

A Description of the Skill-based EAP Training for Pre-departure Students at the British Council in Jakarta

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Traditional skill-based EAP courses, as opposed to subject content-based courses have provided programs of pre-departure training for students destined for study in English medium countries at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Recently however, these programs have been criticized on the grounds that they fail to bridge the perceived gap between such courses and academic courses on degree programs. This paper presents a description of the pre-departure programs in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) offered to students at the British Council in Jakarta, Indonesia. It examines the content of these courses, detailing the balance of language input, skills development and cultural orientation provided. The view that skill-based courses themselves provide adequate pre-departure preparation is then advanced and defended.

Introduction

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a recognised branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Like ESP, it incorporates both learners' needs and target situation analyses (Hutchinson & Waters 1987: 53-64), but it is arguably more clearly focused than the more broadly-based ESP, in that the eventual use that students will make of the language (i.e. academic study) is very clearly defined. The quality and effectiveness of the training offered to students aspiring to study in English medium universities is a matter of great concern to those involved in training learners in EAP. This is because critical decisions concerning students' careers and therefore their future prospects are increasingly becoming contingent upon academic success at tertiary level. EAP trainers therefore carry considerable responsibility for ensuring that learners are placed in the best possible position to cope with the challenges of academic study.

There appears to be a widely held perception that a gap exists between performance standards in the ESL/EFL language classroom and in the academic, content-based courses that EAP learners will proceed to follow at Universities in English medium learning environments. Krashen (1982:172, 1985:70) calls it the transition problem (his italics), and suggests that immersion-style, comprehensible subject matter teaching can help to bridge this gap between the language class and the academic mainstream. He refers to sheltered, content-based courses, in which native speakers are excluded, so as to ensure that input is comprehensible, and argues that such approaches have contributed greatly to the success of the Canadian immersion programs. Citing work carried out at the University of Ottawa (Edwards et al 1984, Wesche 1984), he provides evidence of the effectiveness of comprehensible subject matter teaching in the learning of both the target subject (psychology in this case) and in second language proficiency.

Gaffield-Vile (1996:108) appears to point to possible weaknesses in standard, skill-based EAP courses, suggesting that non-native speakers are placed at a disadvantage, and that inadequate preparation for University study may, in some cases lead to student failure at the end of the first year of the student's undergraduate program. How serious then, is this gap and how does it arise? One logical way to address this question would be to look at comments made by pre-session course tutors at Universities on students preparing to enter faculties, and then to compare these views with those of academic tutors in the faculties. Tonkyn et al (in Blue: ed, 1993), reporting a study carried out at the University of Reading, found that while pre-session course tutors and faculty academic tutors agreed in the majority of cases on whether or not a student's English was 'adequate for academic study', the criteria for adequacy itself continue to lack precise definition. They further stress (1993:47) the 'need to give flesh-and-blood embodiment to the concept of inadequate English for academic study'. Cases in which departments had decided that it would have been better for a student with a low language rating not to have been admitted to a course were reported to be very few in number.

If the gap in English language proficiency between pre-departure students and students performing satisfactorily on degree courses is not as great as has been widely argued, perhaps the weaknesses are more closely related to problems with study skills, inadequate learner training, inappropriate strategies for study (especially in the critical listening, reading and writing skills) and the culture of

teacher dependence prevalent among overseas students from many parts of the world (Furneaux et al., 1991). This article will now turn to a description of the many ways in which a traditional, skill-based, pre-departure EAP course (in this case at the British Council Language Centre in Jakarta, Indonesia, is ideally suited to dealing with such learner training, awareness-raising, and orientation to the target academic culture.

Description of the Program

The pre-departure EAP courses at the British Council English Language Centre in Jakarta are organised into a seven-part structure. The current components are: language upgrading, listening, speaking, reading, writing, learner training and study skills and cultural orientation. We shall deal with each of these elements in turn. Reference will be made to the particular demands of the IELTS test in describing work on each of these components.

