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An e-learning course in EAP –
Enhancing academic study skills, language and culture

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Abstract

The paper investigates the impact of the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course on the development of academic study skills, language and culture. The course, designed within the framework of the Virtual University project, is aimed at English Major students who need to develop their writing skills and strategies for writing their theses in English and their presentation skills for an oral defense of their theses. The course was developed on the findings of a needs analysis and piloted in the EAP course in the bachelor-degree program in the 2013-2014 winter semester. The paper examines the research conducted in 2012 and 2013 that has confirmed expected progress in academic skills and language development and revealed a necessity to focus on cultural awareness more systematically. The paper discusses the results achieved from assessing students' essays and oral presentations.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes (EAP); essays; oral presentations; academic study skills, academic language, academic culture

1. An EAP Online Course

In 2008, Trnava University applied for a project, called Virtual University, with the aim to support e-learning education and enable students to study wherever they are. In 2009, the project started to be implemented in three faculties of Trnava University in which enthusiastic pedagogues were willing to produce new materials to make their courses more available for their students. The Department of English Language and Literature within the Faculty of Education of Trnava University recognized various obstacles their students had to overcome while writing their theses in English in the past few years and decided to conduct research based on a students' needs analysis - the process proposed by Jordan (2004). The theoretical approach to the needs analysis was firmly based on Munby's

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sociolinguistic model for defining the content of a purpose-specific language program, which aims at giving a valid specification of the target level communicative competence of users as it operates at two stages: building up a profile of student needs and converting them into syllabus content, presented in Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design* (1997). A third perspective referring to the distinction between learner-centered and learning-centered approaches (Hutchinson, Waters, 1991) was included to the theoretical basis of the research.

1.1. Needs Analysis

The group of learners the research in 2010-2012 targeted were students studying English Language and Literature in combination with other disciplines such as languages, sciences, humanities and arts, and all the questions were designed to reveal the skills relevant for students (needs), the skills students consider important and want to improve (wants) and the desired competence of students (lacks).

Focusing on academic study skills, it was found out that previous secondary-school studies had limited students' study skills by prioritizing grammar over developing proper communicative language skills, affecting mostly reading, which had been practiced through reading aloud word by word without noticing meaningful units or guessing meaning of unknown words from the surrounding text. Prediction related to thinking ahead, hypothesizing and predicting had not been practiced. The focal students admitted not being able to use proper language as speaking activities during their studies had been focused on memorizing the texts from the course books and writing had not been practiced systematically. The proficiency test revealed that the traditional approach to grammar teaching had been limited to correct forms at the expense of usage and the aspect of formality had not been mentioned much during their secondary studies, so students had not been aware of its proper usage. Culture had been taught through reading the texts about English-speaking countries, and any steps toward intercultural teaching had not been recognized.

The needs analysis confirmed the necessity to enable students to develop their study skills, academic language and culture, as more than 50% of English Major students had applied for thesis writing in English. The needs section of research 2010-2012 displayed the necessity to introduce the formality aspect of English due to the test results, in which a large number of students (68%) failed in tasks related to formal English. The same number of students (70%) claimed that they had never practiced referencing, and had not been aware of paraphrasing. When expressing their wants in the questionnaires, 57 percent requested for an intensive course related to thesis writing and 49 percent acknowledged their unawareness of presentation techniques (Bérešová, 2013).

The needs analysis proved the necessity of designing a course which would enable students to overcome their deficiencies and help them to complete their bachelor-degree program successfully.

1.2 An online course

English for Academic Purposes – an online course (Bérešová, 2014) consists of 7 sections divided into 14 units providing practical help in developing academic study skills, such as effective note-taking, citation, referencing, paraphrasing, summarizing, presenting the achieved data orally, and developing academic language and culture. Students are encouraged to study independently as a number of practical tips are presented and authentic materials are provided for practicing all four communicative skills, grammatical structures and vocabulary characteristic for academic discourse and attitudes, beliefs and values of the English-speaking academic world. From this paper's perspective, the online course sections related to speaking, writing, language in use and academic culture are discussed below as the data displayed in the data analysis refer to oral production and interaction, and written production.

- Speaking

The material provided in this section enables students to practice both oral production and oral interaction. The activities of this section support developing the ability to present the chosen topic fluently without reading from notes, and responding to comments and questions related to the presented paper. The students are trained to justify their presented viewpoints. Evaluating presentations is included as it can help student to become self-aware.

