

## **The Case for Reflexivity in Developing ESL Students' Academic Communication Skills**

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**Abstract:** Recent research investigated the communication skills required by students for whom English is a second language and who are entering English-medium higher education institutions. Analysis of qualitative data gathered from 36 internationally-located participants indicated significant agreement among faculty regarding requisite skills but considerable dissatisfaction with current communication skills course methodology, which is broadly influenced either by a 'generic' perspective, emphasizing skills needed by all students in common, or by a 'discipline-specific' view, which emphasizes skills development contextualized by students' disciplines. These standpoints influence the choice of subject-matter for study; generic perspectives rely primarily on general-interest topics while discipline-specific perspectives center on discipline-related topics. However, both generated difficulties. In relation to the former, these included content oversimplification and discipline irrelevance. Discipline-specific topics, though more relevant, limit institutional flexibility, requiring discipline-homogeneous classes and faculty with greater discipline knowledge. These issues are addressed through an innovative methodological alternative that rejects the options above in favor of a student-initiated, enquiry-based approach in which communication skills are the subject-matter of communication courses. This reflexivity enables students to investigate their own contexts, conduct original research, and communicate their results to those with genuine interests. Many opportunities arise as the subject-matter simultaneously offers academic texts for linguistic analysis and relevant content that reinforces the skills required for successful study.

### **Introduction**

All first-year students in higher education need to develop and apply with immediate effect a range of academic communication skills to enable them to participate effectively in the academic community they are entering. Academic communication skills are the literacy, research, study and interpersonal skills that students require for effective engagement not only with their discipline, but also with the wider academic community that a university represents. These skills include the ability to give effective presentations, engage in academic debate and discussion, write reports, argue a position, locate library resources and work in teams. All are predicated upon an understanding of the functions of a university, and the nature of knowledge and its generation and representation.

In contexts in which students' first language differs from the medium of instruction, as is the case for students for whom English is a second language attending an English-medium institution, the task is twofold: they must continue to improve their English language proficiency

while concurrently developing the necessary academic skills. For example, these students, most of whom have a level of proficiency in English sufficient to meet institutional requirements (often equivalent to a score of 500 or above in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or band 5 in IELTS), will need to continue to improve their fluency and accuracy in English as well as expand their range of vocabulary to incorporate both discipline-related words and phrases as well as those in more widespread use. Students for whom English is a first language, on the other hand, arrive with a linguistic foundation enabling them to concentrate more on the development of academic skills.

The challenge for ESL students in English-medium higher education, therefore, is compounded by their ongoing need for linguistic development. Both to prepare and to support these students, many institutions require them to undertake courses to develop their English language and academic communication skills either prior to admission or as co-requisites to discipline-related courses. Such courses are frequently labeled 'English for Specific Purposes' (ESP) or 'English for Academic Purposes' (EAP). ESP is an umbrella term that encompasses both English for general Academic Purposes (EAP, or occasionally EGAP), and English for Occupational Purposes, or EOP (Dudley-Evans, 2001: 132 – 33).

EAP courses generally aim to develop the range of oral and written skills believed to be required by all students regardless of their intended discipline. Examples of such skills include note-taking, summarizing, paraphrasing, quoting, referencing, presenting and engaging in academic debate or discussion. Courses may also however be designed to respond to the needs of students of the same discipline or closely-related subjects, in which case the pedagogic focus may be further narrowed through topics more closely related to the students' intended area of study. Such courses tend to be referred to as ESP courses and are often given titles such as 'English for Law' or 'English for Medicine'. They are frequently in-sessional, while EAP courses may be either pre-sessional or in-sessional.

Although difficulties in identifying suitable topics and texts for study undeniably exist for the ESP curriculum developer, the problem is exacerbated for those developing EAP curricula, as they must identify appropriate material for use with students intending to study, potentially, a diverse range of subjects. For example, I have taught EAP classes composed of students of subjects as distinct as economics, Islamic Studies, law, geology and medicine. With such a class, what topics and texts can these students engage with most profitably in order to develop the necessary academic communication skills? The research reported here identified a number of common solutions to this problem, including the use of texts drawn from the media, which offer several advantages but present difficulties in relation to the language exemplified, which is likely to be more journalistic than academic. Other possibilities, particularly in the case of EAP classes, are presented by texts drawn from subject areas considered to be more interdisciplinary, such as sociology (see, for example, Gaffield-Vile, 1996: 108). Both approaches are driven by the notion that reading material should provide the starting point for study, a reflection perhaps of the status of the written word in academic contexts. It may be that this preoccupation has contributed to a failure to recognize an opportunity which presents several benefits and is discussed below: the

use of research into the field of communication itself, in terms both of its products (reports and presentations, for example) and its processes (such as gathering and interpreting data).

