

## Hot links to English language development resources and services: The UWA English Language Corner



Category:  
Professional Practice

### Siri Barrett-Lennard

*The University of Western Australia*  
Siri.Barrett-Lennard@uwa.edu.au

The UWA English Language Corner aims at assisting students to develop English language skills anywhere, anytime. Employing free social bookmarking and tagging software powered by *Delicious* to overcome the barriers of time and space, this website assists students to navigate through the ever-growing range of services and resources for developing English language proficiency. Annotated links tagged by skill area make it easy for students to access relevant services and resources. The use of social bookmarking and tagging software, moreover, make the website simple to maintain. The English Language Corner is available at: <http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/page/156053>

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### Context

In recent years, prevailing assumptions about the academic language proficiency of students entering Australian universities have changed. Whereas once it was generally expected that all incoming students had sufficiently high levels of proficiency in English language and academic literacy to succeed in tertiary studies, this is no longer the case (Barthel, 2007). In part due to the broadening of access, increasing numbers of international students, and changes in secondary school outcomes, relative complacency with the academic literacy and English language levels of university students has given way to widespread concern, and in some cases alarm (see for example Birrell, 2006 and Bretag, 2007). As the *Outcomes from a national symposium: English language competence of international students* (AEI 2007) and the *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities* (AUQA, 2009, p.2) have made clear, 'it can no longer be assumed that students enter their university with the level of academic language proficiency required to participate effectively in their studies'.

With a new set of draft National Standards for English language development commissioned by DEEWR, the dialogue has now moved from Good Practice Principles for international students to mandatory standards for all students. This movement marks a shift from rhetoric and ideals to policy and policing. It also signals a shift in assumptions whereby *no* student can be deemed to have sufficient academic communication skills upon entry to university unless proven otherwise, and much greater pressure on universities to take action to assure that students' academic literacy needs are met.

Universities have responded to these changes and to the increasing pressures for improved academic communication standards in a number of ways. These vary from the introduction of post-entry English language assessments (PELAs) (see Dunworth, 2009), to the implementation of language and literacy policies, to the wholesale renewal of curricula with academic communication skills embedded in new generation degrees. At the University of Western Australia (UWA), explicit statements have been developed to promote curricula, teaching and

assessment practices that develop English language skills as part of the normal program (UWA, 2009). In addition, instruction and assessment of communication skills are key components of all new courses to be introduced in 2012 (Chalmers et al., 2010).

An increasing focus on improved tertiary literacy skills has been one of the driving factors behind the expansion of Australian university academic language and learning (ALL) services, with over 450 ALL professionals working in Australian universities in 2010, a 23% increase from the previous year (Barthel, 2010). ALL staff not only facilitate students' academic language and learning, they are also called on to participate in curriculum renewal and embedded academic language instruction, support their colleagues in the faculties, run PELAs and develop self-access resources for students. The *STUDYSmarter* team at UWA is a relatively small ALL team by national standards, but provides over 20 different services to students and staff. As part of its strategy to manage the many demands placed on its services, *STUDYSmarter* has developed a section of its website called the English Language Corner.

## Response: The English Language Corner

The English language promotes English language development. It uses social bookmarking and tagging, or folksonomies, to efficiently connect students with a wide variety of services and resources that provide academic English language and learning opportunities.

The home page acts (Figure 1) as an overview page for first time visitors to the site, describing what students can find on the site. It tells visitors that they can use the site to improve English language skills. It indicates that the site provides advice on how to improve skills, information on what is available to help, links to selected online resources and guidelines on what is expected at UWA.

**English Language Corner**

[EL Home](#) | [Speaking](#) | [Listening](#) | [Reading](#) | [Writing](#) | [Vocab & Grammar](#) | [Testing](#) | [Rights](#) | [EL at UWA](#)

Welcome to the English Language Corner

Here you will find...

- ✓ Advice on how to improve English language skills
- ✓ Information on what's available to help
- ✓ Links to some great online resources
- ✓ Guidelines on what's expected

Use the English Language Corner to help yourself (and your students) to better English language skills today! Navigate this site by clicking on the general topic links at the top, bottom or side of the page. Or for specific topics, check out the *STUDYSmarter* English language tags below.

**STUDYSmarter English Language Tags**

[Australian-words](#) [discipline-specific](#) [grammar](#) [learning](#) [listening](#) [national-guidelines](#) [news](#) [presentations](#) [pronunciation](#) [reading](#) [speaking](#) [ss-grammar](#) [ss-listening](#) [ss-reading](#) [ss-speaking](#) [ss-writing](#) [studyskills](#) [teaching](#) [testing](#) [using-sources](#) [UWA](#) [UWA-grammar](#) [UWA-learning](#) [UWA-listening](#) [UWA-reading](#) [UWA-speaking](#) [UWA-teaching](#) [UWA-testing](#) [UWA-writing](#) [vocabularywriting](#)

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**Tag cloud**

Figure 1: English Language Corner: Home page

In addition to this overview, the home page contains a tag cloud generated by [Delicious](#) software. A tag cloud is a directory of tags, or key descriptive words, assigned by users of social bookmarking software to particular websites. *STUDYSmarter* has bookmarked a number of websites that provide outstanding advice for developing English language skills and has assigned descriptive tags to each of these. These tags identify these sites as useful for developing English language speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar or other skills.

