

# Enhancing Learning Outcomes for ESL Students in Australian Higher Education Via an Analysis of Instructional Strategies and Support Services

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**Abstract:** International students for whom English is a second language (ESL) constitute a substantial segment of Australia's undergraduate population, particularly in the social sciences. However, many of these students face linguistic and cultural hurdles that can impede their academic success. This paper analyses instructional strategies and support services designed to improve ESL student learning outcomes via a literature-based approach, reviewing peer-reviewed studies on undergraduate ESL learners in Australian higher education with an emphasis on social science disciplines. Key findings indicate that integrating academic literacy instruction into content courses, employing culturally responsive and active learning pedagogies and facilitating peer-support mechanisms such as mentoring and study groups are effective in enhancing ESL students' academic performance. University support services including writing centers, language workshops and counselling play an influential role in mitigating language difficulties and socio-academic adjustment challenges. ESL students who actively utilize these support services and engage in tailored instructional programs show improved course completion rates, higher grades and greater confidence in academic communication. This paper discusses how these strategies address identified gaps, the implications for curriculum design and faculty development and the need for sustained institutional support, proposing that a combination of embedded instructional interventions and support services can substantially enhance learning outcomes for ESL undergraduates in Australian higher education.

**Keywords:** ESL; International students; Australian higher education; Social sciences; Instructional strategies; Support services; Academic outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Australian universities have experienced a significant increase in international student enrolments, many of whom are English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners (Humphreys, 2023). Additionally, Rahnuma (2023) argues that this trend is especially apparent in social science faculties, which attract large cohorts of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The influx of ESL undergraduates has long raised concerns about students' ability to meet the English language and academic literacy demands of tertiary study according to Maldoni & Lear (2016). Research consistently shows that international ESL students face a range of challenges in adapting to a new academic environment including language barriers, unfamiliar academic conventions, and cultural adjustments, which can adversely affect their learning outcomes (Zhang et al., 2022). For example, difficulties with English academic writing and oral participation may impede these students' performance on assignments and in-class discussions. Such challenges are not due to any lack of capability, rather, they often stem from differences in prior educational experiences and the added challenges of operating in a non-native language. As Heng (2018) argues, international students should not be viewed through a deficit lens, instead, their distinctive backgrounds require supportive strategies to leverage their strengths and facilitate success.

Despite Australian higher education's formal English language entry requirements, a clear gap persists between the minimum language proficiency for admission and the level needed to excel academically in social science programs

according to Bodis (2021). Many ESL undergraduates who meet IELTS or TOEFL cut-offs still struggle with discipline-specific vocabulary, constructing arguments in essays and engaging critically with readings in English. In recognition of this gap, Australian universities and researchers have explored a variety of instructional strategies and support services aimed at enhancing ESL student learning outcomes (Arkoudis et al., 2014; Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Birrell et al., 2006). Initiatives range from curricular interventions including embedding academic literacy instruction into content subjects to co-curricular support programs like academic skills workshops and peer mentoring schemes. However, there remains a need for a comprehensive analysis of which approaches are most effective for improving outcomes among ESL undergraduates, particularly in the context of the social sciences where strong language skills are integral to success.

This paper addresses that need by examining recent empirical research on instructional strategies and support services that enhance learning outcomes for ESL undergraduate students in Australian higher education. Learning outcomes are considered broadly including academic performance (grades, pass rates, progression), skill development (academic writing proficiency, critical thinking), and student engagement or satisfaction. The focus is on social science disciplines though broader insights from other fields are incorporated when relevant. The review begins by outlining the methods used to select and analyze the literature, followed by presenting findings and discussion in two integrated parts, first, instructional strategies within the classroom or curriculum, and second, academic support

services outside the classroom. Throughout, examples of effective practices and their measured impacts are provided as reported in the literature. Finally, discussion of the key implications from identified empirical findings is provided, as well as acknowledging limitations and suggesting directions for future research with the aim to inform educators, support staff, and policymakers on how to better support ESL learners in achieving equitable academic outcomes in Australian higher education.

## 2. Methods

This study employed an integrative literature review methodology to gather and analyze evidence on enhancing ESL student learning outcomes through instructional strategies and support services. Given the focus on recent developments, the review is limited to scholarly publications from 2015 to 2025 including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and conference proceedings that presented empirical findings or evaluations related to undergraduate ESL students in higher education in general, with the key focus within the Australian context. Sources such as blog posts, news articles, pre-prints, or trade magazine pieces were excluded to ensure academic rigor and credibility. While the primary context of interest was Australian universities (with an emphasis on social science disciplines), selected international studies were also incorporated for broader perspective, provided their insights were applicable to the Australian context.

