

Developing Academic Competency for Studies in English: The Malaysian ESL Teachers' Perspective

Wong Fook Fei & Thang Siew Ming
School of Language Studies & Linguistics
The National University of Malaysia

Abstract

Most public universities in Malaysia offer English courses to the undergraduates. These are usually English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Who, what and how much to teach, however, depends on the individual university. At Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), all undergraduates have to take two semesters of English. The first course that students have to take is an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course that is relevant to his/her faculty. The EAP course aims to equip students with the necessary academic studying skills in English so that they can cope with their studies as the science and technology courses are now conducted in English and the majority of the reference materials are still found only in English. A study to find out the teachers' perception of the EAP courses was carried out to find out the challenges faced by them in developing academic competency. Data were obtained from a questionnaire distributed to the instructors teaching the course and through focus group discussions with them. The researchers also examined the course files and reference books in order to better understand the courses, and to explain and substantiate some of the claims made by the instructors. The findings revealed that the teachers were more satisfied with the commercially prepared texts used to teach the Art students than the materials designed by the ESL instructors used to teach the Science students. With regard to assessment, the teachers' main concern was that it was being used to drive teaching and learning leading them to adopt a 'touch and go' approach to teaching. Also, there appeared to be a mismatch between instructions and assessments in some courses. This seemed to stem from a lack of understanding of the basic principles of testing and formative assessment.

Background

It is mandatory for all UKM undergraduates to take English language courses for 2 semesters. The primary aims of these courses are (1) to equip them with academic study skills so that they can access reference materials and resources in English (2) to introduce them to the terminologies, sentence and organizational structures and discourse types that are commonly used in their discipline (3) to upgrade their general English proficiency (4) to train them in specific English skills that are relevant for the workplace. Depending

on the perceived importance of specific skills to a particular faculty, the emphasis given to each of the aims differ. The skill that is considered the most important for most faculties is academic reading skills. This is because it is the skills that students need immediately so that they could access the readings in their reference list which are mainly in English.

The English language courses offered consisted mainly of EAP courses such as English for Business (for the Economics and Business Faculties), English for Science and Technology (for the Faculty of Science and Technology), English for Law (for the Faculty of Law) and so on. These courses are conducted during the first semester of the undergraduates' first year at the university. After completion of one of the EAP courses, students move on to do one of the essentially English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses such as Public Speaking, Technical Report Writing, Communication Skills and so on. These courses usually focus on developing a specific English language skill that would be necessary for the workplace. Most of the courses are focused on developing either speaking skill or writing skill. Both, the EAP and EOP courses are compulsory and the grades are included in the calculation of the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA).

What are the common features of all of these seemingly disparate EAP courses? First of all, all the courses focus on developing reading skills. In fact, Robinson (1991) concedes that reading is probably the most needed skill in EAP and Fishman (1977) also states that reading is vital when studying in a university where the medium of instruction is English. Although other skills, particularly speaking and writing, could also be developed but usually only nominal emphasis is paid to them. Grammar could also be taught but it is usually in relation to certain features that arise from the exploitation of the reading passages. Second, the students spend 4 hours (divided to two 2-hour session) each week for a duration of 14-weeks which means that the students have a minimum of 56 hours of class instruction. Third, to assess students' performance in the course, on-going assessments and summative assessment (final exam) are used. One of the on-going assessment components is a project that requires students to use some of the skills learnt

to complete a task that is relevant to their academic domain. Students are required to work in groups outside of the classroom to complete the project.

These courses are mainly taught by English language instructors from Pusat Pengajian Umum (School of General Studies) which functions as a service centre for all the faculties. The instructors are mainly university trained TESL instructors. There are also a few instructors who have basic degrees in the Sciences or Economics in the teaching team. These instructors are the ones who are in-charge of these courses. They decide on the syllabus and content of the course, the materials to use and the evaluation procedure that would be used to assess students' performance.

Two earlier studies have been done on these ESP teachers. The first study looks at the teaching styles of these instructors (Thang and Wong, 2005) and it found that these teachers mostly prefer learner-centric teaching styles and that they are aware of communicative language teaching. They are also interested in helping students acquire appropriate language learning strategies to promote learner autonomy. In brief, these teachers are aware of current theories and practices in ESL. The second study (Thang & Wong, 2006) looks at teaching styles from a qualitative perspective by examining the data from the focus group discussions held with the instructors. The study found that while the teachers support the current thinking on communicative language teaching, they feel that explicit instructions in English should be given, especially for low proficiency students.

