

# **Non-English speaking background students in TAFE: Exploring the factors behind their module completion rates**

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## **Abstract**

The available research indicates that students from non-English speaking backgrounds generally perform less well in vocational education and training (VET) compared with the rest of the student population according to measures such as module completion rates (Dumbrell et al. 2004, John 2004, Miralles 2004, NCVET 1999). This paper outlines a current study, under the auspices of the TAFE NSW Multicultural Education Unit, which explores some of the factors that contribute to these module completion rates in selected TAFE NSW courses. For the purpose of this study non-English speaking background students are those who indicate on their enrolment form that they speak a language other than English at home.

The study first examined module completion rate statistics across a range of TAFE NSW courses at Certificate 111 and above based on official enrolment data. A wide variation in module completion rates was found across both disciplinary/program areas and courses. Research teams in three TAFE NSW Institutes examined in detail the perspectives of students and teachers in a selected number of courses. While the study is ongoing, this paper reports on some initial findings in two courses: Hairdressing, and Small Business Management. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with current students in these courses and focused firstly, on factors relating to the courses, including curriculum content, teaching styles, peer group influences, language/literacy support, and secondly, factors relating to the personal circumstances of the students. The aim was to provide insights into the perspectives of students and teachers in these different courses that may enable a better understanding of the needs of non-English speaking background students and facilitate strategies to improve their course outcomes.

## **Introduction**

In mid 2006 the Multicultural Education Unit in TAFE NSW funded a one-year research study to examine some of the factors relating to module completion rates for non-English speaking background students in TAFE NSW. What prompted this research were statistical data produced from within TAFE NSW showing module completion rates for non-English speaking students enrolled in Certificate 111 courses and above. These data cut across TAFE NSW as a whole and also within particular Institutes and particular program areas. While the findings varied across these Institutes and the program areas, overall it appeared that non-English speaking background students were performing less well compared to English speaking background students and the findings were deemed significant enough to merit further enquiry. For the purpose of this study non-English speaking background students are those who indicate on their enrolment form that they speak a language other than English at home.

The study aims to provide insights from students and teachers in selected TAFE courses that may enable a better understanding of the needs of non-English speaking background students which in turn may lead to strategies to improve their course outcomes. The study is ongoing and is due for completion in mid 2007. This paper will outline some initial findings and discussion relating to interviews conducted with current students in two courses representing the diverse program areas operating in VET. The courses are: Hairdressing (Certificate 111) and Small Business Management (Certificate 1V) and these are drawn from the broader program areas of Community Services, Health, Tourism & Recreation, and Manufacturing, Engineering, Construction & Transport respectively.

## **Literature review**

### *Non-English speaking background students perform less well overall*

According to recent National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER 2006) statistics, nationally there were 203,000 non-English speaking background students in VET in 2005, representing 12.4% of the total VET student population. The research literature indicates that non-English speaking background students perform less well overall in VET courses. For example, using 1996 data, the NCVER (1999) provided a national statistical overview of non-English speaking background students in TAFE Institutes and other government providers. As with this current study, they targeted as non-English speaking background those students who indicated on their enrolment form that they spoke a language other than English at home. Overall it was found that both females and males performed less well compared to English-speaking background students (4% and 7% less well respectively, NCVER 1999: 22). Miralles (2004: 13-14) also found that overall students in her study of selected groups (Arabic, Bosnian, Cantonese, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese) had less successful module outcomes compared to English speaking background students (though Cantonese students were the exception to this trend). Dumbrell et al. (2004: 19) examined non-English speaking background students in VET as one of the designated equity groups and found their participation and pass rates were “slightly below the average”. And John (2004: 15) in a demographic study identifying the key factors affecting the chances of passing VET subjects, found that those students who were both born in a non-English speaking country and spoke a language other than English at home, had a lower probability of passing compared to those students from English speaking backgrounds.