Language Upgrading

Typically, EAP courses in the language centre range in length from 12 to 24 weeks, though some shorter, highly intensive, IELTS exam-focused programs are also offered. The early weeks of these programs include an explicit focus on the quality of learners' language production (i.e. formal correctness in speech and writing). This begins with a series of diagnostic speaking and writing activities, followed by sensitization to mistakes made in oral and written work. In composition work, teachers will typically introduce a system of correction symbols, such as that provided in coursebooks like *Headway: Upper Intermediate* (Soars & Soars, OUP, 1987). Learners are inducted into the process of editing their written work thoroughly for language mistakes, so as to raise their awareness of the language system as a whole and set priorities for improvement in further assignments produced as the course progresses. Spoken language accuracy is addressed through language laboratory classes, in which learners are able to record themselves and receive individual feedback on their mistakes. Although many published pronunciation courses tend to focus on exercises in which 'problem' sounds are isolated for individual attention and practice in articulation of vowels and consonants, our materials have been developed to extend this work and include longer sequences at the suprasegmental level, together with the integration of material practised into extended stretches of natural, spoken discourse. Individual learners are regularly tutored on their language production, through de-controlled sessions in the self-access centre, where the teacher is able to devote time and attention to student-specific learning problems.

The language competence of learners entering the EAP programmes is assessed using standardized tests of written and spoken language. Depending on the entry level of the group, the language input in the programs will include an explicit structural focus. This may be a review of the tense system, a focus on complex or problematic structures (such as modals or the conditional perfect), and/or a remedial strategy aimed at aspects such as noun-verb agreement, prepositions or articles. In oral work, early emphasis is directed at accurate formation of questions, word and sentence stress, intonation patterns in relation to politeness, and the selection of appropriate levels of formality in speech (there are explicit indications of appropriate registers in IELTS interview tasks).

Listening

Training in the listening skill focuses on a wide range of situations relevant to learners' likely real-life exposure when they arrive in an English speaking country. They are introduced to global and intensive listening, trained in strategies such as recognizing key words, tolerating uncertainty, recognizing markers of emphasis, sequence and attitude, and made familiar with referential devices used to structure spoken discourse. A range of material is presented involving individual and group interaction, types of discourse and patterns of information exchange. Critical listening 'genres' in which training is given include monologues (e.g. stories), dialogues (e.g. phone calls), group discussions, lectures, presentations, recorded announcements (e.g. railway stations), messages (e.g. answerphone recordings) and news items from live television (e.g. BBC WORLD). Much of the strategy work emphasizes anticipation and prediction skills, so as to address learners' innate fears about non-comprehension and becoming overwhelmed by problems of rapid pace, unfamiliar accents and attitudinal features associated with aspects of pronunciation (particularly stress and intonation).

Speaking

Classroom oral work is closely integrated with all other language skills, both to realize the aims of the language upgrading component and to provide opportunities for re-cycling, revision, extension and expansion of learners' lexical resources, a critical objective of the program as a whole. Activities center around group discussions based on themes and issues presented through other media, such as

written text, audio tape, video or computer (via Internet). Most of this work is fluency-based and focuses on the quality of the argumentation, degree of support, exemplification, opinions expressed and articulation of ideas relevant to the topics under discussion. In the Indonesian context described here, it is vital that learners are given opportunities to develop and express ideas freely and openly and to construct arguments in their thinking, which can later be expressed in writing. Critical thinking; particularly the freedom to question the validity of propositions and their assumptions is the central platform of a successful approach to academic study in Western contexts. However, as Ballard (in Crooks & Crewes, eds, 1995:151) reminds us, there are 'social and cultural constraints on the expression of such thinking'.

Reading

The reading component of our pre-departure program has recently undergone something of a revolution, due to the now very pervasive influence of the Internet. The approach to reading has traditionally been to draw on the very wide range of skills and strategies materials published in the 1980s (c.f. Sim & Laufer-Dvorkin 1982, Kennedy & Hunston 1982, Walter 1982, Elliot & Strutt 1984, Romstedt & Tevis McGory 1988), so as to expose EAP students to a variety of text types and topics. Classroom work then focused on skimming and scanning, developing reading speed, intensive reading and building up students' ability to tolerate uncertainty, access background knowledge predict linguistic and rhetorical features of texts and develop interpretation skills. However, not only has the theoretical basis of reading 'skills' and 'strategies' been called into question (Rosenshine, in Spiro, Bruce & Brewer (eds) 1980, Susser & Robb 1990), but most such materials tend to concentrate on short texts and a limited range of topics. EAP students, on arrival for courses in English medium countries will be exposed to very challenging reading material intended primarily for educated native speakers.