Systematic searches in educational databases (including *Scopus*, *ERIC*, and *Web of Science*) and publisher platforms were conducted using keywords such as “ESL students,” “international students,” “higher education,” “Australia,” “learning outcomes,” “instructional strategies,” “academic support,” and “social sciences.” Reference lists of relevant studies were also mined to identify additional sources (snowballing). The search and screening process yielded approximately 40 sources, of which about 15 were determined to directly address our research focus after applying inclusion criteria. These criteria required that a study include (a) involve tertiary-level ESL or international students, (b) evaluate a teaching strategy or support service (or discuss its impact) on academic outcomes, and (c) provide data or analysis on outcomes (quantitative or qualitative). Particular weight to studies conducted in Australian institutions was given to ground the review in local context, though influential findings from other Anglophone countries (the United States, United Kingdom) were included for comparison and completeness.

Data extraction from each source captured details on the student population, the nature of the instructional or support intervention, and the reported effects on student learning outcomes. Given the diverse types of studies (ranging from statistical analyses of academic performance to interview-based qualitative research), a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. Common themes and strategies were identified and findings were triangulated across studies to assess the consistency of evidence. The analysis was organized around two broad categories derived from our review question including instructional strategies (approaches implemented within teaching and curriculum design) and support services (academic support mechanisms provided outside regular classes). Within each category, sub-themes emerged (“embedded literacy instruction” as a strategy and “peer mentoring programs” as a support service). During the compilation of key findings, outcome measures such as improvements in grades, pass/fail rates, or student self-reports of skill gains were also acknowledged.

## 3. Instructional Strategies to Support Esl Students

### 3.1. Embedding academic literacies in the curriculum

A prominent strategy in the literature is the embedding of academic literacy development within mainstream courses according to Lum (2015). Instead of relegating language support to add-on workshops, this approach integrates instruction in academic writing, reading, and discourse conventions into the content of social science subjects. For example, a longitudinal study by Maldoni & Lear (2016) implemented an embedded Unit Support Program (USP) across nine first-year units in disciplines such as sociology and political science. This program involved collaboration between content lecturers and academic skills specialists to deliver targeted literacy instruction including how to structure an argument in an essay, how to engage critically with readings) during regular class time. The outcomes of this decade-long project were substantial, as student cohorts who experienced the embedded program showed significantly higher success rates and skill development than those who did not as shown in Figure 1 of ITM average final results between those enrolled in USP programs and those enrolled in non-ESP programs. According to Maldoni & Lear’s (2016) findings, there was a clear positive relationship between embedding academic literacy in the disciplines and improved student learning outcomes.

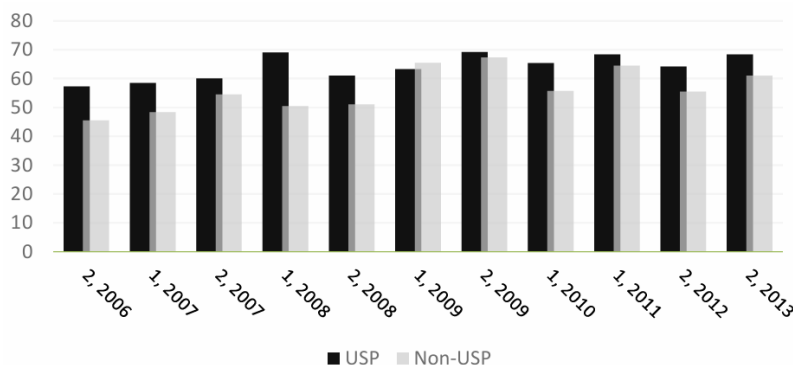


Figure 1. ITM average final results USP vs Non-USP (Maldoni & Lear, 2016, p12)

Figure 1 and the accompanying Table 1 below collectively demonstrate the efficacy of the embedded University Support Program (USP) in over 2,500 students. Across eleven semesters (2006–2013), USP cohorts consistently outperformed their non-USP peers, with the mean pass rate climbing from roughly two-thirds of students to more than nine in ten once the literacy workshops were fully integrated (90.6% vs 66.3%). Regular USP attendees also posted markedly higher final marks than irregular participants which is an advantage of nearly 8% the observation window. The sustained performance gap evident in Figure 1 also affirms

the value of situating academic-literacy instruction within disciplinary content whereby students can immediately apply newly acquired skills to assessable tasks, thereby reinforcing learning and fostering confidence (Maldoni & Lear, 2016). Embedding support in this manner embeds accountability for communication skills within mainstream teaching, encouraging greater engagement from both students and staff and reframing language development as integral to disciplinary success rather than a remedial add-on (Maldoni & Lear, 2016; Johnson & Bishopp-Martin, 2023).

