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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 66 (2012) 247 – 254

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

The 8th International Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) Seminar - Aligning Theoretical Knowledge with Professional Practice

English for Art Communication to Enhance Quality Programs

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Abstract

English-medium instruction has become a common approach to increase the internationalisation opportunities of academic institutions. This article presents the results of a survey ($N=80$) and a focus group discussion to identify students' attitudes toward specialized English for art, and their experiences and challenges regarding English-medium education. The findings showed that communication and understanding were the challenges that concern the nonnative students in the focused international institution. The study also indicated that senior students have higher awareness of their need for specialized English than freshmen. The paper confirms the significance of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction for students and recommends an on-going communication and academic writing courses to contribute to the quality of international art communication.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the LSP 2012 Committee, Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Keywords: English-medium instruction; art; communication; Internationalisation; EAP

1. Introduction

Nonnative students of English who joined English medium institutions must understand and use English appropriately to succeed ultimately. For newcomers practically, language obstacles are the most common experienced difficulties. They need to overcome these formidable barriers as soon as possible, since a wide range of institutional and learning tasks are accomplished through language use. To facilitate students' language adjustment, international institutions usually provide English support programs. The main aim of these programs is to prepare students to cope with academic language needs, such as: understanding texts and lectures, communicating with lecturers, peers, and staff, and writing reports.

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English support programs in institutions usually have to deal with a complicated problem. Although primarily they aim to introduce the linguistic demands of academia to newcomers, students' general knowledge of and proficiency in English is so varied and often limited that these programs turn to general English training courses. In fact while instructors of English for academic purposes (EAP) programs attempt to make students aware of the linguistic differences across academic disciplines, in reality many nonnative students do not have the basis for such programs. Therefore, EAP is very prone to be sacrificed in favor of general English proficiency.

EAP has a special responsibility. It makes the students aware of the fact that each discipline has its own language characteristics which differ greatly from other disciplines [1]. Yet, the successful implementation of EAP courses in international learning institutions depends on students' attitudes toward and readiness for such courses. This research, by taking a Malaysian institute of art as a case of investigation, tries to seek students' attitudes toward specific English programs for art and identify their experiences and challenges of studying in an English medium institution. The results of this study may contribute to the development of support English courses in such institutions.

2. Review of Literature

Becher and Trower [2] use the word 'tribes' for the different academic disciplines. This is because each distinct discipline uses specific language norms. This means that academic disciplines use language differently to construct knowledge [3][4]. Swales [5] believes that group members use specific language to achieve collective goals. Barton [6] uses the term 'discourse community' for such group members and says: "a discourse community is a group of people who [...] the text aimed at [...] or it can refer to the people who participate in a set of discourse practices both by reading and writing." Discourse gives identity to a culture. It gives certain attitudes to its practitioners and makes them practice certain things. This approach reveals that texts are not the same in all disciplines and their producers need more skills than general English proficiency [3]. Therefore, EAP should become the mainstream in institutions to inform the learners about the different vocabulary and linguistic patterns associated with particular academic disciplines [1]. In such programs, learners study texts, roles and contexts which build their awareness of their disciplines. Johns [7] calls this a socio-literate view to teaching which ultimately develops genre understanding in learners. EAP tries to express that with general English one cannot be successful as a member of a discourse community. Swales and Feak [8] believe that students have particular communicative needs which are defined by their disciplines. They believe that pedagogical decisions and classroom activities should be highly discipline-based. However, before developing a discipline-sensitive language course it is of value to understand learners' attitude toward learning the conventions of their target disciplines and whether they have experienced the need to learn specialised English. Such information informs course-designers and decision makers of the learners' readiness for being exposed to EAP courses.

3. Methodology

This research used a mixed methods approach. The quantitative survey was done first, and then a focus group discussion was implemented where the qualitative data was collected. This research gave greater priority to quantitative than the qualitative approach, since the questionnaire was designed to show the differences in attitude toward EAP programs between the first year and the final year students. The outcome of the qualitative data was less dominant and used to illustrate the reasons behind the change in attitude among the focused groups.

3.1. Participants

This study made use of quota sampling to involve 80 nonnative students from a Malaysian institute of art. This mode of sampling was used to select three groups of art students. Sampling was done by personally inviting students in different spots of the focused institution (such as café, library, and computer lab) to find interested and appropriate applicants. Although sampling was not on a random basis, it was the only feasible method in the

context of the study. Moreover, since the researchers were interested to compare the attitude of the first year and the final year students toward EAP, two strata (groups) were involved in the quantitative phase of the study. The number of the respondents in each spectrum was determined based on the Table of Sample Size provided by Krejcie and Morgan [9]. The sample consisted of 52 first year students, and 28 final year students ($N=80$). For the qualitative phase, the final year participants of the study were invited to take part in a focus group discussion. Of 28 participants only 5 accepted to be involved in the discussion. The participants were local and international students with an average age of 19. The respondents spent an average of 6 years of being exposed to general English courses and none of them had the experience of studying English specifically for art. Their average IELTS band score was 6.0.

