

A Critical Commentary on Learning, Teaching and Assessment of an EAP Module at XJTLU

WANG Yi-li

(Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou 215123, China)

Abstract: This is a critical reflection based upon the academic experience of the author who has taught English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for over 4 years to undergraduate students of various disciplines since 2014 when he joined the Language Centre at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU). The purpose of this article is to introduce to a wider community one of the typical EAP modules that are carried out in the joint-venture institution. In order to address how the specific challenges of teaching under an English medium context in China are managed, there will be discussion probing into the aims, learning outcomes, teaching strategies, syllabus, and assessment methods which are aligned in the design and delivery of the course programme. Furthermore, some evaluation in regard to any potential changes and improvement for the curriculum development will also be investigated accordingly.

Key words: a critical reflection; EAP; discussion and evaluation

中图分类号: H31 文献标识码: A 文章编号: 1009-5039(2019)07-0262-04

1 Introduction

EAP006 English Language and Study Skills II for Business is a mandatory course intended for Year 1 undergraduate students who are studying business and other related disciplines in the second semester. The module takes 10 credits and serves as a bridging function to help extend students' English language, reflective thinking and independent learning skills in the context of their programmes. This critical commentary will therefore probe into the learning outcomes, the syllabus, the teaching strategies as well as the assessment methods of this module based on learner reviews, peer observations and some recent studies of education and applied linguistics. Analysis will also be made on how learning activities are inclusive to meet the needs of any diversity within the module student group and how the specific challenges of teaching Chinese students in an English-medium university are managed. Finally, there will be consideration for potential changes and improvement in the areas of teaching strategies and curriculum design.

2 Design and Delivery of the Module

Year 1 EAP modules for business (both EAP009 & 006) consist of the largest working team in the Language Centre at XJTLU since teaching and curriculum development are shared and carried out by more than 25 academic staffs who have contributed to the design and delivery of the courses in a collective wisdom.

2.1 Aims and learning outcomes

According to the Module Handbook of EAP006 (Batten, 2016) approved by the University of Liverpool, English tutors aim to improve students' academic English language ability in reading, writ-

ing, listening and speaking in order to better equip them for their academic study in business-related subject areas. Unlike most traditional universities in China where passing language tests (e.g. CET4 & 6) tends to be the primary concern, students at XJTLU will nevertheless be encouraged to develop skills for academic success throughout the lesson, including critical thinking, research and teamwork skills as well as independent learning ability, to name but a few. On successful completion of this module by the end of Semester 2, most students should be able to reach a standard no less than the low CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) B2 level which is necessary for entry into a UK university or study in a higher institution where English is the official language and the medium of instruction. Details in regard to how the contents of the syllabus, the teaching strategies and the assessment methods of EAP006 are designed and implemented to help students achieve the learning outcomes will be investigated in depth through the following sections.

2.2 The syllabus and its operation

At first, it is worthwhile to mention that students are streamed into three levels (A, B & C, and group C is the highest while group A is the lowest) based on their performance in the semester 1 EAP module, namely EAP009 under this case. Lower-level groups will focus on meeting the basic requirements of each module learning outcome while higher-level groups will be encouraged to exceed these requirements. Although the syllabus for each level may slightly vary in response to students' needs, all the levels cover the same module learning outcomes and there will be no difference for the assessments among the students. The rationale behind this division of

收稿日期: 2018-12-15 修回日期: 2018-12-25

基金项目: 本文系西交利物浦大学领导与前沿研究院(ILEAD)开展的教学提升培训课程学术成果, 通过英国高等教育学会(Higher Education Academy, UK)评估并获得最高等级Distinction。

作者简介: 王一力(1982—), 男, 四川成都人, 西交利物浦大学讲师, 学术英文导师, 英国利物浦大学荣誉导师, 谢菲尔德大学英语语言学硕士, 主要研究领域包括英语句型学、语音学、教学语法以及英语作为国际通用语之现状。

learners is backed-up by the renowned theory of Input Hypothesis in which Krashen (1982) claims that language can only be acquired if the student is exposed to what he or she understands. In another word, comprehension may only take place when the language input is a little beyond the student's current level of competence. Moreover, compared with many English courses elsewhere in China, delivery of the module at each week tends to be quite intense as students need to attend a 2-hour seminar of integrated skills on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday respectively and they should also sit for a one-hour lecture as well as a one-hour writing workshop following the lecture on Wednesday.