**Table 1.** Average final results for USP cohort across regular and irregular attendees (Maldoni & Lear, 2016, p13)

Semester	Regular USP	Irregular USP
	Final mark	Final mark
2, 2006	57.3	45.5
1, 2007	58.5	48.4
2, 2007	60	54.5
1, 2008	69*	50.5
2, 2008	61	51
1, 2009	63.3	65.5
2, 2009	69.20	67.4
1, 2010	65.33	55.73
1, 2011	68.3	64.5
2, 2012	64.2	55.5
2, 2013	68.33	61.02

### 3.2. Scaffolding and culturally responsive pedagogy

Another key research themes identified of effective instructional strategies involves scaffolding course materials and adopting culturally responsive teaching practices (Gunawardena et al., 2017; Idrus & Sohid, 2023). According to Polat et al. (2019), scaffolding refers to structuring learning tasks in graduated steps and providing temporary support to help ESL students master complicated content and skills. Moreover, practical scaffolding techniques identified in the literature include offering guided reading questions for dense journal articles, modeling analytic writing through examples and breaking major assignments into smaller components with interim feedback (Lew et al., 2021). These techniques are particularly useful in social science classes, where students must grapple with theory-laden texts and develop well-argued written analyses, as Jaffee & Yoder (2019) found that by scaffolding these challenges, instructors enable learners to progressively build understanding and not be overwhelmed by linguistic complexity at the outset. Nassaji’s (2016) review also found that courses employing scaffolded assignments see better assignment completion rates and higher-quality submissions from ESL students compared to courses with a sink-or-swim approach, whereby incremental literature review assignments have helped students gradually acquire disciplinary discourse conventions.

Additionally, culturally responsive teaching involves recognizing the diverse cultural backgrounds of ESL students and incorporating examples, perspectives and modes of interaction that validate and leverage this diversity (Sanczyk, 2020). In sociology and international relations classes, instructors have enriched discussions by inviting students to share insights from their home countries’ contexts, thus valuing multilingual and multicultural knowledge, whereby

such practices can increase engagement and make learning more accessible according to Pratt-Johnson’s (2021) study. An Australian university focused study by Wilson et al. (2024) found that when lecturers used inclusive discussion techniques like small-group discussions before whole-class reporting and allowing students to prepare points in writing, the participation of ESL students in tutorials improved drastically. Moreover, ESL students under culturally responsive teaching often report feeling more confident and included, which correlated with improvements in their oral presentation grades (Matiso, 2024). However, although quantitative data on culturally responsive pedagogy are less common, qualitative feedback in several studies by Sarpong (2024) and Rivera (2021) indicates that students perceive a more supportive classroom climate when instructors demonstrate awareness of language difficulties (speaking clearly, explaining local idioms) and actively facilitate cross-cultural exchange.

### 3.3. Active learning and collaborative activities

Active learning techniques such as problem-based learning, group projects and classroom debates have been widely recommended to benefit ESL learners as they create more opportunities for students to practice language skills in context and to learn collaboratively with peers (Duhlicher, 2020). Group work, in particular, can help distribute communication load and allow ESL students to contribute in smaller settings before presenting to the whole class (Lin, 2017). However, simply putting students into groups is not automatically beneficial as successful implementations often involve structuring roles (discussion leader, note-taker) and coaching students on effective teamwork and communication. One case at a Sydney university as mentioned by Lowe & Kent (2019) introduced group research projects in a political science course, pairing domestic and international students.

The instructors provided clear guidelines on group processes and intercultural communication, as the outcome was a higher overall course pass rate and a reduction in the performance gap between domestic and ESL students compared to previous iterations of the course without such designated group work. ESL students credited the collaborative project with helping them learn from peers, practice academic English in a low-stakes environment and gain deeper understanding of content through discussion (Lowe & Kent, 2019).