### *Accounting for diversity*

The main problem with generalised findings such as those above is that non-English speaking background students do not comprise a unified, homogenous whole. On the contrary, there is enormous diversity within this category of students, and many research studies now highlight this point (e.g. Bowman 2004: 17, Miralles 2004: 5, Volkoff & Golding 1998: 7-15). An overview of the diversity and the broad range of variables involved in analyzing non-English speaking background students in VET is provided by Volkoff (2004). She explains how individual non-English speaking background students can vary so much in terms of their backgrounds and experiences. For example, some could have migrated to Australia from urban, educated, professional and middle class backgrounds, while others could be refugees fleeing persecution or war and involve rural,

uneducated and poverty stricken backgrounds. Many non-English speaking background people will be members of other target equity groups. For example, they may be long term unemployed or suffer low basic skills, and these 'cross-group' factors need to be taken into account. Clearly then, non-English speaking background people do not comprise one discrete group, but many groups (Volkoff 2004: 124).

There are also definitional issues to be resolved. There is often the assumption that to be non-English speaking background is to be born overseas in a non-English speaking country. But of course there are a great many people who were born in Australia but who speak a language other than English at home. According to the 2001 census data, 16% of Australia's population speak a language other than English at home (Volkoff 2004: 122). This includes a great many Indigenous people (12% according to the 2001 census).

Volkoff (2004: 124) refers to the 'tangled threads' involved in attempts to analyse how non-English speaking background people fare in VET. In particular she refers to issues of English language proficiency, where people were born, the migration experience, and the length of time spent in this country. These issues vary for many non-English speaking background students. Settlers arriving under particular streams of Australia's migration program, for example, are found to take longer to acquire English language proficiency, and the issues of the circumstances of migration are important. Humanitarian entrants for example, generally require more intensive and sustained support in their resettlement compared with other settler arrivals. Longer resident and established ethnic groups also have networks of support within their communities that are still to be developed in many of the small and emerging ethnic groups.

#### *The way forward*

Clearly, in view of the 'tangled threads' outlined above, there are no 'one size fits all' strategies for addressing the needs of non-English speaking background students in VET. Volkoff (2004: 138) suggests the need to try to disentangle the threads with equity policies and programs directed to those most in need (in particular, those from low socio-economic backgrounds and those who are at the same time members of other target equity groups). She also suggests strategies such as recognising cultural diversity in training competencies, ensuring material is written in plain English, providing culturally relevant assessment, using interpreters where necessary, and professional development to VET staff. Miralles (2004: 4) in her study of six ethnic groups concluded that enrolment in and completion of VET courses would be strengthened by programs that: provide clear pathways into employment; provide integrated language support; acknowledge and address cultural issues; have teachers who understand issues faced by students (culture, language and settlement), and who have, in turn, the ability to explain cultural and professional values to students; acknowledge students' existing vocational skills; and include work experience in their training. In relation to students educated overseas, Zuvich (2000) draws attention to one aspect common to the conclusions of Volkoff and Miralles above, and that is the need to focus on developing awareness among teachers and students of the educational/cultural differences between the Australian VET system and that common to many of the migrant students.

## **Research methods**

This study utilises both quantitative and qualitative data for macro and micro analyses. Quantitative data were in the form of student enrolment statistics provided by the TAFE NSW Data Warehouse. Qualitative data were in the form of transcript material from semi-structured interviews with students and teachers in selected TAFE NSW courses.

As indicated earlier, it was the statistics on module completion rates featuring non-English speaking background students that provided the rationale for further investigation with a research project. However, from the outset, the research team at the TAFE NSW Multicultural Education Unit was concerned for the need for qualitative data that could inform organisational practice. The intention was to provide a research report that was accessible to TAFE teachers across disciplinary areas and which identified support and interventions that facilitated improved outcomes for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Three research teams were formed to undertake interviews in three TAFE Institutes, though only two Institutes are featured in this paper. The courses selected for study were deliberately diverse, featuring different program areas and different module completion rates. For this paper two courses were selected which featured good and poor completion rates for non-English speaking background students – i.e. Hairdressing and Small Business Management respectively. The interviews focused on how students perceived factors relating to their course, including curriculum content, teaching styles, peer group influences, language/literacy support, and factors relating to the personal circumstances of the students.

The aim was to record interviews with at least 10 current students from each course, and to follow this with interviews with teachers and phone interviews with those students who have withdrawn from the course. This paper reports on the initial interviews with current students and teachers.

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Module completion rates*

The statistical data provided in this section have been accessed from the TAFE NSW Data Warehouse. The data were provided in response to a request from the TAFE NSW Multicultural Education Unit for specific data on non-English speaking background student enrolments.

