

Challenges of Content-based Teaching in EAP at University

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This is a description of the evolving content-based curriculum in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class at an Australian university. The reasons for choosing the content-based instruction (CBI) methodology are discussed, and some intrinsic problems are examined. Numerous versions of the CBI methodology have emerged since the early 1980s, with a considerable degree of success being claimed for almost all of these approaches. The evolution of the course will be described, including the problems that have been resolved and some that remain to be resolved. Some of the problems have been: resistance from students, whose varied backgrounds and goals found some of the subject matter irrelevant; resistance from (non-EAP) staff, who thought the topics were too specialized and difficult; and the problem of choosing tasks and readings that are fully representative of those that the students are using in their other subjects. Another challenge is the unique standing of the EAP course, as the students have in fact already passed the IELTS or TOEFL examinations, and are already studying at undergraduate level. Is it an English course? If not, what exactly is it? The article finishes with an overview of the planned future expansion of the EAP section.

これはオーストラリアの大学のEAP授業において展開されている内容重視型(Content-Based)カリキュラムについて述べたものである。内容重視型の指導(Content-based Instruction, 以下CBI)法が取られた理由が論じられ、その固有の問題についても考察が加えられている。1980年代の初めから数々のCBIが出現し、その多くが相当の成功を収めたと言われている。前述のコースの進展状況について、今までに解決された問題やこれからの課題を含め、詳述される。問題には以下のようなものがある。背景と目的が多様であるために題材が不適切だと感じる学生からの抵抗、トピックが特殊すぎて難しいと感じるEAP以外のスタッフの抵抗、他の科目で使っている教材を十分に代表するようなテキストやリーディング教材を選択する際の困難などである。もうひとつの課題はこのEAPコースの特殊な状況である。即ち学生たちは実は既にIELTSあるいはTOEFLの試験を通り、すでに学部レベルでの勉強をしている。では、このコースは英語のコースなのか? そうでないなら、いったい何のコースなのか? この論文は最後に、EAP部門の将来の拡充計画の概観について論じる。

This is a brief description of the trials and experiences of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) undergraduate class at an Australian university. It is necessary to clarify at the beginning that although in many, if not most, teaching organisations, EAP is taught at pre-university level, the course discussed here is actually a university course—a credit-bearing university course, which international students can choose to study as part of their undergraduate degrees. So EAP, in this context, refers to university classes, not English Language School classes. The EAP subject is one quarter of the normal study requirement in one semester.

Following is a brief description of the EAP section at this university, its history, a discussion of the challenges, and finally, a glimpse into the proposed future of the section.

Description

The EAP unit at this university, based in the Linguistics Department, has been in existence since about 1990. All students who have a non-English speaking background, either international students or local students, are eligible to take these courses and to participate in the other activities offered by the unit. The international students are mostly from Asian countries, with a sizeable proportion of Japanese students. The Japanese students comprise approximately 25% Study Abroad, and 75% normal international students who are studying their complete degrees in Australia.

The section offers two undergraduate courses for credit, free individual writing consultations, and a selection of free one hour weekly workshops: grammar, referencing skills, pronunciation, and discussion skills. The course being discussed here is EAP100, a course that focuses on the development of:

- Analysing instructions for university assignments, especially essay type tasks.
- Critically reading and analysing academic texts (articles and chapters of books).
- Distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information for assignments.
- Planning, writing and editing assignments—producing an essay type text.
- Using evidence and arguments effectively in writing.
- Referencing sources accurately and appropriately (in-text citations and reference lists).

History

The basic structure of the EAP department has remained the same since it started. However, in 2001 the EAP 100 course underwent a major change of direction from its focus on language skills. Research and professional experience convinced the academic staff to change to a more content-based approach. Research on content-based instruction (CBI) was examined, and the decision was made to use a modified theme-based instruction model. Theme-based (TB) was chosen because this particular EAP course is discrete from other academic subjects and the students come from all faculties in the university. There is a large body of evidence (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Carson, 2000; Iancu, 2002; Johns, 1998; Jones, 1999; Pally, 2000; Snow & Kamhi-Stein, 2002; Weissberg & Lipoufski, 2002) pointing to the fact that the integration of content and language learning is an effective form of instruction, as the students can improve their English while learning content, or vice-versa. CBI is regarded as particularly relevant to students undertaking full-time study.