3.2. *Setting*

A Malaysian institute of art which provided different fulltime Diploma courses in the field of art to local and international students was selected and permission was sought to enter the institution and do the research from the administrator's office of the institute. There were many students from China, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Iran, and Myanmar in this institute at the time of conducting this research. The language of instruction as claimed by the students was "half Malay, and half English". It is important to mention, there was no English language courses to support students in the institution. As a general entry requirement, international applicants need to prove their English proficiency by either TOEFL score of 525 or IELTS band 6.0 when they apply for a course.

3.3. *Instruments*

A questionnaire was developed in simple English by the researchers and piloted on 10 art students to evaluate the competency and quality of the questionnaire and to estimate the time the participants need to complete it. The finalized questionnaire had four sections. The first section sought the respondents' background in English proficiency. The second section investigated how students view EAP as compared to general English. The questions in the third section asked about the students' readiness for EAP. The fourth section sought the students' expectations of EAP courses. The respondents had to rate the questions on a 5-likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.80 for the first year students and 0.85 for the third year students, indicating the scale measured responses with internal consistency.

For the qualitative phase of the research a focus group was chosen. Focus group is a way of asking potential users for their opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about the focused issue. A focus group encourages discussion which gives the researchers the chance to learn more about the phenomenon under investigation.

3.4. *Procedures*

The questionnaire was given to the students in person by the researchers. The researchers briefed the respondents about the content of the questionnaire and how each section should be answered. During this phase of the study 80 questionnaires were distributed and all of the obtained responses were considered valid.

The focus group discussion was conducted two days later in the library of the institute with the participation of 5 third year students. The participants were chosen from the third year respondents of the questionnaire who were eager to share their opinions and experiences with the researchers. The focus group discussion was conducted in English and participants were asked to reflect on their experience of studying and communicating in English as well as the necessity of attending EAP courses during their studies. The focus group was audio recorded and it took 45 minutes.

3.5. Data Analysis

SPSS (PASW) 18 was used to calculate Cronbach's alpha mean to obtain the reliability of the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, and means) were also estimated and independent t-tests were run to determine whether there were any significant differences between the first year and the final year students' responses.

The data gained from the focus group were analyzed through a structural analysis approach. Structural analysis is a common approach in focus group data analysis. According to Gall, Borg, and Gall [10] by utilizing structural analysis the researchers tried to elicit special patterns in conversations. The researchers did not explicate meanings and relied on the instances derived from the data. To do structural analysis, the recorded dialogue was transcribed. Then with the help of an interrater, the utterances were clustered and classified into common themes across the responses to the questions. Then the instances were recorded in an Excel database, where the themes emerged. These themes then were used to support the findings from the survey.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section is divided into two parts to report and discuss the findings of the study where it is divided into sections: the survey, and then focus group discussion.

4.1. The Survey

Table 1 presents the result of t-test for the first set of questions. This section asked the respondents seven questions to determine their preferred type of English course as well their perception of EAP. The data clearly showed significant difference between the two parties. In other words, while the third year students (Group B) were more interested in EAP, the first year students (Group A) had great desire to attend general English training courses. The most significant difference was found in item 2, when they were asked about the usefulness of EAP. Obviously, the third year students believed that EAP would be more useful; while the first year students' preferred general English, since they considered such training more beneficial than EAP. These findings show that the more students were exposed to English specific texts and lectures, the more they realized the efficacy of EAP and its impact on their academic wellbeing.

Table 2 presents the results of the second section of the questionnaire. This section was particularly interested in understanding the students' feelings about their knowledge of English and their readiness for EAP. According to the table, the most significant difference was related to the seventh item. While almost 46 per cent of the third year respondents believed that EAP would be necessary for nonnative students' of art who study in international institutions, nearly 71 per cent of the first year students were opposed to this item. The interesting finding in this section was related to item 6 which revealed the majority of both groups agreed that an EAP course would be challenging for students who do not have sufficient general English proficiency.

Table 3 presents the results of the data analysis for the third section of the questionnaire. It reveals that there was a consistency of opinions between the two groups of the students about the nature of an EAP course. Most of the participants agreed that the goal of EAP is different from general English training (item 1). They generally believed that the medium of instruction in an EAP course should be English (item 2) and the instructor should be an art expert (item 4). More than these, they agreed that EAP textbooks should be related to their discipline (item 6), and the majority of them agreed that an EAP course should not have a final exam (item 7). The most interesting findings of this section was the significant difference between the groups in item 5, in which the third year respondents believed that students of art should take an EAP course as a compulsory course, while the first year students did not agree. Item 3, also showed a moderate difference between the groups, in which the third year respondents believed that EAP *instruction* differs from general English instruction.