In total, non-English speaking background students comprised 18.5% of all TAFE NSW enrolments in 2004 (i.e. 93,926 of a total 506,626 enrolments) and 18.4% of all enrolments in 2005 (i.e. 94,157 out of a total 513,070 enrolments). Consistent with overall trends in VET, the overall module completion rate for non-English speaking background student enrolments in all award courses in TAFE NSW in 2004 was just over 4 percentage points lower than for all student enrolments.

Within the non-English speaking category, females fared better than males (by just over 3%). The reverse trend was true for English speaking background students with males faring slightly better than females (just over 2%). However, these statewide figures mask wide variations in Institutes, program areas and individual courses. In this paper we will focus on just two metropolitan Institutes in which the proportion of non-English speaking background student enrolments in 2005 exceeded 20 per cent.

Table 1 provides data in terms of languages other than English spoken in these two Institutes and the respective module completion rates for the speakers of these languages.

**Table 1: Main languages spoken and module completion rates**

Metropolitan Institute A			Metropolitan Institute B		
	<i>Enrolments</i>	<i>MCR</i>	<i>Tablehead3</i>	<i>Enrolments</i>	<i>MCR</i>
Cantonese	1893	79.70%	Arabic (includes Lebanese)	8213	73.50%
Mandarin	1705	77.10%	Vietnamese	4204	76.40%
Korean	1402	76.60%	Cantonese	2484	79.40%
Arabic (includes Lebanese)	728	75.80%	Mandarin	2267	81.50%
Persian	599	68.80%	Spanish	1964	77.50%
Spanish	594	77.20%	Hindi	1267	78.50%
Italian	526	80.50%	Persian	1017	73.10%
Hindi	457	77.90%	Turkish	889	73.30%
Tagalog (Filipino)	392	82.70%	Tagalog (Filipino)	858	80.60%
Thai	381	85.20%	Italian	717	83.10%

Notes: MCR = Module Completion Rate  
Source: Unpublished TAFE NSW Data Warehouse 2006

While Table 1 indicates the numbers of students speaking the main languages other than English, at this broad level the module completion rates mean little beyond showing that, relatively speaking, a couple of language groups do not fare too well while others achieve higher module completion rates. In one of the Institutes, Persian speakers have relatively lower rates, and in the other Institute, Persian, Turkish and Arabic speakers have relatively lower module completion rates.

Table 2 and 3 show a further breakdown of module completion rates across several different program areas in both Institutes during 2005. In the Business, Arts and Information Technology areas at both Institutes the non-English speaking background students achieve lower module completion rates by an average of 3 to 5%, and in the Manufacturing, Engineering, Construction & Transport areas, the figures are worse. However, in Community Services, Health and Tourism there is only marginal difference between non-English and English speaking background students.

**Table 2: Metropolitan Institute A MCR by selected program areas**

<i>Program area</i>	<i>Award level</i>	<b>2005</b>		
		<i>NESB</i>	<i>ESB</i>	<i>Not stated</i>
Business, Arts & Info Technology	Diploma	78.00%	81.40%	83.30%
	Certificate IV	72.10%	77.20%	76.30%
	Certificate III	75.40%	76.40%	68.90%
Community Services, Health, Tourism	Diploma	78.80%	83.50%	85.00%
	Certificate IV	87.80%	88.00%	87.30%
	Certificate III	85.30%	81.90%	81.00%
Manufacturing, Engineering, Construction, Transport	Diploma	60.20%	73.10%	55.60%
	Certificate IV	68.50%	75.40%	69.90%
	Certificate III	80.70%	87.80%	86.20%

Notes: MCR = Module Completion Rate

Source: Unpublished TAFE NSW Data Warehouse 2006

**Table 3: Metropolitan Institute B MCR by selected program areas**

<i>Program area</i>	<i>Award level</i>	<b>2005</b>		
		<i>NESB</i>	<i>ESB</i>	<i>Not stated</i>
Business, Arts & Info Technology	Diploma	76.50%	82.70%	90.80%
	Certificate IV	72.80%	80.10%	84.40%
	Certificate III	75.60%	76.40%	79.50%
Community Services, Health, Tourism	Diploma	77.80%	77.10%	75.70%
	Certificate IV	83.30%	84.00%	88.90%
	Certificate III	82.10%	82.40%	76.50%
Manufacturing, Engineering, Construction, Transport	Diploma	75.90%	79.40%	73.00%
	Certificate IV	73.40%	85.80%	72.00%
	Certificate III	80.40%	87.80%	85.70%