Most of the teaching materials meant for these three types of class are designed by the tutors who are teaching the module as well as contributing to the curriculum development which covers a spectrum of course contents, including but not limited to core reading articles, vocabulary task sheets, worksheets of daily seminars and lecture power points for the one-hour large-group contact. In addition to the materials and handouts created by tutors, there is also a regular textbook which contains some useful study skills and may help the students practice the language through topics specific to their own disciplines. The reason why a range of teaching contents rather than a single textbook (which is the case in many other Chinese universities) are prepared is that diversity in regard to the learning styles, strategies and motivation of the students must be well taken into account for the benefit of successful second language acquisition (Cohen, 2010). Any textbook may have its own limitations and therefore cannot function alone to meet all the aims. Besides, in order to help learners transfer what they have learned in the classroom to a more communicative context, pedagogical activities must be psychologically authentic while alignment between the conditions of learning and the conditions of subsequent use is supposed to be set up as well (Segalowitz, 2003, cited in Larsen-Freeman & DeCarrico, 2010).

2.3 The teaching strategies and how to manage the challenge

As mentioned above, students have 8 hours per week of integrated skills seminars covering reading, writing, listening and speaking. They also have one large group lecture each Wednesday, followed by a one hour workshop related to the lecture content. To put it another way, a permanent class containing 20-25 students for the whole semester is taught by the same tutor in both the integrated skills seminars and the post-lecture workshops while the lectures are delivered by different tutors of the module week by week to more than 200 students at the same time in a big theatre. As a result, teaching of one single tutor is mainly conducted in the form of small group to better encourage the students to interact and talk with each other especially when the focus of the lesson is on listening and speaking skills which enable the learners to generate critical thinking.

However, there is a challenge regarding how to motivate the learners to break the silence and open their mouths since Chinese university students are likely to be less active and quieter in the classroom than their western counterparts due to the disparity between the two opposing cultures, namely Individualism versus Collectivism (Hofstede, 2005; Gudykunst, 1998; Kim, 1995) or to be more specific, Low-context versus High-context. According to Edward Hall (1990: 6, cited from Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009: 215), context was 'the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of the event'. 'A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person and very little is in the coded, ex-

PLICITLY transmitted part of the message while a low context (LC) communication is just the opposite for the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code' (Hall, 1976: 91). Based on the definitions from Wang's own research at the University of Sheffield (2009), the UK is mainly a country of individualism with low context while China is a nation which is predominated by collectivism with high context.

Individuals in high-context cultures may not need to communicate and exchange their meanings through words (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009) as they are very homogeneous with similar experiences and information networks due to the sense of 'in-groups' which is deeply rooted in mind from history period to modern times (Trandis, 1988, cited in Wang, 2009). Normal transactions and connection in daily life are likely to be processed through inference, gestures and even silence as in-depth background knowledge is not compulsory (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2009, cited in Wang, 2009). What's more, free talk and active inquiry are not highly encouraged in a classroom for students of collectivistic cultures since their childhood. 'Any disagreements and requests to the teacher should be presented in an indirect way with a reserved manner which is supposed to be most effective' (Wang, 2009). In particular, silence is a very useful technique and considered as 'a communicative act rather than mere void in communicational space' (Lebra, 1987, p.343, cited in Wang, 2009), and it can be used to 'indicate truthfulness, disapproval, embarrassment and disagreement' (Gudykunst, 1998, p.117, cited in Wang, 2009). In order to allow all parties to preserve face, debates can only be made through indirect styles when conflicts arise (Gudykunst, 1998, cited in Wang, 2009).