- Writing

   This section presents practical steps necessary for students to be aware of communicating a clear message effectively in written English by introducing key concepts in academic writing, exploring the use of the layout of the paper, developing and presenting an argument, practicing academic genres such as essays, abstracts, summaries, etc. The mother-tongue influence on writing is diminished by training students to develop a good paragraph in English.

- Language in Use

   These activities focus on distinguishing multiple meanings of words, using dictionaries and extending general and academic vocabulary. The activities based on more general words used for discussing ideas and research are usually complemented by more specific words regarding the discipline students are concerned with. Formal grammar usage such as nominalization, the passive, subordinate clauses and linking devices is explained, practiced and systematically revised. This section is aimed at language needed to understand and deliver academic arguments, language of speculation and synthesizing information from multiple sources into their academic texts and presentations.

- Academic Culture

   The issues of how to avoid plagiarism, using the main forms of citation and referencing are presented and practiced. Students are exposed to presentations which are analyzed and contrasted. The rehearsal of the thesis defense is recommended and promoted. From the practical perspective, students are enabled to practice their presentations in pairs, focusing on timing, justifying the presented viewpoints and evaluating others' opinions. Influenced by the culture of English-speaking countries, the Department encourages students to present their ideas in their theses on the basis of freedom to communicate and disagree with the authors' opinions without fear of repression.

   Apart from the above-mentioned sections, the course involves sections referring to reading and listening skills, practiced through lectures and authentic academic texts, which provide realistic contexts for exploring these skills. The course enables students to acquire academic skills which are required to function effectively in a university environment.

2. The Assessment of Essays and Presentations – The Research Conducted in 2012 and 2013

   While working on an online EAP course, an ongoing debate about its probable impact on students' study skills, language and culture resulted in the idea of carrying out research which would enable us to compare the performances of students that did not take part in the course and those who applied for the course. In 2012, we measured the students' performances in essay writing and presenting the chosen topics with the aim of obtaining data related to their academic skills and strategies as well as academic language acquisition and cultural awareness. These students deliberately decided to apply for writing their theses in English and were led by their supervisors while working on their research and thesis writing. This group of students became a control group in our research, in which an experimental group were the students who applied for an optional course – an online EAP course. Our aim was to thoroughly examine the effects of the EAP course and to identify the factors influencing the quality of the students´ theses and oral defense presentations. The hypothesis of the research was associated with the impact of the online course on students' writing and speaking skills, academic language and culture. The data presented in this paper are based on assessing students' essays and their presentations. Each group (experimental and control) consisted of 12 English Major students in combination with other disciplines in their third year of the bachelor-degree program, and, as mentioned above, exclusively those who applied for writing their theses in English. Both written and oral performances were assessed using the analytical rating scales.

2.1 Assessing essays

   In the first place, it needs to be mentioned that the rules for academic writing in Slovak are not the same as those for writing i'n English, mainly those referring to genres and levels of formality, and the organization of the text.

Writing essays, topic and illustrative sentences in a paragraph are typical for English academic culture. Some features of essay writing are practiced in courses of general English during secondary-school studies, but how to structure an argumentative essay or a discursive one is the goal of university study courses, focusing on thesis, antithesis or synthesis structure-based approaches. Secondly, formality in English texts expressed by using complex sentences, the passive, discourse markers, high-level vocabulary, academic vocabulary is directly proportional to the level of language proficiency, which might limit some students. As a consequence, the students are expected to achieve CEFR level C1. Those whose language competence is lower are recommended to attend optional courses in English. From the cultural perspective, it is necessary to mention that Slovaks expressing their ideas and viewpoints use vague phrases and sentences quite a lot, as some years ago the people in this country could not express their attitudes openly without being repressed. What is more, in contrastive rhetoric Slavic languages are considered indirect, which influences organizing text (Carter, Jakes, 2009). Students were provided general guidelines for approaching essays, related to expressing their ideas clearly and precisely, providing specific examples, citing, paraphrasing, referencing, balancing the items, including only those which are relevant to the topic, etc.