This study, on other hand, aims to investigate the challenges faced by these instructors in discharging their duties as ESP instructors. It looks at their perceptions of the EAP courses and the problems that they faced in the classroom. Data were obtained only from these EAP courses: English for Business, English for Social Sciences, English for Life Sciences, English for Law and English for Science and Technology. The other courses, namely English for Islamic Studies, English for Nursing and English for Engineering were excluded because firstly, only 2 or 3 instructors were involved in teaching the course and most importantly, the instructors involved were also the designers of the

respective courses. A decision was made therefore to leave these courses out because the instructors' perceptions of the courses would most likely be biased.

Overview of EAP and Language Programme Evaluation

As the study is situated in the EAP context, within the ESP umbrella, a brief background to EAP is given below. Also, since this study can be looked upon as a language evaluation study, a background to language evaluation in the ESL context is given.

EAP

ESP can be considered as an approach to language learning that is based on the learners' needs; related in content to a particular discipline, occupation or activities; centred on language appropriate to these activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics and involves an analysis of the discourse (Hutchison and Waters, 1987:19; Strevens 1988, cited in Dubley-Evans and St John 1998:3). The learning skills that are taught may be restricted – for example only reading. Usually no specific methodology is prescribed. ESP has often been touted as the most significant development in the field of English language teaching. Under ESP, we have EAP and EOP, both are branches of ESP. Many universities offered courses in EAP as part of the orientation of the undergraduates into the academic culture of their discipline. Students are exposed to the expectations and requirements of their faculty particularly to the target language situation (Jordan, 1997:80). According, to Dubley-Evans and St. John (1998:36-37), the EAP courses also help foreign students from non-English speaking countries to achieve their full academic potential in an environment where English is the sole medium of instruction. Now that the medium of instruction has been changed from Malay to English for Science and Technology at the public universities in Malaysia, EAP has gained in importance.

EAP courses generally focused on “common-core academic language and skills” (Dubley-Evans and St John, 1998:36). Among the contents of an EAP course (as

outlined by Jordan, 1997) are classroom based oral presentation skills, understanding lectures, note-taking and note-making skills, academic writing, academic reading and vocabulary, and academic speech and pronunciation.

Language Evaluation Studies

There is a dirge of literature on evaluation of language courses in the second language. Most of the research done were in the L1 context or are related to educational evaluation, not language evaluation. Research studies in the early years (1960's) were more concerned with finding out the effectiveness of language teaching methods. Among these studies were Keating's 1963 study that looked at the effectiveness of using the language laboratory and Scherer and Wertheimer's 1964 study that compared audiolingual and cognitive code methods of teaching German. Most of these evaluation studies were not useful because either their results were inconclusive or the data could not be interpreted due to invalid research procedures and problems encountered during the conduct of the experiment (Baretta 1992).

Given the early research scenario, it was not surprising that decisions made based on findings of large evaluation projects were also disappointing. Hence, Cronbach (1963) proposes that evaluation projects emphasize on course improvement. Stake (1973), on the other hand, proposes the 'countenance model' of evaluation which places more value on descriptive data and value judgments. Under this 'countenance model' there is no prearranged evaluation design as by doing so would confine the outcome, making it too rigid and too narrow. Instead, Stake suggests that researcher picks up on whatever turns up and allows the research to be shaped by both the known and unfolding concerns of the stakeholders. Another proposed methodology is by Scriver (cited in Baretta 1992) who suggests a "goal-free evaluation" where the evaluator pays no attention to stated goals but examines what is actually happening. His argument is that if the goals of the course are relevant, they will show up in the classroom. The value of a program according to him depends on how closely the outcomes match the perceived learning needs of the students.

Even now, as far as the researchers are aware, there is no single way of conducting an evaluation. Evaluation can be approached from the learners' perspective, from the teacher's perspective and from the perspective of the outside language-teaching experts (Lynch, 1996; Richard, 2001). The scope of coverage also varies. Coverage of evaluation studies can include curriculum design, the syllabus and program content, classroom processes, instructional materials, the teachers, the students, monitoring of pupil progress, learner motivation, the institution, learning environment, staff development and decision making (Sanders, 1992; Weir & Roberts, 1994). For this study, the researchers will focus on the teachers – on how they perceive the courses.

The Study

This study aims to address these questions:

What are the challenges faced by ESL teachers when they teach these EAP courses?

What issues do they grapple with that affects effective teaching and learning of the EAP courses?

It is hoped that by answering these questions better insights regarding the EAP courses could be obtained so that more informed decision could be made for the continuous improvement of these courses. Discussion in this paper is limited to two aspects of the course namely the course materials and assessment procedure, two issues that the teachers are very concerned about.

