

Learning and Using English at University: Lessons from a Longitudinal Study in Hong Kong

Stephen Evans

Department of English, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Bruce Morrison

English Language Centre, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

This article discusses the key lessons that can be learned from a longitudinal study of the undergraduate experience of English-medium university education in Hong Kong. Data were derived from 137 semi-structured interviews with 28 participants from different societal, educational and disciplinary backgrounds over three years. Each of the six rounds of interviews focused on a particular aspect of university life and study. The interviews revealed that the participants experienced an array of challenges when studying in English, including comprehending specialist vocabulary, understanding unfamiliar accents, grasping the purpose and structure of lectures, processing visual aids and planning major assignments. The article proposes a number of strategies to negate or mitigate these problems. The findings indicate that the major factor influencing student adjustment to higher education is their secondary-school teaching medium: unlike their counterparts from English-medium backgrounds, students from Chinese-medium schools found the transition to university extremely taxing. The findings also suggest that content-area professors take little or no account of English skills when assessing students' assignments, which raises doubts as to whether university English courses serve any useful purpose at all.

Key words: Academic literacy, EAP, higher education, Hong Kong, longitudinal research, needs analysis

INTRODUCTION

One of the most notable developments in second language teaching and research in the past twenty years has been the emergence of English for academic purposes (EAP) as a significant sphere of scholarly interest and inquiry and a major motor of pedagogic initiative and innovation. The remarkable growth of EAP theory and practice has been stimulated by the rapid expansion in the number of non-native users of English undertaking degrees through the medium of English (Graddol, 2006). This trend is inextricably linked to the internationalization, marketization and massification of higher education in recent decades (Jones & Brown, 2007) and the rise of English as the lingua franca of research and scholarship (Ferguson, 2007).

The expansion of English-medium higher education and therefore of EAP teaching and research has occurred in three main contexts: (1) the English-speaking countries of North America, Australasia and the British Isles, whose highly ranked universities have long been favoured destinations for international students (Andrade, 2006) and have thus been at the forefront of developments in EAP syllabus planning, materials design and classroom methodology; (2) post-colonial societies in Asia and Africa, where the use of English as the medium of instruction at secondary and tertiary levels is arguably the most significant legacy of British colonialism, but one that also poses pedagogical problems in contexts such as Hong Kong and Tanzania where the language of the classroom has limited use in everyday social life (Mohamed & Banda, 2008; Li, 2009); and (3) non-Anglophone societies in Continental Europe, the Middle East and East Asia (Coleman, 2006; Huang, 2006; Sert, 2008), where, as a consequence of programmes encouraging student mobility (Erling & Hilgendorf, 2006) or policies promoting economic development (Chang, 2006), increasing numbers of undergraduates are

undertaking individual subjects or entire programmes in English in institutions where another language is the usual medium of instruction and assessment. Such institutions may indeed prove to be influential new testing grounds for EAP research and practice, since a growing body of evidence suggests that students who have learned English as a foreign language experience considerable difficulties coping with the demands of English-medium university studies (Erling & Hilgendorf, 2006; Kerklaan et al., 2008; Crawford Camiciottoli, 2010).

While the nature and extent of EAP provision vary according to an array of contextual and institutional factors, at the heart of the EAP enterprise is the notion that the content and methods of instruction should be firmly founded on the needs of the learners (Belcher, 2009). It is perhaps not surprising that much of the research conducted in this area has sought to identify and understand the particular challenges that undergraduates encounter when studying in English. These challenges have been investigated through a variety of research methods.

One of the standard methods of gathering such information is the questionnaire survey: indeed, many early EAP studies relied exclusively on surveys as a means of determining students' needs and interests and professors' requirements and expectations (Johns, 1981; Leki & Carson, 1994). Although conveniently itemized survey findings enable EAP practitioners to identify areas of difficulty in the learning and use of English, such data are generally unable to illuminate the constellation of factors that underlie these problems, which is essential if they are to design relevant and engaging courses, materials and activities. This limitation has prompted EAP researchers to collect richer sets of data via methods such as case studies and interviews in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the challenges posed by English-medium higher education (Hyland, 2006). While the 'thick' descriptions that emerge from qualitative research (Geertz, 1973) provide valuable insights into the nature of these challenges, such methods are generally employed in synchronic rather than diachronic studies, and thus – like 'one-off' questionnaire surveys – are unable to capture the complex and

dynamic process of social, academic and cultural assimilation that undergraduates undergo in the academy (Cheng & Fox, 2008). This emphasis on synchronic research has prompted calls for more longitudinal investigations of the student experience (Spack, 1997).