This paper explores some of the problems of content and methodology in EAP and ESP programs, and describes an approach to the development of academic communication skills that is reflexively grounded in its own research as product and as process, and in which linguistic development is embedded. How the approach responds to the issues raised by the research is detailed, and its advantages to students in both discipline-heterogeneous and discipline-homogeneous contexts are highlighted.

### **Communicating for academic purposes**

ESP/EAP and general English language teaching methodology differ as a result of their starting points. While the starting point in the general English classroom is often language, in the ESP/EAP classroom it is more usually students and their immediate and/or anticipated communication needs (Hamp-Lyons, 2001: 126; Dudley-Evans, 2001: 132 – 33). This is the case partly because ESP/EAP students have more specific and identifiable needs than those attending general English classes, enabling a more narrowly defined pedagogic focus that is informed by the communicative competence required for ESL students to function within their target academic discourse community.

Reviews of current practice in EAP (e.g. O’Loughlin, 2002; Cook, 2003; Burnapp, 2006) suggest that another key difference between general English language methodology and EAP is the recognition within EAP that ‘communicative competence’ transcends language skills. ‘Communicative competence’ in this context includes the need for students to apply and develop their skills through involvement in relevant and authentic academic contexts, and to engage in a process leading to ‘social and academic integration’ (Beder, 1997; Cooper et al, 2006) adequate for survival within the target academic culture. Integration may be achieved in part by the development of appropriate behaviours, attitudes and strategies (Acton, 2003), including an increasing awareness of learning processes through reflective and metacognitive skills. Cooper et al (2006) emphasize the need for EAP students to develop and practice the skills they require through involvement in the academic community. They note that it may be helpful to view EAP students as “participants in a ‘community of practice’” (Wenger, 1998), as learning is a social activity that takes place within such a community. The research reported here however identified a number of difficulties with regard to the process of ESP/EAP student integration, addressed by the approach detailed below, which fosters student-initiated enquiry within both the transitional and target communities of practice.

## Research base

### *Contexts*

A research project carried out between 2003 and 2007 set out to answer the question ‘How does EAP tutors’ practice compare with discipline lecturers’ expectations of their ESL students?’ Participants represented tertiary institutions in nine countries that included Indonesia, Australia, Bahrain, the UAE and the UK. Other studies have sought to compare the practice of EAP tutors with subject-lecturers’ expectations. Ferris and Tagg (1996), for example, examined the expectations of subject lecturers in relation to their ESL students’ oral and aural skills, while Kehe and Kehe, (1996) investigated the preparation of ESL students in Japan intending to study in the U.S. In both cases, however, the focus was on ESL students studying their disciplines of choice in the U.S., while the research reported here investigated the preparation of ESL students studying at English-medium institutions in several international contexts.

### *Method*

A two-phase qualitative design was employed, involving in phase one sets of open-ended questions completed and returned electronically by 36 participants (16 subject lecturers and 20 EAP tutors<sup>1</sup>). In phase two, four faculty (two lecturers and two tutors) who had not participated in the first phase were invited to discuss the preliminary outcomes, the purpose being to allow for triangulation and the substantiation, rejection, modification, or supplementation of the issues that had emerged in the first phase of the research. The discussion was audio recorded and transcribed with the help of a word processor and two research assistants. All data were gathered according to an ethical framework of 7 criteria (Patton, 1990), including informed participant consent, guaranteed anonymity, and confidentiality.

### *Analysis and synthesis of the data*

The two phases generated a large quantity of data. Although there is a range of software available to facilitate qualitative data analysis, a manual approach was adopted in this case in order to maximize familiarity. After the 36 questionnaires had been assigned ID codes, the approach involved the following process and led to the identification of themes, categories and issues (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000):

#### Step 1: Focusing the data by question.

Answers with attached IDs were collated by question to produce two documents labeled ‘data books’ (one for tutors and the other for lecturers).