The researchers are aware that students' perspective of the EAP courses is also important for a more holistic view of teaching and learning. However, Thang (2001) who investigated adult Malaysian ESL students' perceptions of their ESL courses through the use of questionnaire and interviews found that these students were not aware of what was involved in learning a language and of language learning processes, hence they were not able to make credible judgment of what constitutes a good course. They tended to give positivist opinion of ESL courses offered based on their perceptions of their teachers and their teaching. Based on her findings, Thang concludes that studies that are based purely

on Malaysian students' perceptions of their English courses are unreliable. Hence, it was felt that that teachers' perceptions are more credible and valuable since they are fully aware of the objectives of the ESP/EAP programmes.

Methodology

This study adopts both quantitative and qualitative instruments to obtain its data. The Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) which employed a 4-point Likert scale was used to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire comprised 27 objective items. Section 1, named the Evaluation of Course Material (EMat), comprises items 1 to 15. It sought the opinions of the ESL teachers on the ESP course materials. Section 2 (EAssess) comprises items 16 to 29 and sought the views of the ESL teachers on the Assessment Components of the EAP courses. The instructors had to respond to the close-ended items to show the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the items in the questionnaire. Instructors were also asked to give their personal comments to substantiate their views at the end of each section. See Appendix A for the CEQ.

Qualitative data was obtained through focus group discussions with the ESL teachers teaching the EAP courses. A focus group was conducted for each EAP course. The focus groups were held about a month after the distribution of the questionnaire. They were held with instructors from the following courses: English for Law, English for Social Sciences, English for Business, English for Science and Technology and English for Life Sciences. During the focus group discussion, instructors were told that the discussion was mainly to discuss their experience teaching the ESP courses. They discussed their experience using the course materials. They also talked about the on-going assessment procedures and gave suggestions on how some of the problems that they had raised could be resolved. The focus group discussion also functioned as a debriefing session allowing course committee members who were also present to get feedback on their courses.

Research Sample and Procedure

The study was conducted on 26 ESL teachers from the School of Language Studies and Linguistics¹, University Kebangsaan Malaysia who taught the said EAP courses. The teachers were of varied ethnicity, 16 Malays, 7 Chinese and 3 Indians, which is reflective of the racial composition of Malaysia. There were only two males teachers. The rest were females. The minimum qualification was a Bachelors degree and most of them were between 30 to 40 years of age. The questionnaires were distributed to all the instructors teaching these courses. Some of the instructors answered more than once because they taught more than one course. Altogether, 51 questionnaires were completed and returned. The attrition rate was 35 %.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analysed using item analysis and ANOVA to compare the mean scores of responses to both the course material and course assessment sections using SPSS (Version 12) statistical package.

Ramsden (1983: p.5) pointed out that “the answers to groups of questions are much more reliable than the answers to individual questions” in his discussion of the Lancaster Approaches to Studying and Course Perceptions Questionnaire. However, it was considered useful to undertake a comparison of the mean scores of each item according to faculties in this study as that will enable the researchers to determine some general patterns or trends. To ensure that only marked differences were identified, only significant differences in mean scores (i.e., $p < 0.05$) were taken into consideration. ANOVA was employed for this purpose.

As for the data from the focus group discussions, a qualitative inductive approach was adopted to analyse the transcriptions of these discussions for emerging themes and

¹ When the study was carried out, the language instructors were members of the Faculty of Language Studies and Linguistics. Now, the language instructors are under the umbrella of the Centre of General Studies (Pusat Pengajian Umum). However, the EAP courses offered remain essentially the same. Thus, the findings of this study will be equally relevant to the current situation.

commonalities across the courses. Besides the focus groups, responses to the open ended questions of the questionnaire were also used to explain and account for the results of the quantitative data.

Discussion of results

Comparison of mean scores per item across courses

The mean scores per item of the instructors from the various faculties were compared. For EMat, the results significant (to the level of $p < 0.05$) are displayed in Table 1, and for EAssess, the results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 1: Means scores per item of instructors from different faculties for EMat

	Question	Faculty	No. of instructors	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Rank of items
2.	The materials are suitable for the students	English for Business	7	2.86	0.38	3
		English for Social Science	11	2.91	0.54	2
		English for Life Sciences	6	2.33	0.52	5
		English for Science & Technology	14	2.64	0.63	4
		English for Law	8	3.13	0.35	1
6.	The materials are creative and interesting.	English for Business	7	3.14	0.38	1
		English for Social Sciences.	11	2.64	0.50	2
		English for Life Sciences	6	2.00	0.00	5
		English for Science & Technology.	14	2.50	0.65	4
		English for Law	8	2.63	0.52	3
8.	This is certainly one of the most well organised courses that I have ever taught.	English for Business	7	3.00	0.58	1
		English for Social Sciences.	11	2.73	0.47	3
		English for Life Sciences.	6	2.00	0.00	5
		English for Science & Technology	14	2.50	0.76	4
		English for Law	8	2.75	0.71	2