In the practicing phase, the essays written by both control and experimental group students were commented on by teachers providing them with formative feedback, indicating for each student what their weaknesses are in these areas: communicative quality, ideas and organization, grammar and vocabulary and coherence. The students' abilities were not judged, on the contrary, students were provided information about the comprehensibility of their ideas or if they were able to convey their message. Feedback related to organization included comments on their organizational structure based on logical thinking, relevant arguments and supporting material. As far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned, the students obtained feedback on their range and control of grammatical structures and vocabulary. Creating coherent and cohesive discourse, using a wide range of connectors and other cohesive devices was the principle underlying the category of coherence.

Testing writing was based on the following task: Write an argumentative essay (1,400-1,500 words), which is to be published in the university journal, entitled *An EAP Course is Worth Doing*. Focus on the following points: developing study skills, improving English language and becoming aware of academic culture.

An analytic rating scale based on four marking criteria enabled the assessors to make assessment as objective as possible. These marking criteria are constantly used and students are familiar with them. The first criterion (task achievement) refers to the achievement of the purpose stated for the task, clear evidence of research, enough material to cover all the points and the clarity and relative easiness of the content to be understood. What is more, it includes use and acknowledgement of sources. The second criterion (organization) covers the genre aspects, and the arrangement of the text in the paragraph, the level of formality suitable for the intended audience. The third criterion refers to grammar and its range and accuracy. The vocabulary criterion emphasizes range, accuracy and appropriateness of the words and phrases (words in collocation) used.

In accordance with the ECTS system of grades, which was designed as an aid to the understanding of grades across national boundaries, the points gained by the students were transferred into the ranking system, which tells how a particular student performed relative to the remaining students. The Department of English language and Literature have agreed upon the classification system in which measurement of knowledge, skills and competences should be distributed into grades is as follows: A (100-92), B (91-85), C (84-79), D (78-73) and E (72-65).

Table 1 Scores of control group students versus scores of experimental group students

Students	A	B	C	D	E	FX
Control group	1 (8.33%)	2 (16.66%)	4 (33.33%)	1 (8.33%)	2 (16.66%)	2(16.66%)
Experimental group	4 (33.33%)	3 (25.00%)	2 (16.66%)	2 (16.66%)	1 (8.33%)	0 (0%)

Despite the fact that the students from the control group were supervised how to produce an academic text in written English, they complained about non-systematic approaches, irregular meetings with their supervisors during their office hours, not enough time and room for practicing skills and academic language. The most disappointing results were achieved while assessing citing and referencing as the students were familiar with the introduction of the central registration of theses where all the theses are checked and students receive the document called a certificate of originality, which is an inseparable part of the student´s documentation related to the final examination.

2.3 Assessing presentations

After choosing the topic of their theses, the students were expected to retrieve information from different sources, present their viewpoints and take an active part in a professional discussion. The course was aimed at developing communicative competence of the students, focusing on presenting ideas and explaining their viewpoints, expressing the structure of their presentation, giving support to their statements and argumentation through gathered data, presenting different arguments and refuting them, persuading the audience, admitting defeat in the discussion and making conclusions. With the goal of providing an objective evaluation of the students´ performances in mind, it was needed to set up an evaluation instrument. The designed rating scale consists of several categories related to three areas: information retrieval, presentation skills and language competence. The information retrieval section involves the choice of material and its relevance to the selected topic, analyzing and contrasting opposing viewpoints and synthesizing evidence and explanation. Presentation criteria contain the organization of the presentation, such as the introduction, the topic announcement, reasoning for the topic choice. During the development stage, apart from the ideas and supporting comments, the ways of creating independent ideas effectively and focusing on the most significant problems are assessed. At the end of the talk, the students are expected to recall the main aim and the major points of the talk. Descriptors of the rating scale allow assessors to measure fluency and readiness to answer the audience's questions and overall performance (eye contact, speaking without reading from papers, attracting the audience, movements, gestures, etc.). The last criterion - grammar and vocabulary is based on the range, accuracy and appropriateness of using typical EAP grammatical structures and academic vocabulary. This area refers to qualitative aspects of spoken language competence such as range, accuracy, fluency and coherence for oral production. In the interactional part of the presentation, the interaction aspect is replaced by the coherence aspect.