Table 1. EAP vs. general English training (N=52 – 1st year; N=28 – 3rd year)

Questions	Responses on a Likert scale					Mean	T
	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)		
Q1A	13.46	55.77	23.08	7.69	0	2.25	*6.06
Q1B	3.57	10.71	25	50	10.71	3.53	
Q2A	28.85	46.15	19.23	5.77	0	2.01	*6.81
Q2B	7.14	10.71	21.43	39.29	21.43	3.57	
Q3A	17.31	32.69	28.85	17.31	3.85	2.05	*2.75
Q3B	10.71	10.71	25	46.43	7.14	3.32	
Q4A	21.15	57.69	15.38	5.77	0	2.8	*6.02
Q4B	7.14	10.71	32.14	42.86	7.14	3.57	
Q5A	19.23	34.62	23.08	21.15	1.92	2.51	*2.78
Q5B	10.71	14.29	25	39.29	10.71	3.25	
Q6A	25	42.31	26.92	5.77	0	2.13	*4.98
Q6B	10.71	14.29	21.43	42.86	10.71	3.28	
Q7A	17.31	40.38	26.92	15.38	0	2.40	*5.04
Q7B	3.57	7.14	35.71	39.29	14.29	3.53	

*p < .05

Q:Question; A:Group A; B:Group B

Table 2. Students' readiness for EAP (N=52 – 1st year; N=28 – 3rd year)

Questions	Responses on a Likert scale					Mean	t
	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)		
Q1A	17.31	40.38	17.31	21.15	3.85	2.55	*3.45
Q1B	10.71	7.14	25	35.71	21.43	3.5	
Q2A	17.31	38.46	21.15	19.23	3.85	2.53	*3.4
Q2B	7.14	7.14	32.14	46.43	7.14	3.39	
Q3A	0	3.85	32.69	30.77	32.69	3.92	*2.89
Q3B	10.71	14.29	21.43	46.43	7.14	3.25	
Q4A	0	0	17.31	51.92	30.77	4.13	*3.59
Q4B	10.71	7.14	28.57	39.29	14.29	3.39	
Q5A	13.46	34.62	23.08	28.85	0	2.67	*2.96
Q5B	7.14	14.29	25	35.71	17.86	3.43	
Q6A	0	1.92	13.46	55.77	28.85	4.11	*2.82
Q6B	3.57	3.57	32.14	50	10.71	3.60	
Q7A	25	46.15	23.08	5.77	0	2.09	*5.09
Q7B	7.14	7.14	39.29	35.71	10.71	3.35	

*p < .05

Q:Question; A:Group A; B:Group B

Table 3. The perception of students' of an EAP course (N=52 – 1st year; N=28 – 3rd year)

Questions	Responses on a Likert scale					Mean	t
	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)		
Q1A	11.54	28.85	7.69	44.23	7.69	3.076	0.58
Q1B	14.29	17.86	14.29	35.71	17.86	3.25	
Q2A	7.69	19.23	9.62	48.08	15.38	3.44	0.59
Q2B	7.14	7.14	42.86	35.71	7.14	3.28	
Q3A	13.46	46.15	28.85	11.54	0	2.38	*2.89
Q3B	3.57	25	42.86	28.57	0	2.94	
Q4A	19.23	19.23	3.85	40.38	17.31	3.17	0.02
Q4B	17.86	21.43	3.57	39.29	17.86	3.18	
Q5A	19.23	57.69	15.38	7.69	0	2.11	*5.09
Q5B	10.71	14.29	25	39.29	10.71	3.25	
Q6A	5.77	36.54	9.62	38.46	9.62	3.09	0.09
Q6B	3.57	35.71	25	21.43	14.29	3.07	
Q7A	21.15	53.85	17.31	7.69	0	2.11	0.87
Q7B	14.29	53.57	21.43	10.71	0	2.28	

*p < .05

Q:Question; A:Group A; B:Group B

4.2. Focus Group Discussion

The focus group discussion was particularly designed to investigate the attitude of the third year students toward an EAP course. Particularly, the researchers wanted to gain some insights of the importance of specialize English in an art institution. The participants reported that “English proficiency was one of the basic requirements” (all 5 participants) of getting admission from the institute. Most of them recalled that language was their main concern before starting their studies. All of them took intensive preparation courses at least for two months before sitting for IELTS examination. Interestingly, all of them agreed that their IELTS exam did not show their real ability to use English. This issue was also obvious in the quantitative phase of the study (table 2: Q5). They acknowledged that their IELTS score was the result of their intensive studying for the examination, while in reality they experience much hardship in understanding the lectures and communicating.