Similarly, a study by Clark (2021) found that the Unit Support Program (USP) operationalized active-learning principles through a weekly, team-taught workshop that ran in parallel with lectures and tutorials in an educational design model as shown in Figure 2. The 12-week intervention incorporated a hands-on routine with every class opened with a short teacher-led overview and then pivoted to workbook-based drills in pairs or trios (dissecting journal articles, mapping arguments, building paragraph templates). Students were repeatedly asked to annotate, discuss and co-draft answers before pooling insights for immediate tutor feedback,

a cycle the focus-group data show they found most engaging on “explore, practice and collaborate” (Clark, 2021). Furthermore, collaborative design translated into sharper higher-order outcomes for the ESL cohort, on the initial critical-thinking probe (n = 20), only 35% could articulate an overall argument and 75% could relate the material to personal experience, after eleven weeks of workshop activities those figures rose to 61.1% and a perfect 100% respectively (n = 18), representing relative jumps of 26.1% and 25% respectively. At the same time, high-quality conclusion writing, almost absent at baseline was evident in 72.1% of scripts (33.3% high-performers; 38.8% reasonable) by semester’s end, while under-performance on that criterion collapsed to 5.55%. Clark’s findings suggests that placing language work inside collaborative, discipline-authentic problems boosted the skills ESL learners most need for academic success especially in synthesising evidence, staking a position and closing with a justified claim, while simultaneously building the confidence ESL students reported valuing in active learning sessions.

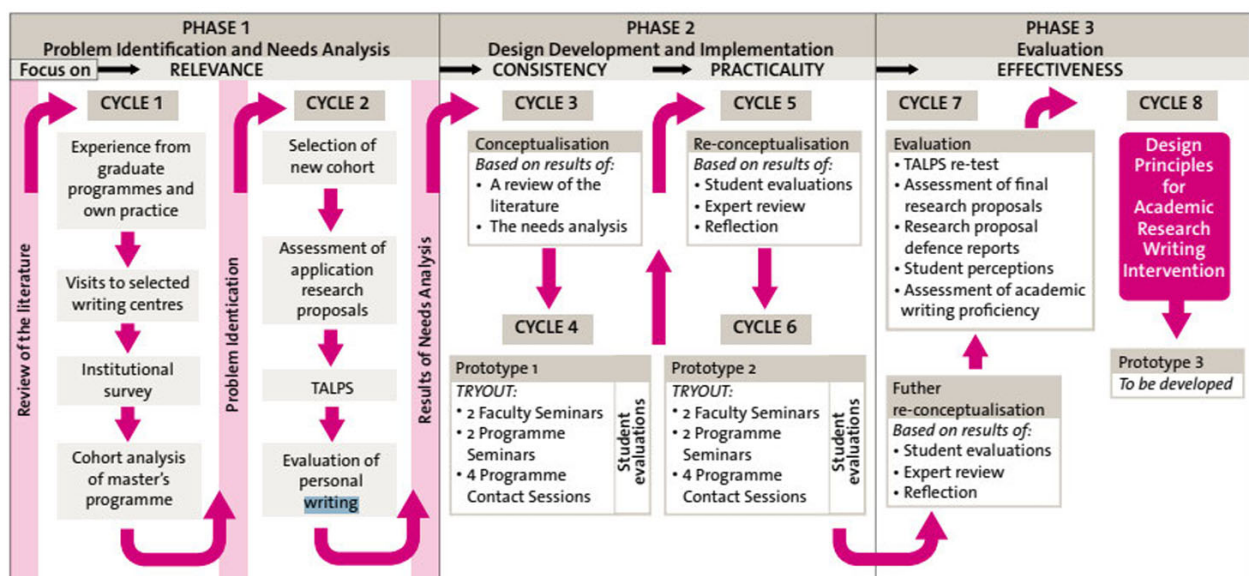


Figure 2. Educational design model (Clark, 2021, p54)

## 4. Support Services and Co-curricular Initiatives

### 4.1. Writing centres and academic skills workshops

Outside the formal classroom, universities typically offer academic support units including writing centres, learning advice centres, or academic skills workshops to assist students with assignments and skill development (Clarence, 2017). These services are particularly vital for ESL students, who often need additional guidance on English academic writing conventions, referencing, or exam preparation strategies. Empirical evidence in Winder et al.’s (2016) study shows that ESL students who proactively utilize writing centre consultations or attend skills workshops tend to achieve better academic outcomes than those who do not. In a study by Bullen & Roberts (2019) on Australian university international undergraduates who had at least one consultation with the writing centre in their first semester attained a higher average GPA by the end of the year than a

matched group of international students who never used the service. This trend echoes findings in North American contexts, for instance, a survey of 344 international students in the United States found that those with self-identified language difficulties frequently sought help from writing and student success centers, which was associated with improvements in their confidence and assignment performance (Banjong, 2016). Moreover, it was found that students grappling with issues like homesickness or stress were more likely to visit the counseling centre, suggesting a holistic interplay between academic and personal support services for international learners (Banjong, 2016).