Table 2 Scores achieved by control group and experimental group students

Students	Organization	Presentation Skills	Language in Use
Control group	56.11%	58.62%	61.33%
Experimental group	64.35%	68.29%	69.67%

The students of both groups were familiar with the criteria from being trained how to assess their colleagues' performances and/or how to assess themselves. The crucial issues were discussed regularly, however, the experiment has revealed that they are better prepared theoretically than practically. Some of them admitted to not having rehearsed their presentations as they had underestimated its significance. The scores achieved by both groups are not substantially different, but slight improvement is recognizable and the results of the experiment will affect the selection of the material in the next academic year.

Presenting a thesis plays an important role in grading the thesis part of the final bachelor-degree examination. As it can be influenced by many aspects that can be classified as content-related (a clear purpose, message to communicate, relevant and new information) or delivery related (presentation techniques), the department considers training how to prepare and deliver a presentation as one of the key issues of an EAP course. Recent research in 2012 and 2013 has produced some interesting findings that students still have problems with covering only the main points of their research and showcasing the highlights of the research by summarizing the main ideas and the most interesting and convincing supporting points. Unlike previous years, a systematic approach to presentation skills was recognized in the 2013-2014 academic year.

3. Conclusion

On the basis of the findings from needs analysis 2010-2012, an online EAP course was designed and piloted within our Virtual University project. The course was officially recommended to English Major students who had chosen their theses from the list presented by the Department of English Language and Literature of the Faculty of Education of Trnava University. Research measuring the impact of the course on development of academic study

skills, language and culture was proposed to be conducted in the 2013-2014 academic year. The achievements of an experimental group of students were analyzed and statistically compared with the previous year measurements of the third-year students who applied for writing their theses in English and were systematically instructed by their supervisors who followed the same syllabus and the same materials. Both groups were students of their third year of studies in the bachelor-degree program. The experimental group consisted of 12 students who decided to attend an online course as they selected the thesis topics proposed by the department. The group of those who attended an online course was 18 but 6 students opted for the course for various reasons such as improving their English, getting credits required for completing a bachelor-degree program, etc., and these students are not included in our research as they did not intend to submit their theses and defend them. The students of the control group were those who selected their theses to be written in English but were obliged to attend tutorials with their supervisors. Comparing the study results, the students of the control group were better students as their English acquired at secondary-school was assessed at CEFR level B2. The experimental group included students with only a CEFR level B1 school-leaving examination (5 out of 12). The samples taken were quite small and drawing conclusions should be done very carefully, but research data indicate that after exposure to an online EAP course, the students from the experimental group were better prepared for writing their theses in English and were more confident in presenting their ideas, supporting and contrasting points, admitting defeat in discussion and completing presentations by expressing balance. Their English was more appropriate and natural as they could practice formal English independently at home as many times as they wanted. Introducing an academic culture typical for English speaking countries resulted in some changes in students' behavior. They were more curious, critical and honest. While last year, one student was accused of plagiarism, this year students mastered citation and referencing. As they were exposed to language in use exercises in natural authentic texts, their English was more English-like and the number of mistakes reduced by 30 percent.

From the cultural perspective, a limited number of students managed to present extracts from books and articles in a critical way and compare various approaches to the topic. However, quoting from books and articles while also acknowledging the source has increased in numbers (in 23 percent) and using the recommended web sites was significantly recognizable (increase to 68%). Using an online EAP course had a remarkable effect on working out the papers oneself as the students commented on in their questionnaires. Each time they were not sure how to write their essays or prepare their presentations, they went on-line and went through the theoretical part and read carefully the presented examples, working on their own papers or presentations.

The real impact on the students' performances was seen at the end of the summer semester when they were obliged to submit their theses and defend them orally. Unlike the previous year when one student failed (for plagiarism and not being able to defend her thesis orally but presenting it sufficiently), this academic year all the English Major students passed in both parts of the thesis examination despite the fact that in average they were weaker learners than those who completed their studies last year.

The department's slogan is that mastering another language means accepting a system of beliefs and values shared by a target community. Apart from many goals the department has set in training the students for their teaching career, the emphasis is laid on intercultural communication as a target culture can remarkably influence our approach to life in our home country as well.

To conclude, there is no need to measure the extent to which modern technologies expand our teaching horizons as the impact is clearly visible. The Virtual University project enabled us to enrich language teaching at our department, to look at ways to approach the growing area of teaching on-line and to use the Internet for both staffˇs and studentsˊ own professional development.

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