#### Step 2: Annotation of data in relation to research question.

Hard copies were made of the two data books, which had been designed with wide margins. The collated answers were read with the research question in mind and

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<sup>1</sup> For ease of reference only, those teaching EAP/ESP are referred to as ‘tutors’ while those teaching other subjects are referred to as ‘lecturers’, though in practice this distinction was not always maintained in the data. When referring to both groups, the term ‘faculty’ is used

annotations summarizing content and key points relevant to the research question were made in the margins. Quotes for future use were highlighted.

### Step 3: Word processing all annotations.

All annotations with quotes from raw data were word processed to facilitate further analysis, particularly through the 'find' function in MS Word.

### Step 4: Collation of annotations into themes.

Examination of the annotations and quotes suggested that they could be broadly organized into a number of emerging themes. Examples of themes at this stage included presentation skills, learning academic vocabulary, integration / transition into a higher education culture, documenting sources and plagiarism, the 'carrier' content of EAP and ESP classes, assessing written work, critical thinking and research skills. They were therefore organized accordingly with many annotations and quotes listed under each theme in two sections, one for tutors and the other for lecturers.

### Step 5: Collating related annotations.

The annotations and quotes were examined to identify consistencies and differences. This step indicated that the lists contained several annotations which were related either because they expressed similar or identical ideas or because they expressed opposing ideas. Such related annotations were assembled.

### Step 6: Identifying relative importance.

At this stage it was possible to obtain a sense of the relative importance of various themes or issues within themes, as indicated by the frequency with which they occurred in the data. Colour-coding was used to indicate this. A very small number of annotations that were not supported by another or others were excluded at this stage and not investigated further.

### Step 7: Identifying relationships.

It was noted that a number of themes or issues were frequently found together, such as 'plagiarism' and 'integration into a higher education culture'. Such pairs or groups were noted.

### Step 8: Identification of issues for further discussion and triangulation.

Annotations were developed into points for further discussion. For example, the annotation 'PPT- sts. use' was expanded into 'Students' use of PowerPoint in the development of their presentation skills.' 19 issues resulted from this phase of the research.

### Step 9: Triangulation

The 19 issues to emerge from phase one were presented to two tutors and two lecturers and discussed during a session that lasted just over 2.25 hours. Once hard copies of the transcribed data were annotated with a focus on the preliminary themes and issues, a

similar process to that described in Steps 2 – 7 above enabled their substantiation, rejection, modification, or supplementation. Nine categories resulted (the term ‘category’ was used to distinguish them from preliminary themes) with 31 associated issues, labeled “critical”, in recognition of their status as the product of phase two.

### *Outcomes*

The 31 critical issues were organized into several categories for the purposes of further discussion and investigation, as follows:

- A. Oral communication skills development
- B. Reading and writing skills development
- C. Discipline specificity of ESP/EAP course content
- D. Research skills development
- E. Teamwork skills and processes
- F. Transition to tertiary academic culture
- G. Academic language
- H. Institutional considerations
- I. Miscellaneous issues

Several critical issues within these categories are particularly relevant to the methodology and design of ESP/EAP courses, and these are outlined below. (Original numbering has been retained.)

The first set of issues relates to the choice of content and material:

*C/11 A ‘discipline’ is not necessarily a clearly-defined or unified entity; this presents difficulty for tutors when selecting topics and material for study.*

While discipline-related texts are clearly most appropriate for use with discipline-homogeneous students, the results showed that not all students of one discipline are interested in all its aspects or subjects, suggesting that a ‘discipline’ is not necessarily a clearly-defined or unified entity, frequently consisting instead of sub-disciplines or branches. Examples include Mechanical and Petroleum Engineering, both considered sub-disciplines of Engineering; and Human Resource Management, Marketing and Finance, all generally considered aspects of Business Administration.