Notes: MCR = Module Completion Rate

Source: Unpublished TAFE NSW Data Warehouse 2006

There are a number of factors that could account for these variations, including statistical anomalies involving smaller non-English speaking background representation in some program areas, and not least, those students who have “not stated” their language background on their enrolment form. But if we break down the data further to the individual courses within the program areas we find some more telling figures. Table 4 features a selection of several courses from each of the two Institutes. These courses were selected deliberately to show examples of quite wide variations in module completion rates. Hairdressing, Aged Care and Child Care for example, show superior module completion rates for non-English speaking background students, while Management/Small Business, Construction and Electrical Installation show quite lower module completion rates for non-English speaking background students.

**Table 4: Selected courses in two TAFE NSW Institutes**

Selected courses	Course Enrolments			Module Completion Rates		
	2005			2005		
Metropolitan Institute A	NESB	ESB	Not stated	NESB	ESB	Not stated
Hairdressing Certificate III	144	418	72	88.20%	80.40%	75.20%
Aged Care Work Certificate III	143	99	61	88.40%	84.10%	85.70%
Management & Small Business IV	104	293	139	55.10%	77.60%	75.70%
General Construction & Furnish III	85	787	159	79.30%	88.30%	88.30%
Metropolitan Institute B						
Aged Care Work Certificate III	212	114	87	87.00%	80.50%	74.90%
Child Care Certificate III	131	119	160	82.30%	68.30%	65.50%
Electrical Installation Certificate III	593	687	69	75.70%	85.40%	82.10%
General Construction Certificate III	560	1492	127	76.00%	87.40%	79.1%0

Notes: NESB = non-English speaking background; ESB: English speaking background

Source: Unpublished TAFE NSW Data Warehouse 2006

Clearly there are many factors involved in these findings. The number of enrolments in courses, for example, is indicative of those courses that are more popular with students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and therefore by inference, they may perform better in these courses. The number of international fee-paying students in the courses may also be a factor. Further, Table 4 indicates results for one year only, while the trend over several years may provide more useful data (these data are available, but not outlined in this paper). What Table 4 does indicate though, is the wide variations in module completion rates in individual courses, which makes it problematic to read too much into overall module completion rates for non-English speaking background students.

#### *Student perceptions in two courses: Hairdressing and Small Business Management*

To consider some of the factors behind wide variations in module completion rates in individual courses, interviews were conducted with teachers and students in the above mentioned Hairdressing and Small Business Management courses in one of the Institutes. The research project is ongoing and interviews are still to be analysed from Aged Care Work and Electrotechnology.

#### 1) Hairdressing

Eleven students in Hairdressing Certificate III at one college were interviewed. Those interviewed were chosen randomly from a list of students in the course who indicated on their enrolment form that they spoke a language other than English at home. Although it is only a small sample of students, one of the Hairdressing teachers confirmed it appeared fairly representative of the Hairdressing students generally at this college. Most were female (8 of the 11), with an average age of just under 18 years (5 were 16, the oldest was 22 years of age). Languages spoken at home varied greatly and included: Arabic (3), Greek (2), Armenian, Italian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Turkish. Most left school in

Year 10 and went straight into Hairdressing. Two completed their Higher School Certificate first, and several had tried various jobs first. Significantly, all but two of the students were born in Australia, and the two that weren't, arrived in Australia aged 6 and 7 years respectively. Given that they have lived most of their lives in Australia, this group of students with non-English speaking backgrounds will have been exposed to the same educational system and learning culture as their fellow students from English speaking background. The main difference, linguistically, is that at home they shift their language codes when speaking with their parents and other family members.

If this profile of Hairdressing Certificate III students is repeated in other TAFE Institutes, then it should become reasonably clear why these non-English speaking background students (on the basis of their language spoken at home) should perform at least as well as their English speaking background peers in terms of module completion rates. Interestingly though, the module completion rates for Hairdressing students in both of the Institutes show that over the years 2003-2005 non-English speaking background students generally performed *better* than English speaking background students.