11.	The course materials are haphazardly placed together. (negatively-phased terms)*	English for Business	7	1.71	0.49	2
		English for Social Sciences	12	1.91	0.51	3
		English for Life Sciences	6	2.5	0.55	5
		English for Science & Technology	14	2.43	0.94*	4
		English for Law	8	1.63	0.52	1
13.	The materials are repetitive and boring. (negatively-phased item)*	English for Business	7	1.71	0.49	1
		English for Social Sciences	11	2.09	0.54	3
		English for Life Sciences	6	2.50	0.55	4
		English for Science & Technology	13	2.62	1.00*	5
		English for Law	8	1.75	0.46	2

* Reverse ranking was used for negatively-phased items.

Course Materials

The item analysis revealed that the instructors' views of the materials used in the course were fairly consistent. An analysis of the mean scores of items that were significant demonstrated that the course materials of English for Life Sciences consistently received the lowest mean scores (or highest mean scores for items negatively phrased). Following closely behind were English for Science and Technology.

The mean scores for the top three ranking items were less consistent. Nevertheless, English for Law and English for Business were the two courses that received the highest scores (or lowest scores for items negatively phrased). This was followed by English for Social Sciences. This seemed to suggest that the course materials prepared for the Arts students were thought to be more suitable, creative, interesting and well-organised than those prepared for the Science students.

The three top rated courses use commercial textbooks specially written for the respective discipline. The textbook used by English for Law is *English for Law* by Alison Riley, a

lawyer. It is published by Prentice Hall in 1991 and is now out of print. Although, English for Law is rated highly by the teachers but the common feeling is that the textbook is not that suitable either. Among their comments are:

“It is too difficult for the students and the layout is very dull.”

“Too difficult for the kind of students we take in these days. Only 10 – 20% of the students can just about manage. The others just get “washed along” or get “washed out””

“The course textbook is more suitable for native speakers. It assumes a solid grounding in basic English, which students do not have, most anyway.”

“The textbook used, English for Law, for the 1st year students covers the content not yet familiar to these students. “

All these are valid comments. Many instructors felt that the textbook was too difficult for some of their students. In the focus group discussion for this course, instructors felt that the course was pitched at too high a level compared to the actual proficiency level of the students. However, the purpose of the book matches the purpose of the course which is to teach students to understand and use the language of the law in English. In the Introduction (xix), Alison Riley states that the book is for intermediate to advanced students of English “who has a special interest in law and needs to use English of the law for studies or work”. The main problem, therefore, is not so much with the materials but with the students themselves. The text is right for the intended learning outcomes of the course but the students cannot cope because they do not have a solid enough grounding in English.

Similar sentiment was also voiced for English for Social Sciences which used the text, *Quest Reading and writing in the academic world. Book 2* by Pamela Hartmann. Teachers generally said that the text was all right. However, the students were not able to cope. As one teacher states:

“The textbook is OK. Actually, it’s quite simple but as the majority of the students are rather weak they find even the simple passages difficult to understand. “

English for Business on the other hand did not draw much criticism regarding its text. Teachers generally seemed happy with it. The only complaint was that they had to complete too many units in too short a time.

Of course there is no such thing as a textbook that can cater to all the students’ need. This is even more so with ESP courses. Commercial books are usually written for ESL students studying in English speaking countries. The context is therefore foreign and cannot fully cater to the students’ specific needs. Another problem is the relative short time (the total contact hours per semester is 56 hours) to teach these EAP course satisfactorily. Teachers are able to cover only about 40% - 50% of most of the textbooks.

English for Life Science, on other hand, relies on more than one commercially prepared texts for its materials. Since, the course committee could not find one book that could meet the objectives of the course; they compiled relevant materials from a variety of sources to be used as teaching materials. However, the teachers were dissatisfied with the materials as evident in the low ranks they gave to the course materials. Some of the problems expressed by them are:

“I did not use the material given – they did not look like they would be of much help to the students. “

“There is no continuity or natural flow to the material supplied.”

“The topics covered were nothing new to the students, the students need more up-to-date and interesting topics for discussions.”

The course committee of English for Science and Technology was also unable to find an appropriate text. However, they decided to adopt a different approach. Based on the syllabus they designed materials for the course. The low ranking the teachers gave to the

course materials of this course clearly showed that they were not happy with these materials too. Some of their comments are:

“The materials were not focused and there were no reinforcement activities.”

“Materials were rather short and not very challenging. “

“There were too many comprehension questions, not much development of skills.”

“Passages are too short, comprehension questions too many, too confusing or repetitive.”