Given the fact that distinctions exist between the individualistic and collectivistic cultures, a great deal of work has to be done for enhancing students' learning under an English medium setting in China. First and foremost, a task-based language teaching approach (Long, 1985; Willis, 1996; Richards and Rodgers, 1986; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1996, 1998), which is a coursework essay and presentation under the case of EAP006, has been adopted in order to better encourage the learner independence and the spirit of team work at the very beginning of a teaching session since there is evidence that participation of each person can only be well-facilitated in an inquiry or problem solving activity (Gibbs, 1995; Jacques, 1991). As learning by doing among students is considered to be an effective strategy for wider engagement and better acquisition (Silberman, 1996), active learning is more likely to take place when the learners are given sufficient opportunities to express themselves through peer discussion. Meanwhile, tutors can maintain an energetic performance and articulate speech in this kind of small group teaching which may even help to draw attention of students who are inclined to be distracted by some unfavourable physical and psychological conditions such as anxiety, nervousness, fatigue, low mood and bad temper. Research has also demonstrated that 'feedback and praise learners receive are amongst the most significant determinants of their final self-evaluation' (Cohen, 2010, p.172) and may therefore be able to encourage initiative as well as motivation upon the lesson. Furthermore, seminars provide a platform to carry out face-to-face tutorials with each individual student whenever possible, and communication is thus to become more straightforward and learner-tailored under this case than otherwise it could be. In fact, successful rapport between the teacher and students could be built up by reinforcing feedback and explanations constantly as a number of students have expressed their agreements or even compliment towards the approach of in-class

tutorials as well as the clarity of the delivery throughout the lessons according to the highly positive comments in the previous university-wide Module Questionnaires (MQs). Last but not least, there must be varied assessment methods rather than a single test to stimulate learners from a range of different practice as ‘the more the task requires personal involvement, the less likely the students are to get it off the net or from someone else’ (Biggs & Tang, 2009, p.5)

2.4 Assessment methods in alignment with learning outcomes

Assessment is made up of three components which are designed and shared by all the English tutors of EAP006 and there is a standardisation meeting prior to each date of the exams to ensure all the tutors are able to mark based on the same criteria in the module descriptors approved by both internal and external moderators who are from the University of Liverpool. First of all, a writing coursework contributing 30 percent to the final grade would be assigned when the teaching starts at the beginning of the semester and students are required to compare two multinational companies and assess which is more environmentally responsible. They need to work together in a group of 4–5 members searching for relevant sources which are intended for writing up an essay around 1,200 words independently. By carrying out this task, students are trained to select appropriate references, read with a large degree of independence and accomplish writing which synthesizes and assesses information and arguments from a number of sources. Besides, sense of how to produce work that meets the deadline and contains no elements of plagiarism, collusion or data embellishment could be initially generated at this stage in which learners should have a good awareness of the UK academic policy and disciplines by citing and referencing appropriately in accordance with the Harvard Referencing Guidelines. Following the coursework mainly assessing the writing competence is the speaking test which also accounts for 30% of the final grade. The candidates need to design a questionnaire, conduct a survey, create relevant graphs based on the data and present their findings with the help of a self-made PPT. During the process of this research-led learning (Brew, 2003), tutors are going to measure whether the students are able to give a clear, prepared presentation on a topic related to their field of study and take follow-up questions with a degree of fluency and spontaneity. Finally, in addition to the coursework writing and speaking, an integrated exam bearing 40% of the credit will be held at the end of the semester. It aims to assess the comprehensive English language proficiency and study skills of the students, especially the ability of notes-taking, information selecting and essay writing through paraphrasing and incorporating ideas from both the in-test lecture and the reading articles, which varies remarkably from the traditional universities of China where the different components of an English test are often separate from each other and use of sources and citations remains to be unintended in the writing section.