The tag cloud on the home page of the English Language Corner contains links to all of the sites bookmarked by *STUDYSmarter* on *Delicious*. Clicking on the first tag, ‘Australian-words’ (hyphenation is necessary to keep multiple words as part of the same tag), takes visitors to *STUDYSmarter* bookmarks of websites focusing on Australian idiom and slang. Each website profiled is annotated with brief evaluative comments by *STUDYSmarter*.

Also on the home page are navigational links to sub-pages of the English Language Corner. These include pages for [speaking](#), [listening](#), [reading](#), [writing](#), [vocabulary and grammar](#) skills development. Each skills development page provides advice on how to improve the particular skill while studying at UWA. Pages include two main features: animated digital characters developed using [SitePal](#) software, which combines animation with podcast technology, and complete annotations of websites bookmarked by *STUDYSmarter* and fed to the page from *Delicious* (Figure 2).

The screenshot shows the 'English Language Corner | Improving English Listening' page. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links: [EL Home](#), [Speaking](#), [Listening](#), [Reading](#), [Writing](#), [Vocab & Grammar](#), [Testing](#), [Rights](#), and [EL at UWA](#). Below the menu, a text prompt says: 'Click on the questions below to hear answers from the *STUDYSmarter* team. You can pause the audio at any time.'

The main content area features an audio player interface. The title of the audio is 'Listening Skills'. The audio player shows a progress bar and control buttons. To the right of the audio player, there are two blue callout boxes with white text and arrows pointing to the audio player: 'Animated digital characters' (with a left-pointing arrow) and 'Annotated links to services' (with a right-pointing arrow). The audio player displays three questions: 'What should I focus on?', 'How can I improve my listening skills?', and 'Where should I start?'.

Below the audio player, there is a section titled 'Links to resources' with the text: 'Check out the links below for ways to improve your listening at UWA. Got a link to add to our list? Email [Siri Barrett-L](#) suggestions.'

Underneath, there is a section titled 'Ways to improve your listening through *STUDYSmarter* at UWA' with three links: [UWA \*STUDYSmarter\* Communication Skills Survival Guides](#), [UWA \*STUDYSmarter\* Podcasts](#), and [UWA \*STUDYSmarter\* Resource Area](#). A blue callout box with a downward-pointing arrow is positioned to the right of these links.

Figure 2: English Language Corner: Sub-page

Below each animated character are questions that students commonly ask: ‘What should I focus on?’, ‘How can I improve my skills?’ and ‘Where should I start?’ When visitors click on these questions, an audio recording begins to play, and the animated character ‘speaks’. These recordings were made by *STUDYSmarter* and are under a minute each in length. They advise students to take an active approach to developing their skills, to take responsibility for their learning, and to use the strategies that best suit their circumstances and learning preferences. Further down the page are annotated links to web resources for developing the particular skill featured on the page.

## Evaluation

The English Language Corner advises students on how to improve English language skills, what resources are available to help and what's expected at UWA. It brings together a range of information on English language learning opportunities at UWA and further afield, including pages devoted to resources and services that can assist the development of speaking, listening, reading, writing, and vocabulary and grammar skills.

The site helps students to select and navigate information, in much the same way as a teacher does in the traditional classroom. This information and advice is not restricted to UWA resources, but in recognition that 'our information role has spread from buildings and collections to encompass the whole electronic world' (Godwin, 2008, p. 3), includes a vast range of other resources available on the net.

Students have responded to the site with enthusiasm as the social bookmarking and tagging helps them find the information they want when they want it. The English Language Corner's use of social bookmarking and tagging enables students to more readily access advice that represents 'just-in-time information provision' (Kift and Field, 2009) and helps to meet UWA students' expectation for online English language skills development opportunities (Barrett-Lennard and Bulsara, 2007).

Establishing the English Language Corner has helped to significantly increase the number of UWA students accessing academic language and learning support each year (Barrett-Lennard et al., 2009). It has also reduced the number of basic enquiries received by the *STUDYSmarter* team from first time users of the service on how to improve English language skills and has increased the quality of student learning, with students tending to use a greater number of services and resources to support their English language development. Students using *STUDYSmarter* services are now less likely to be unfamiliar with what is available on campus to support their English language development and more likely to employ a variety of strategies to assist their learning.

Social bookmarking and tagging have resulted in a low maintenance website that improves learning outcomes for students. Developing the website was quick and did not require sophisticated knowledge of html. Updates are easy and both *Delicious* and *SitePal* software are simple to use.

Despite the ease in developing the English Language Corner, however, there are a few potential obstacles to developing Web 2.0 resources of this kind. Central amongst these is that not all features are supported by all web browsers. The English Language Corner's tag clouds, for example, do not display in *Internet Explorer*, and are thus not a main feature of the site, with visitors being able to navigate in a number of other ways. In addition, in displays of tags, most recent tags always appear first, a fact that requires forward planning. A final note of caution is that any kind of online resource does not replace face-to-face interaction with students. Its value is limited without locally available and relevant services and resources with which to connect students.

Nevertheless, online resources such as the English Language Corner assist students to better navigate services and resources for developing English language proficiency no matter where they are or what time it is.

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