

An Evaluation of Teaching Methods on a Distance Learning Course Focusing on Academic Writing Skills for Graduate Students

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Abstract:

With the development of the economy and science, more and more frequent communication and trade happen between countries worldwide. As one of the world's lingua franca, English has played an irreplaceable role in various fields. For instance, more international students will study in English-speaking countries. They need to cope with the demands of academic study at university in those countries. That is to say, students must master both communicative competence and academic knowledge to succeed in their studies, which requires knowledge about English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Many international students still need guidance and instructions to help them with EAP. However, there is a lack of education in terms of EAP teachers. Thus, it is necessary to explore the pedagogy in EAP courses to help teachers and students relevant to EAP.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

With the development of the economy and science, more and more frequent communication and trade happen between countries in the world. As one of the world's lingua franca, English has played an irreplaceable role in various fields. For instance, the increasing number of international students will go to English-speaking countries to study further. They need to cope with the demands of academic study at university in those

countries. That is to say, students must master both communicative competence and academic knowledge to succeed in their studies, which requires knowledge about English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Many international students still need to acquire guidance and instructions to help them with EAP^[1]. However, there is a lack of education in terms of EAP teachers^[2]. Thus, it is necessary to explore the pedagogy in EAP courses to help both teachers and students relevant to EAP.

2. Literature review

2.1. EAP

Theories related to EAP and Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) must be discussed to determine how to help EAP courses. Hyland K (2006) offers detailed work on the EAP course and discusses a series of views on crucial issues about EAP, and provides a clear overview of EAP^[3]. Additionally, previous study also explores all-around methods and techniques for EAP education. Alexander O *et al.* (2008) prepared a guidance book for EAP teachers that analyzes EAP teaching and learning from many aspects, such as reading, writing, listening and speaking^[4]. Hyland K *et al.* (2016), in their edited work, collect many experts' ideas about EAP. The different classifications of EAP and various genres in EAP are included in their work^[5].

Many theories in the EAP help teachers to teach students better and help students to understand academic English better and integrate quickly into the environment. Of these theories, Scaffolding Instruction plays an unparalleled role and has played an enormous part in EAP teaching. The theoretical source of scaffolding is Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Bruner JS (1975) proposed the concept of scaffolding. He later used "scaffolding" to refer to the mother's efforts to support her child's oral learning^[6]. Michelle M *et al.* (2015) propose a contextual, multimodal model of teacher-led, task-oriented pedagogical scaffolding to understand the nature and value of inclusive pedagogy, particularly in addressing an ESL student's language, literature and cultural learning needs in schools^[7]. She noted that scaffolding activities are an identifiable subsystem of instructional activities well suited to increasing the social, verbal, and scholastic involvement and participation of second-language and English-only learners. Similarly, Dennen V (2003) argues that scaffolding, modeling, coaching and tutorials are all pedagogical techniques learned from social constructionist learning theory^[8].

In contrast, Meyer DK *et al.* (2002) place more focus in their research on how scaffolding provides a background of knowledge, techniques and availability of resources to nurture the process of student self-regulation^[9]. Their study of pedagogical scaffolding through the interpretation of pedagogical discourse has contributed to further insights into how self-regulated learning is

developed and achieved in mathematics classrooms.

In addition to the principles of the EAP, the teaching methods in the EAP have been the subject of research by scholars, particularly in academic English writing. Because EAP is academically oriented and teaching vocabulary, sentences and grammar is essential, several scholars have studied academic writing. In his book, Hinkel E (2004) expresses the importance of texts in written academic discourse^[10].

Furthermore, Harwood N *et al.* (2004) define three kinds of methodology for teaching academic English: the critique approach, the praxis approach and the critical-pragmatic approach^[11]. While they believe critical EAP is pedagogically appealing because of its dynamic questioning of discursive norms, pragmatic EAP has an unambiguous aim. Nonetheless, it tends to fail to recognize differences in community-based practice. The critical pragmatic approach is represented in postgraduates and researchers who have at their heart the use of pronouns and possessory adverbs.