*C/12 ‘General-interest’ academic texts may lack discipline relevance, be insufficiently challenging and culturally inappropriate or irrelevant, and, hence, lacking in credibility.*

The use of so-called ‘general-interest’ or interdisciplinary academic texts in EAP courses was found to be frequent but problematic. Examples described in the data include extracts from literary texts such as Mandela’s *The Long Walk to Freedom*; from academic texts such as Appleyard’s *Brave New Worlds: Genetics and the Human Experience* (1999) and articles from interdisciplinary journals such as Adams’ ‘Intelligent Advertising’ (2004). Further topics mentioned include the manufacture of glass bottles, ecotourism, animal experimentation, the human brain, the worldwide web and global warming. While some

of these texts may provide good examples of academic writing, difficulties arose particularly in relation to content. Criticisms comprised limited student interest and lack of discipline relevance, with an ensuing lack of credibility in the eyes of students who may fail to see why they are reading about the life of Nelson Mandela or the manufacture of glass bottles when they are studying biochemistry or law. It was also noted that some topics were addressed at a level that university students may perceive to be intellectually undemanding and therefore patronizing, as the content is sometimes no more challenging than late secondary level. Some social issues, on the other hand (gay rights, animal rights, abortion and euthanasia were mentioned) were felt to reflect dilemmas specific to particular cultural contexts which may be of less concern or relevance in other contexts; indeed it may be considered culturally inappropriate to attempt to address such topics in certain cultures.

*C/13 Texts drawn from the media, while offering advantages in terms of currency, fail to exemplify academic writing.*

The media were cited as frequent sources of texts for teaching both EAP and ESP. Sources referred to included the local and international press, and magazines such as *Newsweek* and the *Economist*. While the content was noted to offer advantages in terms of currency, it was reported to be difficult to identify topics of interest to all, and also that writing tended to be 'journalistic'. As such, it neither exemplifies academic writing conventions or genres nor offers ideal material for linguistic analysis.

*D/18 Students should ideally select topics and texts from their own target disciplines rather than have these preselected for them by a tutor who is not an expert in the discipline.*

Tutors on EAP courses expressed the desire to be able to integrate and make greater use of material drawn from students' target disciplines; however it was felt that students should choose this material rather than have the choice made for them by someone who was not an expert in the field and who may not be aware of their particular interests.

The second set of issues relates to the development of academic communication skills:

*A/8 Discipline lecturers value a wide range of oral communication skills while EAP tutors tend to prioritize presentation skills development.*

Lecturers attached greater importance to such oral communication skills as persuading, discussing, debating, arguing, negotiating, sharing, and generating and modifying ideas, than to presentation skills. However, EAP tutors were found to prioritize the development of the latter.

*D/20 All faculty are concerned with the detection of plagiarism but they also appreciate the need to teach students how to avoid it.*

Plagiarism was of major concern to faculty, both in terms of detecting it and in terms of training students to avoid it and understand why it is important to do so.

*F/23 Faculty believe that more attention should be paid to the development of students' critical thinking and research skills.*

Faculty were emphatic in their need for greater attention needed to be paid to the development of reflection and critical thinking skills, particularly in cases where students come from backgrounds in which education is seen in more reproductive than productive terms

*G/25 It is generally held to be more beneficial for students if language skills are integrated rather than addressed discretely or in combination with one other skill. It was also felt that students should use language for genuine purposes and not study it for its own sake.*

A number of courses reported on in the data were designed to develop one primary skill, or, occasionally, two related skills, such as reading and writing. However many tutors perceived a greater need for students to integrate skills and 'operationalize' English for genuine academic purposes rather than solely "use or examine language in its parts, as an isolated entity or entities, for its own sake".

The third set relates to institutional considerations:

*H/27 ESP courses can reduce institutional flexibility in cases where students wish to transfer to another discipline*

From time to time students transfer from one discipline or subject to another after they have taken an ESP course. If a student has followed a course in 'English for Law', for example, but decides to transfer to Business Administration, should he or she be required to take another course in 'English for Business Administration'? There appears to be no standard approach; some lecturers reported that students are required to take another course, while others stated that this would be addressed on a discretionary basis.

*H/28 As discipline-homogeneous courses restrict the population from which the student intake may be recruited, they may be less financially viable*

It was noted that discipline-homogeneous courses restrict the population from which the student intake may be recruited. Given that there is usually a minimum class size required to ensure financial viability, one that is open to all students regardless of discipline is likely to be more practical.

These issues are successfully addressed at one institution through an innovative program design and methodology<sup>2</sup>, detailed below.

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<sup>2</sup> Since joining the Petroleum Institute in 2006, I have made a number of refinements to the design and methodology of these communication courses which were substantially in place before I arrived, having been developed over several years by my colleagues Robert Craig, David Dalton and Mary Hatakka. Their previous and ongoing contribution to and development of the program is acknowledged here.