Bueno (2002) highlights the challenges that teachers face when switching from a skills-based to a content-based curricular orientation. Some of the challenges that he mentioned are particularly pertinent to the course discussed here. These include: (1) the determination of course content in response to diverse student interests, (2) the selection of content resources and the designation of targeted grammar points for students with varied proficiency levels, and (3) the sequencing of structured input and output activities.

The EAP100 course follows similar lines to sustained-content instruction which has been discussed in various

studies such as those of Pally (2000) and Murphy and Byrd (2001), where the content, carrier topic, or theme, is taught for a semester, along with the explicit instruction that the students need in order to adapt to an academic setting.

The limitations in designing a curriculum around a single content area are of course that the carrier topic (necessarily chosen by the academic staff) is not what all students are interested in, a problem discussed by Stewart, Sagliano, and Sagliano (2002), and others. The challenges discussed in these studies confirm those experienced by the staff at this university, particularly in choosing appropriate content, ensuring that the needs of the content-learning are aligned with the language needs of the students, deciding whether or not to use textbooks, and determining methods of assessment.

The EAP100 course encompasses a Language-Content-Task framework. Language: although English as such is not taught, discussion about the use of English is interwoven throughout the course, with mini-lessons being provided at point of need in the tutorials. Content area: As always, the knowledge of the content area is the difficult point, as the content is not aligned to any particular course. Tasks: the task concentration in this case is an essay. One of the main points conveyed is that writing is an iterative process, something that the majority of new students find hard to accept.

Challenges

There are four major challenges: choice of content; perceptions of other academic staff; staffing issues; and EAP as a name.

Choice of content

Our interpretation of CBI has necessarily been *theme-based*, as the students are taken from every discipline in the university. A carrier subject, or host subject is used to teach it. Since the move to a content-based course, the major challenge has been how to choose a carrier content which is seen as relevant to all students. One problem is, of course, that the students cannot choose the course—it is chosen by the EAP staff.

In view of the fact that the students come from every discipline in the university, the focus needs to be on something of universal interest, so the options are to concentrate on aspects of culture, problems of international students in English-speaking countries, or more generally known topics such as globalisation or Internet usage. However, even the choice of these generalised topics can be problematic, as many of the students have either already studied these subjects in their degrees, or have absolutely no interest in them.

From 2001, the following topics have been studied: *Acculturation to the academic discourse or academic community; Equal access to the Internet (or not) in developed and developing countries; Globalisation; The language used in computer-mediated communication (CMC); and The various issues surrounding the problem of plagiarism.* These topics have met with an almost universal acceptance. After one of the CMC essay tasks we asked students to write about their responses to the readings supplied for the essay. Appendix A shows some examples of their responses, which reveal that although not all students were satisfied with the readings, some of which were very

difficult, most could cope with the higher level of language required to comprehend them.

Perceptions of academic staff

One of the major challenges is the university-wide perception that the EAP section is there to *fix up* grammar mistakes. A physics lecturer might tell a student to go to the EAP section with their essay before handing it in, and get them to *fix up the grammar*. Or a psychology lecturer might tell a student who has low grades to take an EAP course, with the expectation that from then on, all her writing will be error-free. It is not uncommon to have agitated students pounding on the doors at six o'clock on a Friday evening begging the staff to fix up the grammar in their essays NOW! Before they hand them in at 6.30! It is also not uncommon for a student from, for example, Anthropology or Chiropractic, to fail to bring their assignment question with them to consultations. They often forget, in spite of written instructions to bring them, and are puzzled when we say that without it we can't really tell them if they are answering the question correctly. It is clear that in many cases the perception of other staff and students is different from the EAP staff members' perception of the section. To enter the undergraduate program at this university, students need 6.5 in IELTS with a minimum of 6.00 in Writing. See Table 1 for a comparison of IELTS and TOEFL requirement.

Table 1. Undergraduate Entry Requirements.