“There were not enough activities for the good students.”

“Others said that the materials were taken from the same source and that the materials were not developing skills but merely preparing the students for the exams.”

It is apparent that there are more problems with the teacher-compiled/prepared materials than commercially prepared texts. Quality of the materials is poor and there is no reinforcement of skills. And most of the time, students are engaged in doing comprehension exercises that is more geared for the examination. Granted that commercially prepared texts are not able to fully cater to the specific needs of the students but at least they systematically develop skills and strategies and these are reinforced throughout. Also, the selection of text is better – more varied, graded and interesting. The only problem is that it lacks the local favour.

Course Assessment

Table 2: Means scores per item of instructors from different faculties

	Question	Faculty	No. of instructors	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Rank of items
16.	The number of	English for Business	7	2.86	0.90*	3

	assessments in this course is just right.	English for Social Sciences	12	3.00	0.43	2
		English for Life Sciences.	6	2.67	0.82	4
		English for Science & Technology.	14	2.07	0.83	5
		English for Law	8	3.25	0.46	1
17.	I find that I spend so much time assessing the students that I have no time to teach them properly. (negatively-phased items)*	English for Business	7	2.14	0.89*	3
		English for Social Sciences.	12	1.92	0.51	2
		English for Life Sciences.	6	2.43	0.79	4
		English for Science & Technology.	14	3.00	0.78	5
		English for Law	8	1.88	0.64	1
18.	The assessment components meet the objectives of this course	English for Business	7	3.00	0.58	2
		English for Social Sciences.	12	2.92	0.29	3
		English for Life Sciences.	6	2.67	0.52	4
		English for Science & Technology.	14	2.64	0.63	5
		English for Law	8	3.25	0.46	1
22.	The frequent assessments make the students tense and nervous that they do not enjoy the course. (negatively-phased items)*	English for Business	7	2.14	0.90*	4
		English for Social Sciences.	12	1.83	0.58	1
		English for Life Sciences.	6	2.00	0.58	2
		English for Science & Technology.	13	2.71	0.83	5
		English for Law	8	2.13	0.35	3
23.	The assessment components are well planned and well thought out.	English for Business	7	2.86	3.78	3
		English for Social Sciences.	12	3.00	0.00	2
		English for Life Sciences.	6	2.33	0.52	5

		English for Science & Technology.	14	2.36	0.63	4
		English for Law	8	3.13	0.35	1
24.	There are a lot of mistakes in the various assessment components. (negatively-phased items)*	English for Business	7	2.00	0.58	3
		English for Social Sciences.	12	1.92	0.79	2
		English for Life Sciences.	6	2.00	0.00	3
		English for Science & Technology.	14	2.36	0.63	5
		English for Law	8	1.63	0.52	1
27.	The assessment components make the course too inflexible and do not allow creative teaching and learning. (negatively-phased items)*	English for Business	7	2.14	0.89*	4
		English for Social Sciences.	12	1.91	0.54	3
		English for Life Sciences.	6	1.86	0.69	1
		English for Science & Technology.	14	2.93	0.83	5
		English for Law	8	1.88	0.35	2
29.	The evaluation components should all be retained.	English for Business	7	2.71	0.75	3
		English for Social Sciences.	11	2.92	0.29	2
		English for Life Sciences.	6	2.50	0.53	4
		English for Science & Technology.	14	1.92	0.76	5
		English for Law	8	3.25	0.46	1

* Reverse ranking was used for negatively-phased items.

The pattern of instructors' responses towards the assessment components was also fairly consistent (Table 2). For the 8 significant items, English for Law ranked the highest for 6 items and second highest for 1 item. On the other hand, English for Science and Technology ranked the lowest for 7 items and second lowest for 1 item. This clearly

indicated that the instructors had the highest opinion of the assessment components of English for Law and the lowest opinion of English for Science and Technology. For the rest of the courses, despite less consistency, a clear pattern was apparent. English for Business ranked second for 1 item and third for 4 items. With regard to English for Life Science, although it ranked fourth in 4 items, it surprisingly had better rankings in 3 items which put it on par with English for Business. Thus, the ranking in terms of assessment components could be listed as English for Law followed by English for Social Sciences, English for Business and English for Life Sciences and last, English for Science and Technology.

A closer scrutiny of the mean scores revealed that the instructors' opinions of the assessment components of English for Science Technology were negative for items 26, 27, 32, 33, 37 and 39, with mean scores approaching 2 and below for positively-phased items and approaching 3 and above for negatively-phased items. However, most of the instructors seemed to agree that that the assessment components of the various ESP courses were able to meet the objectives of the courses (refer to item 28) and that the assessment components of the various courses did not have a lot of mistakes (refer to item 34). Despite that, it is evident from the findings that the assessment components of English for Science and Technology are flawed and a major rethink is necessary. The assessment components of English for Life Sciences also need to be seriously looked into, as the instructors were also not very satisfied with certain components.