Our response to the above challenge has been to shift the focus in reading materials towards fully authentic texts obtained via the Internet, and through exploiting the resources of the British Council Library more exhaustively. Research work based on academic journal articles, books, magazines and other reference publications now forms an integral part of the EAP program. The great advantage of this approach is that it allows pre-departure students to study subject content. In effect, we have therefore subsumed the study of subject content under the aegis of the traditional skill-based paradigm without making it the central pillar of the training program. This is because we believe that what EAP learners need first and foremost are the study skills required to cope with the huge volume of reading they are going to face on arrival in an English medium environment. The study of short texts followed by comprehension questions will in no way equip them with the ability to interpret, digest, synthesize and evaluate the quantity of material that will face them in Britain, Australia, Canada or the US.

Writing

The early stages of writing skills work on our EAP courses is closely linked with the language upgrading component. Starting at the sentence level, learners are first trained to link concepts using simple conjunctions. They then proceed to work on complex sentences and a wider range of cohesive devices, building up to a focus on paragraph structure and content. This formal, structural focus is complemented by work on planning, organising ideas, developing, extending and supporting lines of argumentation. In this way, the writing component overlaps and extends the thinking skills developed in the speaking skills work described above. Glendinning & Mantell (1983) is an extremely popular and extensively exploited source of material for the above aims. As the program proceeds, more complex academic tasks are introduced and developed through the use of sources such as Jordan (1990), which is very useful for introducing learners to the range of discourse types appropriate for the writing test in the IELTS examination (e.g. comparison and contrast, description of process and procedure, cause and effect).

Learner Training and Study Skills

As well as classroom work, this component of the training involves the computer laboratory, language laboratory, and crucially, the study center. In the classroom, work focuses on making learners aware of their preferred learning styles and strategies, training them in note-taking from audio and written sources, assisting them in planning their learning and prioritizing tasks, helping them to categorize material learned by establishing and maintaining an efficient file with separate sections for grammar and vocabulary points, introducing them to brainstorming, mind maps, spider graphs and other task planning strategies. Another crucial role of the classroom in our EAP programs is that of inducting learners into the ethos of Western university academic culture; co-operative learning, problem solving, group discussions, information exchange, presentations, turn-taking conventions and the like. This is absolutely vital here in Indonesia, where typically learners have been socialized into a culture based on teacher-centredness, teacher-directiveness and of course, teacher-dependence.

Study Unit time is integrated into the learning program. Our EAP students use it for a variety of self-directed tasks, particularly those which follow up classroom work in the four skills. These activities include video viewing, listening to audio tapes (especially for lectures and IELTS examination training) and reading a whole range of material from coursebooks to test papers to newspapers to grammar books. Material for written work and oral practice, though less comprehensive than for reading and listening, is directed towards practice for the IELTS writing and speaking tests. The role of the trainer as a resource, guide, monitor, facilitator, friend and manager has not been overlooked, as we conduct frequent staff development sessions centred around the philosophy of independent learning and student autonomy. The challenge of weaning learners away from inappropriate, passive attitudes to study has been taken up and greatly supported by input from leading visiting British academics, who have given seminars and workshops on self-access and independent learning. Crucial published materials packages for training learners to study include Gawith (1991) and Waters & Waters (1995).

Both the computer and language laboratories play roles in our approach to learner training and study skills work. The computer room is used not only for editing written work, correcting scripts, drawing graphs, tables, histograms, pie-charts and other visual material, in order to prepare learners for the IELTS writing test, but also for inducting learners into the practice of using computer laboratory resources; spreadsheets, printing, software, hardware, network function and dysfunction! Learners need to be made aware of both the creative potential and the frustrations (e.g. viruses and printer breakdowns) often faced when using such resources. The language laboratory, though less often used in learner training, is exploited in preparing learners for the speaking test in IELTS, particularly for role-play work, and for students' personal recordings and self-evaluation.