## **A student-initiated enquiry-based approach**

The Petroleum Institute in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, offers courses leading to B.Sc. degrees in five engineering majors related to the petrochemical industry: Mechanical, Chemical, Electrical, Petroleum and Petroleum Geosciences. All subjects are taught in English and students are required to have achieved a minimum TOEFL score of 500 before entry. Matriculated students, some 80% of whom are Emiratis, initially follow a two-year program (the freshman and sophomore years) consisting of common subjects that are intended to provide them with a broad educational foundation before specializing. Subjects include mathematics, chemistry and physics, as well as communication and a range of humanities and social sciences subjects such as economics, political science and Islamic studies. Students spend their junior and senior years specializing in their chosen major.

All students are required to take two communication courses in their first year, one per semester (Communication 101 and 151). Courses run for 50 minutes a day for 17 weeks. Students are also expected to engage independently in course-related activities for a minimum of an additional five hours per week. Courses are designed to reflect the belief that ESL students can most effectively develop their academic language and communication skills through the acquisition and articulation of knowledge. To this end, a student-initiated enquiry-based approach is employed, in which teams of students complete three research projects, having identified, with guidance, suitable research questions that can be answered by gathering data from within their immediate contexts. Students carry out a quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research projects. In many cases, it is possible for students to investigate genuine issues raised by the institute's academic managers.

Students engage in all stages of the research cycle including locating and reviewing relevant literature, writing surveys, interviewing participants and analyzing and presenting data. These stages form the primary content input of the course; for example, students are given presentations and workshops on the purpose of literature reviews; how to quote, paraphrase and write a reference list; quantitative and qualitative methods; data analysis, and writing recommendations. In each case, input is immediately followed by the requirement for students to apply what they have learned to their own research. This process shifts the emphasis away from discrete language and skills (a 'bottom-up' approach), frequently found in EAP courses, towards academic processes of enquiry. This is a 'top-down' approach in which linguistic development is embedded.

All but two of the texts used in the literature review stage of Communication 101 are sourced through the institute's online academic database, EBSCOhost<sup>3</sup>, by students who have received training in its use. The two texts that students do not locate themselves are provided for them at the beginning of the course. They are selected to provide examples of academic writing and also for the relationship of their content to the communication needs of first-year ESL students, as

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<sup>3</sup> A database system providing access to magazine and journal citations in approximately fifty databases, a large proportion of which include the full text of the original article.

well as for their ability to inspire a range of research topics. Different texts are used each semester, giving rise to fresh research topics and eliminating opportunities for students to 'borrow' each others' work.

In Communication 101, the topics that students have previously selected include an evaluation of the institute's library, plagiarism, study skills, time management, and the effects of teamwork on achievement. It is interesting to observe that the majority of students, particularly those in their first semester, do not select topics with obvious connections to engineering. Instead, these first-semester first-year students frequently choose topics with an educational focus such as those above. These choices are supported and encouraged by faculty for three reasons. Firstly, it is understood that the students are in the early stages of transition into their disciplines and that they are therefore engaged in acquiring the necessary broad, conceptual foundation on which to build. The provision of such a foundation is the purpose of the institute's freshman and sophomore years, and educational topics can provide a useful, supportive, bridge from high school to university life. Secondly, it is recognized that freshman students are not yet engineers. They have not yet acquired the discipline-specific conceptual base that is a prerequisite for beginning enquiry in the area, necessary in particular for engaging with the literature in the early stages of any research project. Thirdly, communication tutors regard themselves fundamentally as experts in language and communication, not engineering. The approach allows them to develop their students' communication skills within the field of academic communication, that is, tutors' own subject area. Opportunities for tutors to enhance their own expertise are provided as they work with students on communication-related topics, and ideas for original research emerge as a matter of course through such collaboration with students, creating a situation that parallels the opportunities that naturally arise for those working within a discipline. It would appear to be reasonable to suggest that this feature in particular can help to define and establish academic communication as a subject in its own right in the eyes of those involved in other disciplines, by shifting perceptions of the relationship between communication and disciplines away from one of parasitism and towards mutualism, enhancing its standing and legitimacy throughout the wider academic community.