Despite the availability of such support, a recurring theme is that many ESL students underutilize these resources, sometimes due to lack of awareness, scheduling conflicts, or stigma around seeking help according to Qazi (2023). Australian institutions have addressed this by increasingly moving toward an embedded support model and by offering discipline-specific workshops in collaboration with faculty. Some universities schedule tailored sessions including academic writing classes and research skills for essays run by

learning advisors in conjunction with course deadlines (Gurney & Grossi, 2019). These targeted workshops tend to attract more ESL students because they are directly relevant and sometimes even built into course requirements. Evaluations of these targeted sessions show positive student feedback and anecdotal grade improvements. However, comprehensive quantitative evaluations are limited. One notable quantitative study (Banjong, 2015) in the U.S. context did correlate use of an international student support center with higher academic performance, emphasising the potential impact of such services when students engage with them, standing to reason that similar benefits apply in Australia, though more research could strengthen the causal evidence.

## 4.2. Peer mentoring and peer assisted study sessions (PASS)

Peer-led support programs have emerged as a powerful tool to help ESL students adapt academically and socially. In Australia universities, common examples include peer mentoring schemes where incoming international students are paired with experienced students or local buddies and PASS, which are group study sessions facilitated by upper-year students who excelled in the course during the COVID pandemic (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). These programs create informal learning communities and can ease the transition for ESL students by providing guidance in a less formal, more relatable setting than faculty office hours. Empirical literature also mentioned multiple benefits of peer mentoring for international students increased retention, higher satisfaction, and tangible improvements in academic achievement (Le et al., 2024). Le et al.'s (2024) recent systematic review of peer mentoring in higher education confirms that peer mentoring indeed helps improve students' grades (GPA), elevates test scores, and increase passing rates across various contexts. For example, a large-scale study by Graham et al. (2022) in the United States found that mentored

students' average GPA rose from 2.41 to 2.83 after participation in a peer mentoring program. Similarly, a peer mentoring program for first-year international students in the UK led to an increase in pass rates from 80% to 92% among participants, compared to those without mentors (Masehela & Mabika, 2017).

As shown in Table 2, a growing body of evidence confirms that structured peer-mentoring schemes yield substantial academic dividends for ESL and other international cohorts across Le et al.'s (2024) systematic review of studies conducted between 2013 and 2022 found that mentored students out-performed comparison groups on every headline metric, including grade-point average (GPA), pass rates and retention (Le et al., 2024). Individual contributions echo this pattern at a Hispanic-serving institution in the United States, first-year STEM mentees finished their inaugural year with a mean GPA of 3.28 versus 2.78 for non-participants (Cruz et al., 2021); a large multi-disciplinary programme reported a similar gap 2.83 versus 2.41 after two semesters (Graham et al., 2022). In South Africa, Economics students who attended weekly peer-assisted study sessions averaged 60.9% on the final examination, comfortably ahead of the 52.9% achieved by their un-mentored peers (Dos Reis & Yu, 2018), while an institution-wide scheme boosted first-year course pass rates from 80 to 92% (Masehela & Mabika, 2017). These quantitative gains are attributed to mentors' capacity to decode the "hidden curriculum", model effective study strategies and provide linguistically accessible explanation, which together diminish feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging, representing factors strongly linked to persistence and help-seeking in Australian universities (Le et al., 2024). Collectively, the data advocate for scaling peer mentoring and PASS initiatives, provided that mentors receive intercultural-awareness training, language and background are considered in matching, and relationships are routinely monitored to sustain impact.

**Table 2.** Impact of peer mentoring on academic outcomes for international and culturally diverse student cohorts (Adapted from Le et al.'s 2024)

Study & Context	Participants (international / culturally diverse)	Academic outcome reported	Mentored cohort	Non-mentored cohort	Advantage
<b>Cruz et al., 2021 – USA, first-year Latinx STEM majors</b>	<i>N</i> = 90 (all first-generation or international-heritage)	Cumulative GPA (4-point)	3.28	2.78	+0.50 GPA points (≈ 18 % higher)
<b>Graham et al., 2022 – USA, multi-disciplinary transition programme</b>	<i>N</i> = 4 174 (large proportion of new international entrants)	Mean GPA after one year	2.83	2.41	+0.42 GPA points (≈ 17 % higher)
<b>Dos Reis &amp; Yu, 2018 – South Africa, first-year Economics</b>	<i>N</i> = 267 (high share of cross-border African students)	Final exam (%)	60.9 %	52.9 %	+8.0%
<b>Masehela &amp; Mabika, 2017 – South Africa, mixed disciplines</b>	<i>N</i> = 45 (regularly mentored) vs. institutional average	Unit pass rate (%)	92 %	80 %	+12%