Cultural Orientation

A very important aspect of the pre-departure training we offer to learners proceeding to study in the UK is to orient them to aspects of the culture of the target learning environment. This can be divided into three general categories. One strand of this orientation looks at general aspects of living and studying in Britain (e.g. arrival formalities, shopping, travel, socializing, money management, sightseeing, food, weather, politeness conventions, religious faiths and the like). This focus aims to offer up to date information on students' survival needs in the early days and weeks after they arrive, and is very closely related to the oral work described above. A number of in-house British Council videos have been developed for this purpose over the years, and we supplement with the most recent information available from staff returning from leave visits. A second strand of the cultural orientation looks at the historical perspective, examining institutions such as parliament, religions, the Monarchy, structure of local government, the voting system, key historical figures, traditions generally, and the whole question of heritage. This component can be optional, and is often provided on longer courses, or where particular groups of students are planning to study for an extended period in Britain. The third aspect is that of familiarization towards the target academic culture. This includes an overview of the structure of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, their aims and objectives, as well as more specific advice on conventions such as turn-taking in seminar groups, the nature of relationships between students and their academic and personal tutors, punctuality conventions, access to study facilities, aspects of hierarchy and a great deal more.

Conclusion

The above described programme of pre-departure training for postgraduates proceeding to study in Britain is both wide-ranging and thorough in the preparation it offers to learners. In Indonesia, at the British Council Language Centre in Jakarta, we prepare postgraduate students for departure to Britain on the Chevening Awards³ scheme. Open to all members of the Indonesian public, approximately 60 candidates are selected annually for scholarships to undertake postgraduate study in Britain from between 3,000 and 4,000 applicants. Both the English language and study skills abilities of the candidates we send to the UK are highly developed, and we believe that this is at least partly the result of the nature of the skill-based EAP training program described above. Such programs are therefore, we believe, ideally suited to pre-departure training for EAP learners intending to study in English medium learning environments. They provide guidance, support, encouragement and above all, motivation for our learners to achieve academic success and then to return to Indonesia and contribute to the development of their country.

Using evidence from the learning successes of participants on the Canadian immersion programmes, Krashen has argued (1982, 1985) that sheltered, subject-content based teaching, in which native speakers are excluded and input is provided by non-native English speakers, could lead to better performance in the target language, as well as in the target academic subject. While his argument is supported by some experimental evidence (cf. Edwards et al 1984, Wesche 1984), and by some of the conditions for optimal input for acquisition (e.g. relevance and interest level of subject content), some potential contradictions should also be noted.

His affective filter hypothesis argues that low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language learning. We would suggest that neither immersion programs nor subject content based courses are likely to provide conditions of low stress. On the contrary, learner anxiety is raised by a combination of the new and unfamiliar environment in which they find themselves, and by the rigours of the Western academic conventions, to which they must conform. Furthermore, we believe that the exclusion of native speakers, a common practice in sheltered, content-based teaching, is no guarantee that the input the learners receive will be comprehensible.

The skill-based paradigm for pre-departure EAP training has served our learners in Indonesia very well in their preparation for study in Britain. This is supported by the excellent academic results these learners traditionally achieve in their studies. By providing cultural and academic orientation, comprehensive training in study skills and thorough preparation for the IELTS examination in the familiar and therefore stress-free environment of the learner's country of origin, our scholars not only benefit in academic terms, but they return to Indonesia very well equipped for the professional challenges they face in developing their country. The notion that skill-based EAP courses can be 'rather artificial and de-motivating' (Gaffield-Vile 1996:114) is certainly not the experience of our students on either our undergraduate or postgraduate schemes of pre-departure training.

Notes

1. In this article the term 'mistake' is used to denote "wrong language that a native speaker would not usually produce" (after Barton & Walton 1991:21).
2. The term 'genre' is here defined as "a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written" (after Swales 1990:33). The use of the term in connection with listening refers specifically to spoken text.
3. The British Chevening Awards is a scholarship program funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which sponsors overseas scholars to attend Masters degree programs in Britain.

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