Originating from a genre-based approach, the text-based approach is regarded as a kind of practice of genre-based pedagogy in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Feez S (1998) also proposes five procedures for the typical text-based lesson^[12]. The text-based approach, also known as Text-based Instruction (TBI), guides students to help them master the abilities and tactics needed to understand or process the text materials they will encounter^[13]. Richards JC *et al.* (2014) mention some limitations of TBI. Nevertheless, they have not offered a solution to the demerits of TBI^[14]. They also cite many researchers works to present an example of typical activities used in TBI courses.

2.2. Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL)

Technology-Assisted Language Learning (TALL), Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and Web-Based Language Learning (WBLL) are all expressions that have similar meanings to TELL^[15]. The application of the Internet is considered an integral part of TELL. Chang C *et al.* (2012) define WEB 2.0 and propose some examples of Web 2.0 and 3.0 platforms^[16]. Sundeep D *et al.* (2021) explore the application of TELL in EAP^[17]. Chau J *et al.* (2014) offer the related

data to educational practitioners who tend to implement technology elements to EAP syllabus, instruction, and assessment. Yundayani A *et al.* (2019) combine EAP materials and Task-based learning (TBL) with information and communication technology (ICT) ^[18]. They believe that ICT will make EAP learning more innovative as well as interactive. Ismail and Ismail conduct a case study to find the merits and demerits of online teaching and learning through software to explore the online education situation in the Covid-19 period. Horzum MB (2015) claims that there are four aspects that online education should work on ^[19,20]. Rahman MHA *et al.* (2021) investigate the motivation and interaction in online teaching and learning ^[21].

3. Case study

3.1. Description of teaching context

The context in this paper is from a university in the United Kingdom. Students in this class are graduates or postgraduates from assorted majors. All students meet the admission requirements of this university. In other words, the English level is approximately above IELTS 5.5. The teacher in this course has three classes in this subject, which are nine times online courses.

There is a learning project in this school. The purpose is to improve students' academic English ability. Moreover, this paper focuses on one of the courses, which is a part of this project's in-sessional academic English support section. The target groups of the course in this article are students who major in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL). This program aims to enhance their language skills and strengthen their academic understanding so that they can succeed in their study. Furthermore, one of the critical elements that will help them get through their study is to help them understand how to write a course paper. This course primarily focuses on the writing skills of significant assignments without adopting any coursebook. There is no homework and no exam in this course either.

3.2. Merits and challenges

It can be observed from the context that this course is an EGAP course. Although students come from different majors, their tasks are the same, namely writing course

essays. Learners must write a literature review, context and other structures in the paper. Therefore, the skills of paraphrasing or summarising are universal academic skills for them. The commonality of academic skills in different disciplines is one reason for adopting the EGAP teaching method.

Of course, each coin has two sides. This course also comes with some limitations. In the video conference, students can choose to open or not open the video and audio. Therefore, some students sometimes do not attend classes, or some will turn off the video after attending a video conference and do other things. This situation related to attendance is related to student satisfaction ^[21]. Apart from that, the interaction between students and other people, including teachers, is insufficient. In addition, the platform's network is sometimes delayed, which often results in students failing to watch the PPT. This circumstance leads to a negative effect on students' experience as well as their satisfaction with the course.

What is worse, Feez S (1998) describes five phrases of text-based classes, but not all of these steps are included in every class of this course ^[12]. Through the introduction part, as well as information and examples on PPT, this teacher completes phases of building the context by modeling and deconstructing the text. After that, the teacher will ask or discuss them with students about the text. Practice, such as Skeleton texts or cloze, will be offered, which will help students experience the third phase of joint construction of the text. However, the fourth part of the five steps, called independent construction of the text, is missing now and then. The teacher in this course has not provided students with adequate opportunities to write independently. In this part, students should write independently. The teacher ought to only play a supervisory role. Compared with the participation of teachers in the first three phases, the support for students from teachers who use text-based instruction is gradually withdrawn. Regarding the last stage, students are supposed to figure out the relationship between the EAP-related knowledge or skills they have learned and other texts. However, no apparent steps in this course correspond to this part.

This course does not include related exams. The only way to monitor students' behaviors on the platform is to see who has not entered the conference room.