### **Reflexivity integrated: communication as research topic for communication students**

Many of the topics that students select in this approach can justifiably be described as falling within the purview of academic communication skills, given that the aim of the program is to develop 'communicative competence', the definition of which has been extended in this context to include a process of acculturation. Developing this line of thought, such topics suggest that communication students themselves (who are no longer referred to as EAP students) can self-reflexively become their own object of study, allowing them to actively inquire into their own contexts and their roles and responses within them. As well as the topics above, several other potential areas for investigation come to mind, not least because the teaching and learning of these students is at the heart of a great deal of debate. For example, there are issues concerned with identifying the language and skills they need, how adults learn and study, as well as topics such as assessment, critical thinking and learner autonomy. Communication, and its teaching and

learning in relation to ESL students in higher education, is a productive field of study for applied linguists, and there is no reason it should not also be so for ESL students and their tutors.

The use of communication-related topics in preparing ESL students for higher education offers a number of benefits. Firstly, and essentially, it offers an extensive associated literature representing the full range of academic genres, such as conference proceedings, research reports, journal articles, monographs, book reviews and books, all of which exemplify academic conventions and consequently provide appropriate material for stylistic and linguistic analysis. Such material can also provide an effective starting point for further investigation, acting as a source of inspiration for research topics and questions. Students can be encouraged to select recent texts, helping to ensure the uniqueness of their work and also to avoid the problems presented by published material which can become dated. Secondly, their content is relevant to students in discipline-heterogeneous groups as well as those studying in discipline-homogeneous classes; in the latter case, difficulties caused by students wishing to transfer disciplines are minimized. Thirdly, their content can provide the rationale for and a reinforcement of the skills that students are expected to develop for successful study of their discipline. As an example of how this might work, students could read Sutherland-Smith's journal article: 'Pandora's Box: academic perceptions of student plagiarism in writing'. In this article, the author:

[...] examines the dilemmas English for Academic Purposes (EAP) staff face when dealing with student plagiarism in the tertiary classroom. The perceptions of all 11 teachers involved in teaching a first year EAP writing subject at South-Coast University are detailed in light of the university's policy on plagiarism. My research indicates that not only is an agreed definition of plagiarism difficult to reach by members of staff teaching the same subject, but plagiarism is a multi-layered phenomenon encompassing a spectrum of human intention.  
Sutherland-Smith, 2005: 83

Students reading the full article can examine both its language and its content. The latter can help them to develop more sophisticated understandings of the complex issues surrounding plagiarism, including what it is and why it should be avoided, while the former provides examples of how to quote, paraphrase and prepare a list of references. Such understandings can underpin acquisition of the documenting skills required to avoid plagiarism and reinforce the need for rigour in applying these skills.

There is no shortage of authentic and relevant communication-related texts. At the start of a communication course, for example, ESL students could usefully read about making the transition from high school to university. Beder's (1997) article 'Addressing the issues of social and academic integration for first year students: a discussion paper' would meet this need. They could also usefully read about the reading skills needed by students in higher education, in which case Averil Coxhead's review of Upton's book *Reading skills for success: a guide to academic texts* (2005) could be of value. In relation to critical thinking, an extract from Browne and Keeley's *Asking the right questions: a guide to critical thinking* (2004) could be considered. All of these topics are suitable for both discipline-heterogeneous and discipline-homogeneous

classes; all the articles exemplify academic genre and language; and careful reading can suggest further topics for investigation related to and researchable within students' immediate contexts. As with all instructional materials, however, judicious selection is required. Criteria to be considered include linguistic and conceptual level, length, content and quality.

### **Extending the approach: discipline-related topics**

While the use of communication as subject matter on communication courses offers several benefits, it fails to provide students with exposure to their target discourse community. Given that successful entry into this community is the ultimate aim of any course preparing ESL students for academic study, this limitation cannot be ignored. As these writers note:

..... the academic language needs of our students are closely related to the purposes of the disciplines they are being inducted into. That is, different disciplines foreground different types of language – in terms of genre, grammar and lexis.