In order to understand the reason for the high rating of the assessment components of English for Law and the low rating for the assessment components of English for Science and Technology, we shall look at the assessment components of both of these courses.

English for Law has the following on-going assessment components:

1. Reflective journal (students have to make a minimal of 4 journal entries reflecting on any class that they have attended)
2. Mid-semester Exam (a formal mid-semester exam covering reading skills and strategies covered in the first few weeks of the semester - done in the class)

3. Project (students work in groups of 3 or 4 and research on a current legal topic. They have to source for relevant reading materials, read and understand the materials and summarise and synthesize the materials in a report. They also have to make an oral presentation of the report)

The on-going evaluation accounts for 50% of the total. The final exam accounts for the other 50%.

On the whole, the teachers expressed general satisfaction with how the students were being assessed. One instructor wrote that she felt that the students benefited from writing the reflective journals and working collaboratively for the project. A scrutiny of the course booklet reveals that the course has clear instructions given in the form of handouts to student on what they have to do and how to do it. Information about how their products would be assessed is also provided and samples of the expected products are also given.

Conversely, English for Science and Technology has four on-going assessments. The first three assessments are carried out during the class time. The assessment components are:

1. Test on Note-making
2. Quiz on reading comprehension
3. Test on note expansion
4. Project (students have to source for 5 articles from varied sources on a common topic and write a report of about 1,000 words)

Teachers complained that there were just too many assessments throughout the course. Among the comments are:

“The course has far too many assessments. So the students are so tense and feel that the instructors are not really giving them input to the course.”

“Assessment components (note-making, quiz, writing and project) too taxing for both teachers and students”

Too many assessment components. Some difficult to mark as no marking scheme is given. Definitely need to reduce the number of assessment components.

I don't see the need of assessing on note-making.

Having too many tests throughout the course seems to be an issue not just for English for Science and Technology but also for English for Business and English for Life Sciences. A language instructor teaching English for Business remarked,

"I find that it's like we are always trying to prepare them and all too soon it's role-play evaluation. Hardly got time. ... there's one or two weeks before each evaluation..."

In the same vein, an English for Life Sciences instructor commented,

"the course is like 'touch and go', It's like one contact hour or two of certain input, the next one is the evaluation already. Input and then evaluation. There's no continuity. There's no development of skills".

Indeed, such a tension-filled teaching and learning environment makes it difficult for the teachers to systematically develop and reinforce skills throughout the course. It appears that tests are being used as a motivator to drive the teachers and students. For the teachers the test is used to ensure that they cover certain skills that are deemed important. For the students, the test is used to ensure that they pay attention to the skills taught and also to ensure that they come to class. Teachers teaching the course complained that they and their students were stressed out by the constant testing

Another complaint on assessment was the lack of input given to students so that they could carry out their projects successfully. The objective of having a project for all the EAP courses is to provide an opportunity for students to use skills that they have learnt outside the classroom. The teachers felt that not much thought had gone to the skills and subskills that students needed to have in order to be able to carry out the project. For example, for the project in English for Social Sciences, students were required to carry out a questionnaire survey and to write a report on it. No input was available on this in the prescribed course book that the students were using. Teachers were only provided

with materials on how to write a research report - how to go about it and what to include in each heading of the report. However, teachers felt that that was inadequate. They wanted practice exercises on language required for writing the questionnaire and report as they complained that students were generally very weak in writing. The more diligent ones sourced for materials themselves. It appears that teachers have to decide for themselves, what sub-skills are needed and to come up with their own exercises to fill up this gap.

Similarly, for English for Science and Technology and English for Life Sciences the project is supposed to encourage reading outside of the classroom since the primary focus of these courses is reading. Here, students are required to read 5 articles on a similar topic and then to write a report of about 1,000 – 2,000 words. Most teachers said that students “*plagiarise right from the start to the end*”, Instead of summarizing and synthesizing ideas from the 5 articles into a report, students were just cutting and pasting to come up with the report. As one of the teachers said,

“ the project was too ambitious... review of 5 articles ... there is so much demand there so they tend to plagiarise, cut and paste”.

Indeed, the very nature of the task encourages students to plagiarize. The report is too long and students need instructions and guidelines on how to go about writing this report. Granted samples of reports were given as model but these were not adequate.