## 4.3. Holistic support and counseling services

While the importance of academic skills is widely acknowledged, the broader well-being of ESL students also significantly affects their academic outcomes. Studies by Walsham et al. (2023) and Chitrakar & Nisanth (2023) found that stressors such as financial difficulties, mental health issues, or social isolation can impair concentration and motivation, leading to poorer academic performance. Thus,

university support services in counseling, financial aid, and accommodation, among others, indirectly contribute to academic success by stabilizing students' lives. For instance, international student advisors and counselors can help students manage homesickness, culture shock, or anxiety, which in turn can improve their focus on studies (Mulyadi et al., 2024). Banjong (2015) found that international students dealing with loneliness or personal stress often utilized campus counseling services, and this group reported that

resolving personal issues helped them re-engage academically. Similarly, Australian universities have increasingly recognized the importance of such wrap-around support. Many have created dedicated “international student support” offices that bundle academic guidance with personal support, offering one-stop assistance (Kent, 2020). According to Kent (2020), the impact of these holistic services is harder to quantify in terms of grades, but student satisfaction surveys such as the International Student Barometer consistently show a positive correlation between satisfaction with support services and self-reported academic learning outcomes.

Thus, in discussion with student focus groups, ESL undergraduates often emphasize that feeling cared for and having access to help when needed gave them the peace of mind to focus on their coursework (Caturegli, 2021). Consequently, the findings indicate that a multi-faceted approach is essential to enhance learning outcomes for ESL undergraduates, whereby instructional strategies within the classroom, especially those that embed language development in mainstream teaching and adopt inclusive pedagogy directly address the academic challenges ESL students face (Caturegli, 2021). Meanwhile, support services outside the classroom provide tailored assistance and an additional safety net, ensuring that students can seek help for specific needs (Adelman & Taylor, 2018). The combination of in-class and out-of-class support appears to have a compounding positive effect. For example, an ESL student who learns writing skills through an embedded assignment and also visits the writing center for feedback is likely to make greater improvement than through either measure alone. Likewise, a student who benefits from peer mentoring may feel more confident to participate in active learning exercises in class, thus gaining more from the instructional strategies.

## 5. Discussion

The synthesis of evidence from 2015–2025 offers a clear message, whereby enhancing the learning outcomes of ESL students in Australian higher education requires an integrated strategy that spans pedagogy, curriculum design, and student support services. The theoretical framework underpinning this approach draws on several established educational theories. Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development supports the scaffolding practices observed, wherein ESL students achieve more with guided support than they would independently. Tinto’s (2012) model of student integration sheds light on how peer mentoring and social support foster academic integration and commitment, thus improving retention and success. Additionally, Cummins’ (1999) distinctions between BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) remind us why many international students who converse adequately in English still struggle with academic tasks, emphasizing the necessity of targeted academic language interventions.

A key discussion point is the shift from remedial to developmental approaches in supporting ESL learners. Earlier paradigms often treated language deficiencies as a student problem to be fixed through separate remedial courses. The current findings advocate a more developmental (and egalitarian) view, all students benefit from development of academic literacies, and it is the institution’s role to develop these through both curriculum and support initiatives. Embedding academic skills into courses exemplifies this shift, moving away from stigmatizing stand-alone support and

instead normalizing skill development as part of learning. This approach helps ESL students and often raises outcomes for the broader student cohort, a phenomenon reported in some studies (native speakers also improved their writing when academic literacy was taught explicitly in their classes). Such co-benefits strengthen the argument for mainstreaming these practices.

The Australian context presents some unique considerations. Australian universities are among the most internationalized in the world, with some institutions having 30–40% international enrolment in undergraduate programs. This environment can create both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, domestic students and faculty may be more accustomed to linguistic diversity and thus more naturally inclusive. On the other hand, the sheer scale of ESL enrolments can strain resources, making it difficult to provide individualized attention. The research suggests that scalable solutions, like peer-led programs (PASS or large-group workshops), are vital in the Australian setting. It is encouraging that studies have documented success even in large cohorts (for instance, peer mentoring benefiting over 4,000 students in a program) as per Le et al. (2024). However, ensuring consistency in quality as programs scale is an ongoing challenge.