Cullip and Carol, 2002

For this reason, it is necessary to consider how the approach outlined above can be extended to give students the opportunity to engage with discipline-related texts. This is one of the aims of the second course that students take, Communication 151. The value of using discipline-related material has been raised by several writers, such as Dudley-Evans and St John (1998). Pulverness (2002) discusses the problem of locating such texts and suggests that students themselves may in the best position to do this, particularly if they are asked to supply examples of articles they are required to read in their discipline-related studies. While this is a constructive approach, not all are able to do this (particularly those enrolled in pre-sessional courses) and experience suggests also that students can generally benefit from some guidance in finding suitable texts. One solution is to ask students to locate discipline-related texts that are comparable to the communication-related texts to which they have been introduced in the approach outlined above, possibly with the assistance of library staff. In doing this, students may be guided by genre (for example, having studied an communication -related book review, they may be asked to locate a discipline-related book review), by content (for example, they may be asked to locate an article that introduces or describes their subject for non-specialist) or by article section, such as an abstract, an introduction, or a literature review (see Brandt, 2009, for an example of this approach). Such student-located discipline-related material can provide the stimulus for research projects that are more closely related to students' target disciplines and interests.

### **Draft-refocus: the writing process**

A significant proportion of assessment in both communication courses is awarded for course work, and much of this is written. 65% of all marks in course 101 are awarded for writing; in

course 151, which places greater emphasis on oral work, the proportion is 39%. On both courses, students produce individual writing as well as writing developed as a team. They quickly realize that assessed work is never carried out for its own sake or solely to provide tutors with assessable material. Instead, the notion of communicating for a purpose is emphasized and students are helped to become aware that research is futile unless its outcomes are communicated effectively to interested parties.

In all cases, two key perceptions relating to writing among students are encouraged. The first is of writing as a process. The second is of writer-reader as a parallel relationship to speaker-listener. These perceptions are developed through a draft-refocus approach, in which students prepare a piece of written work, such as a literature review, which tutors then mark and respond to, before returning it to the student for improvement, editing and refocus. The fact that drafts are marked but not corrected is an important one; students are instead expected to make corrections themselves and to learn from having done so. Equally essential to the process are tutors' responses to the content of students' work, through which tutors complete the writer-reader relationship.

The ideas of editing and refocus are also key aspects of this process. Students are not required to improve written work for its own sake, but in order to prepare it for inclusion in another document with a different purpose. For example, the literature review is improved, edited and refocused for inclusion in a research proposal. This proposal subsumes includes various sections as well as the improved literature review, such as a description of method and a schedule for project completion. The proposal is marked and returned, and, once again, improved, edited and refocused for inclusion in students' final report. In this way, students begin to see that writing can help to clarify thinking, that it can be greatly improved through a process of rework and refocus and that it can serve further purposes. A similar approach is taken to the development of presentation skills in that students rehearse and give presentations, and receive detailed feedback on both. This work is then improved, refocused and developed for inclusion in a future presentation.

The process results in work of a standard considered acceptable for oral and written dissemination within the institute. This exposes students' work to interrogation, and positions them within the academic community as active participants who are able to construct as well as consume knowledge. This expectation establishes personal and institute standards, enhances student satisfaction and motivation, and improves awareness of the role of knowledge within the institute.

### **Key features of the student-initiated, enquiry-based approach**

To summarize, key features of the approach are as follows:

- Classes are open to all students regardless of discipline.
- Courses are driven by a focus on research processes and products.

- All research carried out is student-initiated and team-based.
- Students experience both quantitative and qualitative research processes.
- Each contact hour is complemented by an hour of independent study.
- Students are guided to research educational topics in the first semester and to move progressively towards loosely discipline-related topics in the second.
- In all cases, students are guided towards identifying topics that involve self-reflexively investigating their immediate contexts.
- No published course material, specifically written for the ESL freshman market, is used.
- Opportunities are found with the institute for students to conduct research which fulfills a genuine institutional need where possible.
- Research processes and outcomes are disseminated orally and in writing to interested members of the wider academic community.
- Oral and written communication is subject to a draft-refocus process in which students are expected to self-correct work marked up to indicate problem areas, resulting in final work of a high standard.
- Assessed work is not carried out for its own sake or solely to provide tutors with assessable material; instead, the concept of communicating for a purpose is emphasized.
- Both the research process (e.g. gathering data) and the research products (e.g. presenting a research proposal) represent significant learning and developmental opportunities for students.
- Language and skills are not addressed discretely but rather as they arise when required for effective communication or understanding of the research process; it is a 'top-down' approach.
- Students are actively involved in decisions related to their learning, having control over a significant proportion of the content of their courses

### **Addressing the issues**

The approach described above responds to the issues raised by the research in several ways, summarized below:

*C/11 A 'discipline' is not necessarily a clearly-defined or unified entity, presenting difficulty for tutors when selecting topics and material for study.*

Tutors are not required to identify suitable discipline-related topics or texts as, with guidance, students take responsibility for this, increasing relevance, interest and usefulness of topics selected.