There would appear to be no easy explanation for this superior module completion rate, especially as enrolment numbers for both categories of students do not vary markedly. In trying to show why these non-English speaking background students performed relatively better, the students themselves could mainly offer the view that having additional language skills helped them to communicate better with clients of varying ethnic backgrounds. One Arabic speaking student, for example, said, "I don't know, different thoughts, different styles, different understanding, because I work with Lebanese people too and it's easy for me". Another said, "I understand what they want". Hairdressing as a trade appears to be so much about relating well with clients, and having another language other than English was seen as a possible advantage. As another student stated, "just being able to understand how different cultures work, the way people communicate with each other".

Another possible reason for the high module completion rates could be the commitment to the course, and in many cases, passion for the work shown by these students. They spoke of hairdressing as something much more than just a job, as the following examples of student comments indicate:

- "It's in me, you can't take it away"
- "Mate, ever since I started I love it ... I've tried other things but nothing's better than this"
- "Ever since I was a little girl, never really wanted to do anything else"
- "It's mostly motivation, you have to love it, hairdressing's something you've got to like, you can't just go into it, yeah, I'd like to be a hairdresser ..."

Further, to love hairdressing meant for some students overcoming some opposition. One male student spoke of how other members of his family did not regard hairdressing too highly: "most of my family's all builders and my cousins are mechanics, they're not

really a fan of hairdressers, they're a bit jumpy at the word hairdressers, everyone's like in a real trade".

Some students also spoke of their parental opposition. One student commented that her mother had said, "I really don't want you to do it, there are other things that you can try". This student herself said, "I tried to change my mind", but she couldn't, such was her desire to be a hairdresser. This love of their trade appeared to carry over to success in the course. Although many of these students left school in Year 10 and often didn't do well at school ("I wasn't the school type" said one), at TAFE they were doing something they really enjoyed. For example, one student said, "I did bad at school, but this is something I like, so".

There were other positive aspects that could make for higher module completion rates. Possibly due to the confluence of ages, with all being so young, there was strong bonding evident amongst students. Nearly all students spoke of helping each other and the support they received from fellow students. For example, one said, "if you do something really good everyone comments and stuff like that ... we all get along very well. Here nobody's left on their own".

It is debatable however, whether these factors are generic, shared by all Hairdressing students or mainly by these students who speak a language other than English at home. Further research would be required to determine this.

## 2) Small Business Management

Eleven students enrolled in Small Business Management were interviewed in one college. Two teachers of the course were also interviewed. As with the Hairdressing students above, the students were chosen randomly from lists of students who, on their enrolment form, stated they spoke languages other than English at home. Six students were male, 5 were female, with an average age of 29 years, and ages ranging from 20 to 40 years. Languages spoken at home included: Spanish (2), Mandarin (2), Japanese (2), Korean (2), Arabic, Cantonese, and Italian. Eight already had overseas degrees, one went to University for a short time, one had a Diploma, and one (aged 20 years) had recently completed high school. Two were born in Australia (Cantonese and Italian speaking students). Most had been in Australia just a few years.

The module completion rates outlined earlier indicated that non-English speaking background students have a lower rate of completion compared to English speaking background students (around 20 percentage points lower) in this particular Institute. From the interviews with students, the main issues for them, in terms of whether they would pass their course modules, appeared to relate to the following: English language proficiency, cultural/pedagogical factors, motivation and whether or not the student already has a small business, and time pressures/family circumstances.

For this course (unlike Hairdressing above), English language proficiency featured strongly as a factor. Students spoke of the problems they have in understanding what the teacher is explaining, and their problems in undertaking oral presentations to the class,

writing assignments and exams. To some extent it was a matter of coming to terms with the technical language associated with the course. One teacher provided an example:

... and then he'll say, what does proof mean? And then I'll say, well, it's evidence, you know, like in a court case, and he'll go, oh yeah ... and they can't articulate those complex ideas back ... the law subject must be horrendous, the tax, GST, occupational health and safety, it's really complex structures in sentences and complex ideas within that, quite technical terms

One student said she takes notes in class okay, "because I can put it in Spanish", but then stated, "sometimes I don't know what she's talking about because I miss one word, like it's a technical word from the taxation office ... I have to ask her for a definition". Other students said the teachers talk too fast sometimes. Exams cause particular problems if students are unable to write well in English. One student said, "we have to memorise ... what the teacher said in class otherwise we cannot write".