Another discussion theme is the evaluation of “learning outcomes”. Most studies measure outcomes in terms of grades, pass rates, or self-reported skill gains. While these are important, learning outcomes also encompass higher-order gains such as critical thinking, autonomy, and long-term academic trajectory (progression to further study, graduation, etc.). The reviewed literature provides strong evidence of short-term improvements (within a semester or year) linked to interventions. There is less evidence on long-term outcomes, for example, do ESL students who receive comprehensive support in first year continue to outperform in later years? Do they graduate at the same rate as their native-English-speaking peers? Some indications are positive. For instance, peer mentoring has been linked with better second-year retention, and embedded literacy programs seem to instill skills that students carry forward. Nonetheless, a recommendation from this discussion is for institutions to invest in longitudinal tracking of ESL student cohorts. Such data could inform whether early interventions have lasting effects or if continuous support is needed at different stages of the degree.

The relationship between instructional strategies and support services also deserves emphasis. Our findings suggest that neither domain alone is sufficient, it is their synergy that produces the best outcomes. For example, if teaching staff assume that support services will “fix” students’ problems, but do not adapt their pedagogy, students may still flounder in class. Conversely, if excellent pedagogical adjustments are made but students face unaddressed personal or language issues outside class, they may not fully benefit from instruction. A holistic institutional approach is thus recommended. Australian universities might consider formal mechanisms to link these domains – such as learning advisors working closely with academic staff to design assessments, or faculty referring students to services early (perhaps even making a certain number of writing center visits a hurdle requirement for identified students). The discussion in several papers pointed out that when support staff and academic staff collaborate (as in the embedded programs), outcomes improve and staff themselves become more aware of student

needs (Maldoni & Lear, 2016). This collaboration can be fostered through professional development and institutional policy that values teaching for diversity.

Our review also reveals student agency as a critical factor. The most successful outcomes were often observed in studies where students actively engaged with the provided resources, for instance, those who sought feedback, attended sessions, or embraced peer mentoring. This suggests that students are not passive recipients of support, their motivation and awareness matter greatly. Some researchers have called for training or orienting ESL students in how to be effective learners in a new environment (sometimes termed “academic acculturation”). In practice, this might mean integrating a brief study-skills module into orientation for international students or a first-year experience course that explicitly teaches help-seeking strategies and time management in the Australian academic context. Through empowering students to utilize strategies and supports, institutions can enhance the efficacy of the interventions described.

Finally, while the paper’s focus has been on the social sciences, many of the discussed strategies are transferable to other fields. However, it is worth noting that disciplines differ in discourse and assessment forms (compare a sociology essay with a chemistry lab report). Thus, discipline-specific tailoring of support is important. The social sciences often demand intensive reading and persuasive writing, therefore, writing support and critical reading workshops are paramount for ESL students in these fields. STEM fields might place more emphasis on speaking (presentations) or specific technical vocabulary, accordingly, oral communication support or glossaries could be more beneficial there. The underlying principle is that understanding the specific linguistic and academic demands of each discipline leads to better-targeted assistance for ESL learners. In our reviewed social science interventions, success was greatest when support was aligned with course content (analyzing a sample political science article in a workshop before students tackled their own article critique assignment). Australian higher education can draw on the growing body of evidence to implement changes that are pedagogically sound and student-centered. The improvements documented, higher pass rates, narrower achievement gaps, and enriched student experiences are not just important for the students themselves, but also contribute to the overall academic quality and reputation of institutions in a competitive international education sector.

## 6. Discussion

Undergraduate ESL students in Australian higher education, particularly in social science fields, bring rich diversity and potential to our campuses. Yet, as this review has detailed, they also encounter distinct challenges in language and acculturation that can hinder their academic performance if unaddressed. The question at the heart of our exploration was how instructional strategies and support services can be harnessed to enhance these students’ learning outcomes. Drawing on a decade of scholarly evidence (2015–2025), it is concluded that a coordinated, inclusive, and proactive approach can make a substantial difference in leveling the playing field for ESL learners. Key instructional strategies including the embedding of academic literacy instruction within content courses, scaffolded and culturally responsive pedagogy, and active learning techniques have demonstrated efficacy in improving ESL student outcomes. These pedagogical adjustments help demystify academic

expectations and equip students with the tools to meet them. At the same time, support services, writing and learning centers, peer mentoring programs, targeted language courses, and holistic advising – provide essential additional layers of assistance. When students take advantage of these services, the benefits manifest in higher grades, better retention, and more confident engagement in academic life. Indeed, the synergy between what happens inside the classroom and outside it is a recurring theme: the most successful initiatives are those where teaching practice and support provisions reinforce each other in addressing students’ needs.