3 Areas for Change and Improvement

A number of aspects on teaching strategies and curriculum design could possibly be fine-tuned to better enhance students’ learning experience in the future. Firstly, according to the analysis of Streaming Report conducted by several fellow tutors the Language Centre (McAleer & Wang, 2017), it is not clear from attendance and marks that streaming is having any benefit for lower level students since absence rates of group A are constantly increasing and its drop-out rates also remain quite high compared with the other two categories, namely group B and C. There is proof that students of group A are de-motivated under the situation where all the class participants are somewhat labelled with the ‘weakest’ or

‘poorest’ by their EAP final scores of the previous semester. For this reason, eliminating A/B/C group division in Semester 2 is strongly suggested as it may provide weaker students the opportunities to learn from peers with higher English language proficiency in a mixed class and all the learners will be treated equally, adapting themselves to cope with classmates of different English abilities in their other courses and subsequent Year 2 EAP study. Secondly, some students have made complaints in the Module Questionnaires that they are expecting more language instructions covering grammar and vocabulary in the class. It is true that the main focus of the EAP module is to teach students academic writing and its related study skills while training upon English language basics tends to be insufficient especially when the learning task is predominated by the coursework assignments. A potential change to the current module design is to increase language contexts which can help raise students’ awareness of the grammatical and lexical rules without interfering with the delivery of the general programme. In this way, tutors are able to provide learners with guidance of strategy development rather than simply spend too much time on teaching grammar and words one after another (Nation and Meara, 2010). Besides, mandatory Continuing Support classes which aim to provide extra help of English language learning might be introduced to the students whose academic performance is unsatisfactory in the first semester. Thirdly, most of the teaching materials in the EAP module are based on the norm of native English language competence which is at odds with the current research and understanding of second language acquisition under the domain of English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2007; Jenkins, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011). To be more specific, since achieving native-like competence is not necessary or desired to many contexts where English is used as an international language (Mckay, 2002), the main purpose of learning English for students at XJTU is to interact with teachers and classmates with different nationalities from all over the world (which is also the case at British universities) rather than people who were born in English-speaking countries only, and learners should therefore be equipped with knowledge of World Englishes (Saraceni, 2015) and trained to build up the ability of wider communication in which many English second or foreign language users are often engaged. Finally, computer-assisted language teaching approach has been proved beneficial to classroom activities (Zhou et al., 2013), and that’s why to better improve the teaching and learning efficiency applications of modern technology such as online forums and blogs should also be taken into account and a Flipped-classroom (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015) seems to be a good start to enhance the command of knowledge by teaching students how to make full use of their spare time out of the class. However, what should be pointed out in face of the AI age is that technology can never be considered as the last straw to the educational innovation and thus should not be overused. In other words, it is the wisdom and capabilities of human beings instead of machinery that determine the development and civilisation of mankind, teaching and learning in particular.

References:

- [1] Batten, M. Language Centre Module Handbook: EAP006 English Language and Study Skills II for Business[S]. XJTU, 2016.
- [2] Krashen, D. Principle and Practice in Second Language Acquisition [M]. Oxford: Pergamon, 1982.
- [3] Cohen, A. D. ‘Focus on the Language Learner: Styles, Strategies and Motivation’ in Schmitt, N. (eds.) An Introduction to Applied Linguistics (2nd edn) [C]. Hodder Education, 2010:

- 161-178.
- [4] Larsen-Freeman, D. & DeCarrico, J. 'Grammar' in Schmitt, N. (eds.) *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics* (2nd edn) [C]. Hodder Education, 2010:18-33.
- [5] Hofstede, G. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (Revised 2nd Edition) [M]. London: McGraw-Hill, 2005.
- [6] Gudykunst, W. B. *Individualistic and Collectivistic Perspectives on Communication: An Introduction* [J]. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 1998 (22):107-134.
- [7] Kim, U. *Individualism and Collectivism: A Psychological, Cultural and Ecological Analysis* [R]. NIAS Reports, No. 21, 1995.
- [8] Samovar, L.A., R. E. Porter., and E. R. McDaniel. *Communication between Cultures* (7th Edition) [M]. London: Wadsworth; Cengage Learning, 2009.
- [9] Hall, E. *Beyond Culture* [M]. New York: Doubleday, 1976.
- [10] Wang, Y. L. *Individualistic and Collectivistic Perspectives on Patterns of Teaching and Learning: Products of Culture*. M. A. Module Essay [D]. Department of English Language and Linguistics, University of Sheffield, UK, 2009.
- [11] Triandis, H. C. (1988) 'Collectivism vs Individualism: A Reconceptualization of a Basic Concept in Cross-cultural Psychology' in G. Verma & C. Baagley (Eds.), *Cross-cultural Studies of Personality, Attitudes and Cognition* [C]. London: MacMillan, 1988: 60-95.
- [12] Lebra, T. S. *The Cultural Significance of Silence in Japanese Communication* [J]. *Multilingua*, 1987(6): 343-357.
- [13] Long, M. 'A Role for Instruction in Second Language Acquisition: Task-based Language Teaching' in K. Hyltenstam and M. Pienemann (eds.): *Modelling and Assessing Second Language Acquisition* [C]. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1985.
- [14] Willis, J. 'A Flexible Framework for Task-based Learning' in J. Willis and D. Willis (eds.), *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching* [C]. Oxford: Heinemann, 1996: 52-62.
- [15] Richards, C. and Rodgers, S. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* [M]. Cambridge: CUP, 1986.
- [16] Nunan, D. *Task-based Language Teaching* [M]. Cambridge: CUP, 2004.
- [17] Skehan, P. *A Framework for the Implementation of Task-based Instruction* [J]. *Applied Linguistics*, 1996 (17-1): 38-62.
- [18] Shehan, P. *A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning* [M]. Oxford: OUP, 1998.
- [19] Gibbs, G. *Assessing Student Centred Learning* [M], Oxford: OCS, 1995.
- [20] Jacques, D. (2nd edn) *Learning in Groups* [M]. London: Kogan Page, 1991.
- [21] Silberman, M. *Active Learning: 101 Strategies to Teach Any Subject* [M]. ERIC, 1996.
- [22] Brew, A. 'Teaching and Research: New relationships and their implications for inquiry-based teaching and learning in higher education' [J], *Higher Education Research & Development*, 2003: 22:1, 3-18.
- [23] McAleer, S. & Wang, A.R. *Streaming Report 2016-17* [R]. Language Centre, XJTU, 2017.
- [24] Nation, P. & Meara, P. 'Vocabulary' in Schmitt, N. (eds.) *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics* (2nd edn) [C]. Hodder Education, 2010: 34-52.
- [25] Jenkins, J. *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity* [M]. Oxford: OUP, 2007.
- [26] Jenkins, J. (2nd edn) *World Englishes: A Resource Book for Students* [M]. London: Routledge, 2009.
- [27] Seidlhofer, B. *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca* [M]. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- [28] McKay, S. L. *Teaching English as an International Language* [M]. Oxford: OUP, 2002.
- [29] Saraceni, M. *World Englishes: A Critical Analysis* [M]. Bloomsbury, 2015.
- [30] Zhou, B., Xing, M., Xiang, C., Wang, Y. & Sun, M. (ed.) *Computer-Assisted Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Technological Advances* [C]. IGI Global, USA, 2013.
- [31] Abeysekera, L. & Dawson, P. 'Motivation and Cognitive Load in the Flipped Classroom: Definition, Rationale and a Call for Research' [J], *Higher Education Research & Development*, 2015, 34: 1-14.

【通联编辑:朱宝贵】