Some teachers also complained that the assessment tasks had little relation to the skills taught or that some of the tasks were inappropriate, In English for Business, students were required to write a critical review of a business article as a part of the on-going assessment component. Although an example of an article review can be found in the prescribed textbook but as a teacher pointed out, the model given in the textbook was quite direct and simple unlike what was used for evaluation which was a few notches above the level of the textbook. She said,

“I feel it is quite simple... but turned out the evaluation is not quite similar and ... the way the question is asked ... this article review – do we expect them to review like master’s students”.

In the same course, another complaint was on the situations used for role-plays. Teachers were dissatisfied because students were asked to role-play situations that they had not been exposed to in the course.

Most of the dissatisfaction related to assessment had to do with the way the students were being assessed formatively. The foremost complaint was that many of the courses had too many formal on-going evaluations which were creating too much tension for both the students and teachers. The impact is that teachers are adopting the ‘touch and go’ approach to teaching. There is not much reinforcement and time given to developing skills and strategies. It appears that teachers in charge of some of the courses are not well versed in or have a misconception of some of the testing principles and practices. As one instructor remarked, *“We can only test what we teach”* and by this she meant that every skill taught had to be tested!

Group Scores Analysis

Table 3. Comparison of group means scores of instructors from different faculties for EMat

Faculty	Group mean score	Standard Deviation	Rank of group mean score
English for Business	2.98	.45	2
English for Social Sciences	2.81	.35	3
English for Life Sciences	2.52	.22	5
English for Science and Technology	2.58	.53	4
English for Law	3.13	.33	1

A comparison of group mean scores for the instructors from the five different faculties for EMat was performed using ANOVA as a statistical tool. The results revealed an overall significance of 0.03 ($p < 0.05$) with F(df) value of 2.74(5/51). The group score analysis yielded similar results to the item analysis of EMat with English for Law and English for Business being the most well received, followed by English for Social Sciences. Similarly the bottom two courses were English for Science and Technology and English for Life Sciences (as shown in Table 3).

Table 4: Comparison of means scores of instructors from different faculties for EAssess

Faculty	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank of group mean score
English for Business	2.84	.52	4
English for Social Sciences	2.99	.28	3
English for Life Sciences	2.67	.32	5
English for Science and Technology	2.48	.40	6
English for Law	3.09	.27	2

A comparison of group mean scores for the instructors from the six different faculties for EAssess was also performed using ANOVA as a statistical tool. The results demonstrated an overall significance of 0.00 ($p < 0.05$) with F(df) value of 5.88(5/51). The group score also analysis yielded similar results to the item analysis of EAssess with by English for Law having the highest mean score followed by English for Social Sciences, English for Business, English for Life Sciences and English for Science and Technology (as shown in Table 4). These results reaffirm the findings of the item analysis.

Conclusion and Implications

The results suggest that the ESP materials for the Arts students were better received by the instructors than the ESP materials prepared for the Science students. Nevertheless, the teachers generally felt that the materials were pitched at too high a level for some of the students. This suggests that there must be a threshold level for the EAP courses. The challenge is to determine the threshold at which students can benefit from EAP instructions.

The findings, as evident in the case of the materials for English for Life Sciences and English for Science and Technology, seem to point to the inadequacy of the language teachers to design EAP courses. Thus, despite complaints about commercially prepared texts, they may still be the best option. The fact is that these teachers do not have sufficient knowledge about the English language needs of the various faculties to be able to design appropriate EAP courses for the students. There is a need for a proper needs analysis of the target language situation, which was not undertaken in this case.

Regarding the assessment components, there is a need to examine the match between instruction and what is being assessed to help improve the assessment components of the courses with lower ratings. The teachers seem to lack an understanding of the basic principles of testing and of alternative assessment. Many of the on-going assessments are merely mini achievement tests. Tests should be part of the syllabus. However, in this case teacher tends to see a one-to-one relationship between test and, teaching and learning. Teach and test, and students will learn seems to be the common mindset among many of the teachers. Teachers should realize that the relationship is much more complex and not unidimensional.

It is clear that teachers need in-service training in ESP course design and language testing. They do not seem to have the expertise to develop relevant materials for the EAP courses. Hence, courses that used commercially prepared texts are rated more highly. It would appear that a textbook that does not seem to be able to meet students' needs is better than materials that are badly conceived and written. Also, there is a need for better collaboration between ESL teachers and content lecturers. Projects could be based on the content courses that students are taking. Hence, there will be no question of relevance of the project for the students. Language teachers would be able to provide the language input that is necessary for the successful completion of the task without having to think about the content.

Acknowledgement

The researchers wish to thank UKM for providing the funds for this research project (SK/18/2002).