For Australian universities, which operate in an increasingly competitive international education sector, the implications are clear. Investing in the academic success of ESL students is not only a matter of equity and educational mission but also of sustaining institutional reputation and appeal. The strategies outlined in this report from curriculum-integrated language support to peer-led learning communities, constitute a toolkit that universities can adapt and implement. Many are already doing so, as evidenced by programs cited in the literature, but consistency and coverage can be improved. Institutions are encouraged to adopt a comprehensive strategy that involves academic faculty, support staff, and students themselves as partners in the learning process. It is important to note that enhancing ESL learning outcomes benefits the entire academic community. Domestic students gain from the internationalization of classrooms when ESL peers are empowered to contribute diverse perspectives. Faculty become more effective teachers through the process of adapting to their students’ needs. The overall quality of teaching and learning rises, aligning with broader goals of excellence in higher education. In this sense, the question of supporting ESL undergraduates is not a marginal or specialized concern, it is thus central to the pursuit of inclusive and high-quality education in a globalized world.

To conclude, it is reiterated that ESL students are clear assets to Australian higher education, and with thoughtful support and instruction, their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds can be leveraged into strengths rather than seen as deficits. As Heng (2018) eloquently put it, “different is not deficient”. The collective findings of the research reviewed here affirm that viewpoint. Through valuing difference and systematically providing the right scaffolds, Australian universities can ensure that ESL undergraduates in the social sciences achieve the strong learning outcomes they are capable of, thereby enriching both their own futures and the intellectual life of our institutions.

## 7. Conclusion

Despite the encouraging trends identified, the evidence base is constrained in several respects that temper the strength and generalisability of the conclusions. Foremost, empirical work on undergraduate ESL learners in Australian social-science programmes remains sparse, forcing reliance on studies from other national contexts or mixed-population samples whose results may not transfer fully to Australian cohorts owing to differences in prior schooling, support infrastructure and cultural expectations. Methodologically, many investigations are correlational or depend on self-reported gains without robust comparators, making it difficult to disentangle intervention effects from confounding variables such as baseline motivation, only a minority employ quasi-experimental or propensity-matched designs, and true randomised trials are rare. Outcome measures also lean

heavily toward easily quantifiable metrics (grades, pass rates) at the expense of higher-order or affective indicators including critical thinking, engagement, confidence, sense of belonging that are central to holistic learning yet harder to capture systematically. Furthermore, considerable heterogeneity exists in how “embedded literacy” and “peer mentoring” are enacted, ranging from intensive weekly workshops to light-touch coordination with writing centres, hindering precise attribution of impact to particular design elements. Publication and language bias may further skew the picture, as unsuccessful or non-English-language evaluations are less likely to surface in formal literature, while the word-limit of this review necessitated selective reporting and an inevitable flattening of diversity within the ESL population itself. Collectively, these issues counsel caution, whereby the positive patterns reported here should be viewed as context-dependent tendencies rather than definitive prescriptions.

## 8. Implications for Future Studies

To address these gaps and refine practice, future inquiry should pursue longitudinal, methodologically rigorous studies that follow ESL cohorts across multiple years, testing whether early gains from embedded literacy or mentoring persist through to graduation and beyond. Discipline-specific investigations are needed to calibrate support to the distinctive literacy demands of fields such as psychology, economics and sociology, while experimental work should examine technology-mediated tools, automated feedback systems, learning-analytics-driven early alerts, that may augment human support. Integrating student voice through qualitative or mixed-methods designs will illuminate how learners experience and value different interventions, informing culturally responsive refinements. Parallel research on professional development can evaluate how targeted training equips academics to scaffold multilingual classrooms and whether such capacity-building translates into measurable student gains. At institutional level, comparative and cost-benefit studies should analyse how differing policy frameworks including mandatory language diagnostics, funded peer programmes, staff-to-student ratios shape outcomes across universities, providing evidence for scalable models. Finally, an intersectional lens is essential with analyses that disaggregate by language background, gender, residency status or first-in-family status will clarify which sub-groups benefit most from specific strategies and ensure that evolving support ecosystems remain equitable as Australia’s higher-education landscape diversifies further.

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