this study was both small in scale and focused on the perceptions and self-reported practices of academics who are clearly committed to reducing linguistic barriers to engagement in higher education, it provides important insights into the possibilities for embedding language support within a wide range of STEM and humanities-related disciplines. The

instructional strategies described by the academics in this research are innovative and yet practical, with most allowing for the explicit deconstruction and co-construction of texts within meaningful, authentic, and discipline-based communicative contexts. While the majority of participants did not regard their approaches to scaffolding language and literacies to be particularly significant or theoretically-informed, they align with many of the principles and practices of language instruction; an unexpected finding given that only two of the ten participants had formal qualifications in linguistics.

Research question 1 explored academics' perceptions regarding the role of language within the knowledge base of their discipline. In this study, participant conceptions of language ranged from mostly instrumentalist and grammatically-focused to more socially and culturally embedded definitions. These varying ideas did not correlate with disciplinary background or stage of career, but they did inform participant understandings of the processes via which discipline-specific linguistic expertise may be acquired, as well as the instructional practices they implemented to provide language support.

Despite contrasting definitions of language and approaches to linguistic support, all ten participants emphasized the need for academics to assume responsibility for learner engagement with disciplinary language, indicating a strong awareness of the associated equity implications for widening participation in higher education. In this sense, exploration of research question 2, which focused on academics' perceptions regarding linguistically diverse student populations, indicated that all participants were committed to linguistic inclusion and had implemented a range of subject-specific strategies to provide opportunities for students to engage with language. Further, all ten participants understood this commitment to linguistic inclusion to be central to their role as discipline specialists, regardless of their area of expertise or stage of career. While this finding is perhaps unsurprising given that participants volunteered to contribute their experiences to a study regarding linguistic inclusion, the depth of understanding regarding potential linguistic barriers in higher education, as well as the range of scaffolding techniques employed by these academics, were unexpected outcomes.

While listening and speaking were described as problematic for some students, most academics in this study indicated that engagement with formal and specialized texts in academic reading and writing presents the most significant challenge for learners, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. Academics who subscribed to more sociocultural understandings of language also identified the significance of complex linguistic transitions required of students as they engage with disciplinary Discourses (Gee, 1999), identifying a need for institutional support for learners as they navigate these multifaceted shifts in linguistic identity.

In response to the final research questions: "How do academics support students' engagement with the linguistic requirements of their discipline? What assumptions, values, and perspectives underpin this support?", participants described a range of practical support strategies that closely aligned with their conceptions of language. Those academics with mostly instrumentalist understandings of language tended to provide more structural, grammatically focused support, usually via feedback on written assessment. Participants with more sociocultural orientations to language tended to engage with both the structural and social aspects of textual practice. These academics described how they integrate a focus on disciplinary language into subject specialist instruction, recounting strategies for deconstructing and co-constructing text with learners, with the overall aim of encouraging increasingly independent production. This apprenticing of learners into specialist linguistic practices was accompanied by attention to broader issues of linguistic identity, discipline membership, language diversity, and power relations enacted through text.

Clearly, questions concerning the role of academics in the linguistically diversified academy, and the nature and implementation of effective language support for all students warrant broader, systematic, and sector-wide consideration. As raised in this study, possibilities for facilitating language development must be explored alongside attention to the implications for academic workload and professional development needs; important issues identified in existing literature (see Bretag, 2007; Daniels, 2013; Skyrme & McGee, 2016). There is also a requirement to pursue productive and efficient collaborations between academics, bridging/enabling program educators, and language support staff.

Providing alternative pathways to university enrollment without also considering the infrastructure required to support staff and students with linguistic engagement undermines the intention of the widening participation agenda and the associated opportunities to pursue a more equitable academy. Expecting students to understand and adopt the discursive practices of their disciplines without providing opportunities to critically engage with the linguistic structures, conventions, and expectations, to say nothing of the associated implications for notions of identity and belonging, is to engage in pseudo-widening participation. In such a system, learners from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds enter higher education, only to struggle to engage with content due to a lack of opportunities to become apprenticed into the linguistic conventions and

expectations. In this way, social and cultural factors rather than aptitude or disciplinary expertise determine learner success. Not only does this limit the potential for students to diversify the linguistic and cultural landscape of tertiary institutions and shape the language practices of their future professions, it ensures universities continue to reproduce existing social stratification, limiting the transformative potential of higher education for broader society.

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DR RACHEL BURKE is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Rachel's work focuses on linguistically and culturally diverse educational contexts, praxis-driven approaches to languages and literacies learning, and participation in higher education for students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences.

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