While recently arrived non-English speaking background students may have English language difficulties, there is some evidence that teachers take into account second language difficulties. One teacher said, "I've never failed anyone for their language skills, not ever ... if you sit and persevere and talk to them, help them ...". The other teacher said, "I had one assignment, it said 'bad food no customers', so long as the message is there ...". Surprisingly, however, few students from this group sought tutorial support (language assistance) with their course, in fact most didn't know it was available.

Cultural and pedagogical issues arise when these students are confronted with teaching styles quite different from those they are familiar with in their home countries. Those familiar with formal lecturing at University sometimes experience difficulty with the more interactional teaching style in this course. One student said, "In China we can only ask questions after class finish", and a Korea woman said, "At first I really embarrassing because I don't have experience talk with my teachers during the class, but in TAFE, so many teacher want to ask my opinion, ask us to discuss any comments". Another student felt confronted by all the student input in the classroom and found the classroom a bit unruly relative to the well-ordered classroom she was used to.

Whether students already had a small business was also a factor. Those that did, and attended the course in order to improve their business, already had an understanding of business concepts and were likely to understand more and persevere even if they had language difficulties. Unlike the Hairdressing students with their passion for their trade, these students had an instrumentalist, rationalist reason for doing the course (i.e. making their businesses prosper). Sometimes, said one teacher, students drop out because they have learnt what they need to run their businesses better, and they see no point in pushing on further. Other non-English speaking background students with no business background tended to struggle to complete their course successfully.

Related to the above motivational factors are time pressures and family circumstances. One teacher said in relation to those students with their own business, "it helps and it

hinders”. The contexts are more easily understood by them, but the pressures of running a business affect their participation and progress in the course. As one male student with a business said:

Well, the last thing you want to do at 9 o'clock is start doing homework, when you've spent all day at work and rushed home and had a quick meal, seen the kids for about five minutes, take off, leave them with the wife to deal with ...

The teachers said sometimes husbands sent their wives to do the course in order to help them with their business. With competing family needs, these students are sometimes not so driven: “so if the children get sick, well, there's always next semester ...” One student said she was doing the course partly to improve her English now that her youngest child was in kindergarten. She had dropped some subjects already because they were too difficult and said, “I don't know, I might finish this course or I might do another course next term”. Thus the personal, and in particular, family circumstances of students can influence whether they stay in the course. As one teacher said, students need to be dedicated because the course is “heavy” involving tax law, accounting systems and legal systems, “what to do to recover debt, how to write out affidavits ... it's not light and easy stuff”.

## **Conclusions**

In the context of this brief paper it hasn't been possible to provide an in-depth analysis of these two courses, Hairdressing and Small Business Management. Neither, at this mid-way stage in the research project, has it been appropriate to provide recommendations for support and interventions to facilitate improved outcomes for non-English speaking background students. This paper has outlined some of the key issues and factors identified by a relatively small number of students in each of these two courses. In a sense, they are glimpses, insights into the particular cultural and pedagogical practices operating within these courses as seen by non-English speaking background students and their teachers. These insights nevertheless are sufficient to indicate the usefulness of qualitative studies that focus on the viewpoints of participants.

Module completion rates when applied with broad brush strokes to whole student populations, and even within particular program areas, may provide indications of areas of general need, but they tell us little more. Policy makers, management and teachers need to have knowledge of the micro course level needs and understandings of students and their teachers before specific strategies can be considered that address the needs of non-English speaking background students and enable improved course outcomes. As the two case studies outlined in this paper demonstrated, non-English background students can differ enormously between individual courses and even within individual courses. The many variables featured in the two courses in this paper include: the ages of students, languages spoken, English language proficiency, previous educational qualifications and experience, length of time residing in Australia, conflicting teaching styles, the role of peers, motivation and attitude towards their course of study, and the influence of work pressures/home circumstances. These variables and others need to be accounted for with

more in-depth, qualitative studies of the whole range of TAFE courses, thus enabling a more targeted organisational response to meeting the needs of non-English background students and improving their course outcomes.

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