The participants of the study agreed that when they joined the institute, their “main language concern was communication in English in daily life” (Participants C, D & E). The interesting point that the participants mentioned was they did not have much concern about understanding the lectures and textbooks. This was because of the general mind-set that art is visual (painting, pottery, photography, and calligraphy) and auditory (music) and success in art highly depends on the ability to manipulate the instruments, one’s artistic talent, and creativity. However, what the participants experienced in reality was the importance of reading and understanding lectures in English. They believed that understanding art texts depends on how many technical words a student knows. They also had this notion that not understanding the text is not because of unfamiliar vocabularies, but because of unfamiliar text structures and discussions. “I don’t understand the text...the language...and the stuff being discussed...it’s difficult to understand” (Participant B & D). They, however, agreed that prerequisite EAP courses are necessary for newcomers (All participants).

In addition to the above point mentioned, the participants mentioned that an EAP course should also enhance their ability to write in English, “We need to know how to write about what we study in English...and maybe EAP can do it” (All participants agreed to Participant’s A suggestion). Their rationale was that just like any other kind of disciplines, art students need to share their findings and creativities with other experts around the globe. Therefore, they need the skills of writing. They agreed that artists usually share their work in exhibitions, and people who visit art galleries may not understand art. They suggested that written explanation is a good way to inform the visitors about the works of art, which obviously requires the artist to possess good writing skills. However, since writing in English is an easy-to-achieve skill, the participants of the study suggested that an on-going course would be suitable for them.

5. Implications and Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study a few implications can be discussed. Firstly, as the findings of the study showed a general English course may not improve students’ English proficiency, therefore general English can be made as prerequisites to EAP courses. Thus, students could be exposed to general English skills courses at the initial stage before or while attending the EAP courses. Secondly, as newcomers are generally not aware of the significance of EAP, therefore the administrators could urge them to attend such classes. Lastly, international institutions which do not offer English language support courses to non-native English students would have to offer general English and EAP courses as these students would face many English language problems both in daily communication and academically. Therefore, English courses are highly recommended to be included in specialized international institutions.

The findings of this study suggested that first year students and newcomers do not have the awareness of the importance of specialized English. Findings indicated that generally students of art need assistance in English, while the 3rd year or the final year students believed that through the EAP courses they may be able to cope with their studies better. Although the students enter the institution with just a satisfactory general English proficiency, the institution needs to take into consideration to offer both general English proficiency and EAP courses to prepare the students for their overall target language needs, generally and academically in their field of study. This is because the institutions have the responsibility to help the students improve their general English proficiency while providing support in developing their academic English. The study suggested that international institutions have to be prepared to challenge themselves in equipping the students English language needs, generally and academically, if they wished to maintain as international institutions that cater to international students globally.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Research University Grant (RUG) Vot 04J07.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire

EAP Questionnaire	SDA	DA	NI	A	SA
Section A					
1. Our Institute should provide English courses specilized for art	1	2	3	4	5
2. I prefer EAP since it is more useful than general English	1	2	3	4	5
3. Art students need English for art	1	2	3	4	5
4. General English is not enough for understanding Art textbooks	1	2	3	4	5
5. EAP is more effective than general English in improving my reading comprehension	1	2	3	4	5
6. An EAP course motivates me more than a general English course to study art in English	1	2	3	4	5
7.EAP helps me to understand lectures better	1	2	3	4	5
Section B					
1.I do not have any motivation to learn specific English for art	1	2	3	4	5
2.My general English is weak	1	2	3	4	5
3.I have difficulty to communicate in English since I do not know many English words	1	2	3	4	5
4.I need to have a satisfactory grounding in general English before attending an EAP course	1	2	3	4	5
5.My standard English test score does not show my real English ability	1	2	3	4	5
6.EAP is challenging for students with weak general English	1	2	3	4	5
7.An EAP course is necessary for non-native students' of art	1	2	3	4	5
Section C					
1.The goal of EAP is different from general English training	1	2	3	4	5
2.The medium of instruction in an EAP class should be English	1	2	3	4	5
3.EAP defferes from general English training courses in terms of instruction	1	2	3	4	5
4.EAP teachers should be art experts	1	2	3	4	5
5.EAP courses should be compulsory for all the students	1	2	3	4	5
6.EAP textbooks should be related the course each student joins	1	2	3	4	5
7.There should be a final exam for EAP course	1	2	3	4	5

Fig. 1. The developed questionnaire