IELTS	TOEFL PAPER	TOEFL COMPUTER
6.5	580	237
	TWE 5	TWE 5
Min 6.0 in each skill - • Reading • Writing • Listening • Speaking	• Min 53 Listening • Min 52 Reading • Min 51 Structure & Writing	Min 19 in each section

The position held in the EAP section is that if students have reached this stage they have already learnt enough grammar, and their major problem is how to apply it, not to learn any more. Although many of them have studied “EAP” before, they have not been exposed to the massive amounts of lengthy and difficult texts and readings that they are expected to plough their way through. Although the focus of the course is on writing, a large percentage of time is spent teaching students reading strategies appropriate to the academic environment, for example, that they do not have to read everything they are given at university, but must learn how to be selective in their reading.

EAP as a name

The name EAP is not helpful, as it is not an English Language course. A better name for it might be *How to Use Your English for Academic Purposes* or *Using English for Academic Purposes*.

Staffing Issues

The staffing issue is of course, simply that there are not enough staff members! There are 3 University staff members, but they all teach other subjects as well, so there is less than the equivalent of two full time staff available. The ideal would be to offer Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) type courses in each faculty, but this will not be possible without a greatly enlarged staff base.

Future plans

There are plans to change the name of EAP to Communication for Academic and Professional Purposes (CAPP). This should coincide with the expansion of the department envisaged for the next few years, and will certainly help other disciplines in the university to comprehend the purpose of the section. The aim is to work collaboratively with individual staff members from all faculties, to identify and address their students' specific language and communication needs. It is in the very early stages of planning as yet, but expressions of interest from all faculties are increasing and are, in fact, overwhelming!

So, of the four challenges, the staffing and naming issues are being addressed. The provision of more staff means that more services can be provided. The new name will better describe what the section does, and will help both students and staff from other disciplines better grasp the wider content of our services. The issue of choice of content will also be resolved if there is a larger staff base, as the students will be able to be divided into groups that can be taught content more related to their individual needs. It seems that

in the four years since the section moved to teaching CBI, most of the challenges facing the EAP section have been addressed.

Although the course described is in Australia, it is hoped that this description of the challenges faced might provide useful information for people teaching EAP or content-based courses in Japan. A significant proportion of international students in Australia are from Japan, and if potential students are exposed to this type of teaching before they leave home, they have a greater chance of academic success in their new country of study.

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Appendix A

Comments from students about the essay topic and the readings for it

The students were asked to comment on the assigned readings they did for their essay. The essay question was: *Compare and contrast computer-mediated communication with each of the following: (a) spoken language, and (b) written language.*

The assigned readings were:

- Belcher, D. (2002). Cyberdiscourse, evolving notions of authorship, and the teaching of writing. In M. Hewings (Ed.). *Academic writing in context*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S., & Weasenforth, D. (2001). E-mail and word-processing in the ESL classroom: How the medium affects the message. *Language Learning and Technology*, 5 (1), 135-165.
- Crystal, D. (2002). extract from *Language and the Internet*. CUP.
- Murray, D. E. (2000). Protean communication: The language of computer-mediated communication. *TESOL Quarterly* 34 (3), 397-421.

Comments from students:

By reading and understanding these 2 articles it is not easy for me to go through them because

of many unknown words, complicated structure and length of the whole articles. Despite of the difficulties in reading them, the authors' points of view in these 2 articles are quite useful information for my assignment. Both of them are really long articles, the contents in them are not so boring. The information contained in them gives me a more clear idea about the features of spoken language, written language and computer-mediated communication.

I can see examples from some of the points made by the author and it made me easily to understand what the author want to say.

Both of the 2 books are not so difficult to read. That is because they are written in a logical structure.

They are well organised according to the outline that I can find in the introduction part. So that is easier to look up what I need in the whole essay by reading the outline.

Murray's article is a little difficult, but not until the degree I felt when I read law books in the library for my major.

...however I am not interesting in them really. Because I am not familiar with this area CMC and computer system and they are boring for me. Though I still finished these articles and my essay.

The writer's structure are very clear, which provide a heading for each topic. The reader easy to find the information they want. So the two artical are very interest.

Neither the two are interesting readings but the one by Crystal is not as boring as the one by Beisenbach-Lucas and Weasenworth.

Both of the essays are not so interesting. For me, academic essays will never attract me and I think they are only for the study, not for the leisure time.

It was a kind of competition for me trying to understand it.

Murray was not very useful and boring.