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Developing an advanced, specialized English proficiency test for Beijing universities

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the specificity conundrum:

EGP   EAP   ESAP   ESP   English in the Disciplines-→

Specialised English [Hyland & Wong 2019]

Abstract

As the general level of English proficiency among university undergraduates in China rises, some institutions and academic departments want to increase their graduates' marketability by offering students the opportunity to take a discipline-focussed English language test in their third year. This project, sponsored by the Beijing College English Research Association, is identifying the need for specifically discipline-focused English language courses and developing a template for the assessment of achievement in those courses. The need for assessments of academic writing and speaking, skills which are less often assessed in China and are increasingly seen to be as essential to success in intra-company as in international communication, has already been identified by College English professors.

"…assessment is a key issue …"

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- "…in English for Academic Purposes programmes, and yet, few EAP practitioners are actively involved in wider debates about what constitutes EAP assessment. In other words, the development of EAP assessment theory has been left in the hands of language testers even though it is EAP practitioners who devise and administer most of the EAP assessment going on around the world."

- EAP teachers have many skills, but

- "Most of the assessment work of EAP practitioners is hidden away and thus contributes little to theory-building or wider understandings of EAP assessment in practice. This results in the construct of EAP in EAP assessment being under-defined and under-theorized."

(Schmitt & Hamp-Lyons 2015)

BCERA Rationale for the project

- "To the best of our knowledge, there is no single testing system targeted at assessing the EAP competence of university students in the Chinese context. Although EAP is touched upon in certain levels of the newly published China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) (Ministry of Education of China, 2018), CSE is not originally intended for EAP learning, teaching and testing. Currently, both domestic and international English tests are available in China, but none is specifically designed for assessing the EAP competence of the Chinese university students who receive higher education and undertake research in the local milieu of China."

BCERA Rationale (2)

- "Therefore, this project aims to devise a testing system that enables the assessment of Chinese university students' EAP competence with the ultimate goal of facilitating EAP teaching and learning as well as enhancing students' EAP competence in China. The long-term objectives of this project are threefold:

1. to develop a test syllabus on EAP competence assessment;

2. to design a test specification accordingly; and

3. to write sample test papers that fit the specification."

BCERA Rationale 3

- "At present, the short-term objectives of the project are also threefold:

  1. to survey and analyze the needs for EAP competence in China;

  2. to define the construct of EAP competence; and

  3. to establish a solid theoretical foundation for its assessment."

Phase 1

PRELIMINARY NEEDS ANALYSIS

To obtain a preliminary view of subject academics' views on their students' needs for English, eight professors from 4 Beijing universities were interviewed.

Interviewers were members of the BCERA. Interviewees were academic faculty at four of Beijing's approx. 70 universities, and the BCERA team currently consists of English Language faculty from 18 of them. The preliminary data were collected from:

Tsinghua University (National Direct, rank #2)
University of the China Academy of Sciences (National Direct, rank #6)
Beijing Normal University (National Direct, rank #10)
University of Science and Technology Beijing (National Direct, rank #15)

The eight interviewees were from:

Civil Engineering
Computer Science
Economics
Education
Law
Materials Science
Maths
Social Science

Findings from preliminary needs analysis:
ENGLISH SKILLS

- Broad question on the current status of students' English suggests that reading and vocabulary are "OK";

- More specific questions on what English skills and levels are desirable in the interviewee's context suggest:

  - Listening: need to understand a wide variety of accents

  - Vocabulary: not mentioned as a problem

  - Reading: extensive reading* is key

  - Speaking: for 6 of 8 interviewees speaking very important

  - Writing: key is writing research articles "in the western way"

  - Translation: rarely needed

Findings from preliminary needs analysis:
DISCIPLINE-RELATED ENGLISH

- The most common needs to emerge in the interviews were:

- Academic social interaction (preparing for study year abroad, for conference attendance and presentation)

- Opportunities for interaction with native speakers

- Mastery of information search and integration skills

- Writing RAs [research articles]

- However, this brief overview conceals large variations between respondents: the differences may be due to individual preferences/attitudes, or to disciplinary variations.

Phase 2(a)

These broad interview questions were intended **not only** to yield an initial sense of the attitudes of faculty members across different disciplines to the value (if any) of EAP competence or 'specialised English language test at the end of the third year of undergraduate study, **but also** to establish the feasibility of the main study.

- All interviewees agreed there was a need for POSTgraduate students to reach higher English proficiency.

- Not all interviewees saw the need for discipline-specific English language assessment for UNDERgraduates, several referring to "EGP" and "ESAP" as seeming the right approach.

- Some comments suggested impractical goals, e.g. ***

- There was considerable variability in the priorities expressed by different faculty members.

Moving to Phase 2(b)

Phase 2b was to be brought in if the findings from the preliminary study raised concerns about the feasibility of the original plan. This discussion with the team in Beijing will take place in the next few days.

The discussion will need to:

- clarify the project objectives and decide how far they are achievable

- identify any constraints on achieving these desired objectives

- Establish the exact design for collection of new data for the Main Study (e.g., should some disciplines be omitted? Should there be a focus on certain skills?

- Determine exactly the numbers of faculty participants needed in each discipline

- Agree on the necessary student population: n-size per discipline **plus** which disciplines; current English language levels; year of study incl. under vs post graduate; (etc).

Phase 2(b)

The team in Beijing will need to implement the planning decisions made in the next team meeting.

- The next steps will be:

    - collect data

    - analyze data

    - interpret results

    - report results to all stakeholders

This will be no small task.

Phase 3

- When this has been done, we can move on to the other two 'short-term' goals:

  - to define the construct of EAP competence; and

  - to establish a solid theoretical foundation for its assessment.

Inevitably the 'construct' will be contextual, but EAP/ESAP/ESP or 'specialized English' will always be construed contextually. Prof. Zhang and her colleagues hope that they will have arrived at a relevant and useful construct for the Chinese, or at least Beijng, context.

Beyond Phase 3

It should be noted that from the earliest discussion of this project, BCERA colleagues have had the improvement of teaching and learning as their over-arching goal.

Following Sawaki (2017), the project aims ultimately not only to identify appropriate language skills for disciplines/faculties/departments, in order to **develop a template for the creation of discipline-oriented assessments to fit those needs**, but also to closely consider the need for revision of teaching materials and the need for improvement in teaching and learning practices.

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APPENDIX: Guidelines for preliminary interviews

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1. In your opinion, what are student needs for English in your discipline? Why? (Overarching question)

2. Specifically, what are their needs for English skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating, respectively? Why?

3. In addition to these basic skills, what are their needs for English that are particularly relevant to their subject learning and research? Why?

4. What are the differences between undergraduates and postgraduates' needs for English in your discipline? Why?

5. What kind of English courses do you think should be provided for your students (both undergraduates and graduates)?

    For example, EGP? EAP? EGAP? ESAP? (The interviewer may need to explain the difference between these two concepts)?