References

- Beretta, A. (1992). Evaluation of language education: An overview. In J.C Alderson, & A Beretta, (eds). *Evaluating Second Language Education*, pp.25-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cronbach, L.J. (1982). *Designing evaluations of educational and social programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dudley-Evans, T & St John, M.J. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fishman, J. A. (1977). *The spread of English: The sociology of English as an additional language*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.
- Hartmann, P. (1999). *Quest. Reading and writing in the academic world. Book 2*. Boston:McGraw-Hill College.
- Hutchison, T & Waters, A. (1987). *English for specific purposes*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Jordan, R.R. (1997). *English for Academic Purposes: A guide and resource book for teachers*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Keating, R.F. (1961). *A study of the effectiveness of language laboratories*. New York: Institute of Administrative Research, Teachers College.
- Lynch, B.K. (1996). *Language Program Evaluation: Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ramsden, P. (1983). *The Lancaster Approach to study inventory and course perceptions questionnaire: Lecturer handbook*. Lancaster: Educational Methods Unit.
- Richards, J.C. (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Riley, Alison. (1991). *English for Law*. London: Prentice Hall
- Robinson, P. (1991). *ESP today: a practitioner's guide*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International.
- Sanders, J.R. (1992). *Evaluating School Programs: An Educator's Guide*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.
- Scherer, G.A.C. and M. Wertheimer. (1964). *A psycholinguistic experiment in foreign language teaching*. Philadelphia: the Center for Curriculum Development, Inc.

- Scriven, M.S. (1972). Prose and cons about goal-free evaluation. *Evaluation comment 3*. Los Angeles Center for the study of evaluation, University of California.
- Stake, R.E. (1967). The countenance of educational evaluation. *Teachers College Record 68*: 523-40.
- Stake, R.E. (1975). *Evaluation the arts in education: a responsiveness approach*. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill.
- Thang Siew Ming. (2003) Investigating Malaysian Distance learners conception of their learning styles in learning English. GEMA: Online journal of language studies. 3(1). <http://www.fpbahasa.ukm.my/journal/>
- Thang Siew Ming & Wong Fook Fei. (2005). Teaching styles of Malaysian ESL instructors: An investigation into current practices and implications to English Language Teaching (ELT) in *3L The Journal of Language Teaching, Linguistics and Literature*. Bangi: Pusat Pengajian Bahasa dan Linguistik, UKM. pp.49-64.
- Thang Siew Ming & Wong Fook Fei. (2006) Insights into teaching styles of Malaysian ESL teachers: A qualitative study. *Jurnal Bahasa Jendela Alam*. Persatuan Bahasa Moden. pp.495- 510.
- Weir, C. and J. Roberts. (1994). *Evaluation in ELT*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Appendix

Course Evaluation Questionnaire

We would like you to show the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements listed below. For each statement, please shade the number that best conforms to your view.

1 for “strongly disagree”

2 for “disagree”

3 for “agree”

4 for “strongly agree”

Section One: Course Materials (i.e. textbooks, materials prepared by the committee, supplementary materials, course booklet etc.)

- | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The course materials meet the objectives of the course | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2. The materials are suitable for the students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 3. The materials do not meet the learning needs of the students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 4. Students have difficulty comprehending the materials | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5. There are insufficient materials to cover the different aspects of the course | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 6. The materials are creative and interesting | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 7. The materials provided are unfocused and too diversified | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 8. This is certainly one of the most well organised courses that I have ever taught | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 9. I have difficulty understanding the instructions in the course file | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 10. The workload for this course is too heavy for the students | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 11. The course materials are haphazardly placed together | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 12. The materials systematically developed the skills/objectives of the course | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 13. The materials are repetitive and boring | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 14. The materials effectively reinforced the teaching and learning points of the course | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

15. The materials allow for progressive development of the students.

Your personal comments on the course materials (if any):

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Section Two: Assessment Components

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 16. The number of assessments in this course is just right. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 17. I find that I spend so much time assessing the students that I do not have time to teach them properly. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 18. The assessment components meet the objectives of this course. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 19. The evaluation components give a fair evaluation of the students' proficiency in the skills taught. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 20. If not for the assessment components, the students will not bother to perform well for the various components of the course. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 21. The level of difficult of the assessments is appropriate. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 22. The frequent assessments make the students so tense and nervous that they do not enjoy the course | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 23. The assessment components are well planned and well thought out | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 24. There are a lot of mistakes in the various assessment components | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 25. The instructions of the various assessment components are unclear and confusing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

- | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 26. The allocation of marks for the various assessments is appropriate | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 27. The assessment components make the course too inflexible and do not allow creative teaching and learning | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 28. The types of evaluation components are reflective of the demands of the course | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 29. The evaluation components should all be retained | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

Your personal comments on the assessment components (if any):

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....