Nonetheless, even if they enter the conference room, students may be unable to listen to what the teacher says. Assessment and monitoring of students' progress are critical parts of text-based methods^[22]. There are five fundamental reasons why a student's performance should be evaluated, which are "diagnostic," "achievement," "performance," "proficiency," and "accountability." Assessment or feedback can help students know what aspects they should improve and what achievements they have already reached. Furthermore, assessment of response can also help students realize whether they are capable of completing current academic tasks. Nevertheless, from the context of this paper, it can be seen that inadequate assessment or feedback in this course. No test, no assignment will lead to a lack of monitoring or feedback in online learning though it does unburden the loads of students under the pressure of assignment and reference reading in this context. As a result, the students' cognition of their learning situation will also be inaccurate due to the lack of feedback and evaluation.

Additionally, some scholars have pointed out that the text-based approach may overemphasize text and research wedded to text^[13], undoubtedly harming learners' ability to innovate. The text-based approach also has certain limitations in promoting learners' desire for expression. This limitation is inherent in the method itself. In the context of this article, the teacher does not pay much attention to the text related to the coursework. It did not provide enough materials in other genres to compare. Richards JC *et al.* (2014) also mention that the teaching process will become uninspired and repeated on the condition that this method is used in the four dimensions of teaching, listening, speaking, reading and writing^[14].

3.3. Solutions

Horzum MB (2015) believes that if students are sufficiently satisfied with the course, class attendance will be positively impacted. Consequently, considering that EAP is regarded as a needs-driven activity, students' needs must be taken into account to improve student satisfaction^[22]. Hutchinson T *et al.* (1987) proposed a framework to figure out learners' needs^[23]. According to this list, questionnaires can be carried out among students to collect their opinions on EAP online teaching methods or materials. Moreover, to guarantee that students

have participated in the meeting, the university can require students to open a video to check-in. However, simultaneously, the virtual background is allowed to turn on to ensure that the information about the student's environment will not be leaked. Furthermore, when implementing teaching activities, teachers can flexibly handle teaching methods according to the needs of students. Another tip to improve class satisfaction is to arrange for students on duty to test the network in advance during class to ensure the network is smooth. If not, students need to contact the relevant department of the school in time to solve the network problems.

Considering the integration of online teaching and EAP learning, teacher-student and student-student interaction is essential to improving student satisfaction. In other words, interaction should be enhanced. Therefore, the teacher can allow students to evaluate their assignments and each other's texts. Then, the teacher will revise and summarize. This phenomenon reflects the characteristics of the text-based approach that students are self-monitor. Meanwhile, the opportunities for interaction between students to teachers and students to students have also increased.

Besides, concerning that the lack of the phrase of independent construction of the text, more independent writing opportunities can be introduced into this course^[12]. Perhaps there is not enough time for writing in class because of the time limit. To solve this problem, the teacher can issue PPT or task requirements in advance, allowing students to preview and write the text before the beginning of every class and then send it to the teacher. Alternatively, the teacher can assign the writing task as homework.

4. Conclusion

This article discusses EAP development and its integration with TELL^[24]. Some theories related to EAP teaching^[25] and students' physical and mental development are also considered. Scaffolding, text-based instruction and genre-based approach are all covered in this article. The context in this article is mainly text-based teaching. Regarding the merits of using EGAP rather than ESAP and the actual situation, the text-based approach is appropriate in this EGAP class. Additionally, EAP online courses

have advantages during this time because of COVID-19. Although the class situation does have some problems, it is believed that these limitations can be eliminated or reduced after modification and improvement. Therefore, several suggestions have been made in this paper.

In short, in today's irreversible globalization trend, communication in various fields cannot be separated from the global lingua franca of English. The exploration of the field of professional knowledge has made people more and more interested in the research and practice of EAP.

COVID-19 in 2020 made people realize how important it is to combine EAP with TELL teaching. At the same time, TELL does have an essential role in establishing an enhanced student-centered context in EAP. Therefore, exploring the practicality of EAP in online teaching is significant. There might be a possibility of the author's lack of experience leading to one-sided views. Thus, this article is only a reference for researchers to explore the teaching method of EAP in the case of TELL.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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