*C/12 'General-interest' academic texts may lack discipline relevance, be insufficiently challenging and culturally inappropriate or irrelevant, and, hence, lacking in credibility.*

General-interest topics and texts are avoided and replaced by student-initiated topics, which, with guidance, are relevant, challenging, appropriate and authentic. Credibility is

improved as students can see the value of their research both in terms of their personal development and as fulfilling genuine faculty and institutional needs and interests.

*C/13 Texts drawn from the media, while offering advantages in terms of currency, fail to exemplify academic writing.*

Topics and texts drawn from the media are avoided. Instead, tutors guide students to locate recent academic texts for their literature reviews using library databases.

*D/18 Students should ideally select topics and texts from their own target disciplines rather than have these preselected for them by a tutor who is not an expert in the discipline.*

Students are required to select their own discipline-related topics and texts with guidance. Tutors are recognized as experts in their own field, and are not expected to become quasi-experts of another.

*A/8 Discipline lecturers value a wide range of oral communication skills while EAP tutors tend to prioritize presentation skills development.*

No discrete language sub-skill is prioritized over any other. Students develop a wide range of oral and aural skills, including for example the abilities to argue a position and to participate in and lead group discussions

*D/20 All faculty are concerned with the detection of plagiarism but they also appreciate the need to teach students how to avoid it.*

Citation skills are embedded in the research process that students learn. Students begin to grasp the status of knowledge and the role of its written representation. Opportunities for plagiarism are minimized as students are carrying out original, individual research projects.

*F/23 Faculty believe that more attention should be paid to the development of students' critical thinking and research skills.*

The development of students' critical thinking, metacognitive and research skills are embedded as, in order to improve, students are required to reflect upon and evaluate their learning, progress and products.

*G/25 Language skills need to be integrated rather than addressed discretely or in combination with one other skill. It was also felt that students should use language for genuine purposes and not study it for its own sake.*

No discrete language skill is prioritized over any other. Students develop all language skills as they engage all their linguistic and cognitive resources in order to accomplish a wide range of complex academic tasks. The research process drives students' linguistic skills development. Language is studied as it is needed in relation to a particular communication purpose.

*H/27 ESP courses can reduce institutional flexibility in cases where students wish to transfer to another discipline*

Fewer transfer issues arise. The first level course develops skills needed by all students, and so would not need to be repeated in cases of transfer; the second level course encourages students to apply those skills in a context that may be described as loosely discipline-specific. This allows greater freedom of movement within broader discipline areas.

*H/28 As discipline-homogeneous courses restrict the population from which the student intake may be recruited, they may be less financially viable*

Courses, with broader, more generic labels such as “Academic Communication Skills” rather than “English for .....”, are open to all students regardless of discipline. Students benefit from working alongside peers from other disciplines. Courses may be more attractive as a result, particularly to first-year students.

## **Conclusion**

In the approach described above, students develop the academic communication skills and language they need in the context of research into, and academic writing about, those skills and language. Content reinforces the skills being developed, while the skills are applied and developed through engagement with the content. This, I would argue, is the only rational approach to the problem of content in preparing ESL students for academic study, not least because it precludes the exclusive use of discipline-related texts, which presents its own difficulties, as well as any need for general interest topics, which may fail to interest the majority and be conceptually below students’ intellectual capabilities. Instead, it is suggested that replacing these topics with a student-initiated, enquiry-based approach focused on communication-related topics which may be researched locally provides content that is at once of direct relevance to, and reinforcing of, the skills students need to develop for successful study, and that complementing these topics with others that may be described as loosely discipline-related can provide an effective bridge to the discourse community of students’ target disciplines, facilitating the ongoing development of communication skills.

While this paper is concerned specifically with ESL students in academic contexts, it may be worthwhile considering the approach in relation to the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language, particularly with regard to the more advanced adult student. Several opportunities for further research are suggested, under the broad question: “To what extent would it be useful, at appropriate proficiency levels, to displace the current use of general interest topics and make learning a second language in its various contexts a more central subject matter in the EFL classroom, inviting adult ESL students to develop their communicative competence by researching and articulating their own language learning experiences?”

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