To date, these calls have largely gone unheeded. Such research that has been conducted in this area has generally been confined to North America (Morita, 2004; Leki, 2007), which is perhaps understandable as the United States and Canada play host to the largest number of international students (Healey, 2008) and have thus been in the vanguard of EAP research. However, the value of these studies for EAP professionals in societies where English functions as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) is limited by contextual differences between institutions in North America, where English is the principal language of society, and universities in ESL and EFL settings, where a disjunction often exists between the medium of the classroom and the language(s) of the home and the wider society. There is therefore a need for EAP-oriented longitudinal studies of the undergraduate experience in English-medium universities outside the Anglophone world, a need which the present Hong Kong-based study seeks to meet.

As a context of inquiry, Hong Kong has the potential to illuminate issues and problems relevant to both ESL and EFL societies; or, in Kachruvian terms, the Outer and Expanding Circles (Kachru, 1985). As a former British colony (1842-1997), Hong Kong has a well established tradition of English-medium teaching in schools and universities. Whereas the use of English as a medium of instruction at secondary level has long been controversial (Choi, 2003) and problematic (Yu & Atkinson, 1988), at tertiary level it is largely uncontroversial as policy (Choi, 2010) but nevertheless problematic in practice (Littlewood & Liu, 1996; Evans & Green, 2007).

Since Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, secondary education has been transformed by the implementation of a mandatory mother-tongue policy in around three-quarters of local schools. This has meant that increasing numbers of predominantly Cantonese-speaking students enter university from Chinese-medium backgrounds. Given the limited social role of English in

Hong Kong and the diminution in its institutional status since the handover (Evans, 2010), the circumstances of such students are broadly comparable to those of EFL students in various parts of Eurasia who currently choose or are compelled to study in English for all or part of their undergraduate careers. In contrast, students who graduate from Hong Kong's elite English-medium schools, who unsurprisingly constitute the majority of university entrants, will have experienced a form of education in many respects similar to that of ESL students in other post-colonial contexts such as Nigeria, India and Singapore.

The objective of the longitudinal study described below was to identify and understand the language-related challenges confronting both categories of student when studying academic subjects in English. This article highlights the central issues that emerged from the study as it unfolded semester-by-semester together with their implications for teaching. The article does not therefore attempt to examine its manifold findings in detail; rather, it focuses on the key lessons that can be learned from 137 interviews with 28 students over three years.

THE STUDY

Participants

The study set out to track the experiences of English-medium higher education of a sample of 28 students from different societal, educational and disciplinary backgrounds. These students were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) from a large number of freshmen who responded to a call for participation at the beginning of their first semester at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Before embarking on the project, the participants signed a consent form which explained the nature and purpose of the study and assured them of complete confidentiality if their experiences and views were reported in subsequent publications. Accordingly, they are

given pseudonyms in section 3.

A large sample was formed in order to capture the experiences of students from a range of backgrounds and to allow for the attrition in numbers that it was (wrongly) assumed would occur over the three years. The formation of a sizeable sample also helped to ensure that the findings would have some degree of generalizability (within the bounds of qualitative research) and thus practical value for EAP professionals and disciplinary specialists. All but one of the 28 students who embarked on the study attended the final interview several weeks before graduation, and ten participated in all six rounds. Most of the remaining participants missed only one session. The participants were therefore generally committed to the project, and were happy to discuss their experiences, views and practices with the interviewers and, when necessary, respond to email requests for supplementary information.

The participants came from the following disciplinary backgrounds: Applied Biology & Chemical Technology (ABCT) (6 participants), Management & Marketing (MM) (6), Building & Real Estate (BRE) (4), Accounting & Finance (AF) (3), Chinese & Bilingual Studies (CBS) (3), Rehabilitation Sciences (RS) (3), Applied Physics (AP) (1), Nursing (N) (1) and Occupational Therapy (1). Twenty-one participants had completed an English-medium secondary education, although their school backgrounds were quite varied: 10 had attended schools that remained English-medium after the introduction of the mother-tongue policy in 1998; 7 had attended English-medium schools that were forced to switch to Chinese, but since they had entered the school before the policy came into effect, their cohort was permitted to study in English; 4 had switched from English- to Chinese-medium schools for their sixth form studies (years 12-13). The remaining participants had attended Chinese-medium schools in Hong Kong (4), mainland China (2) and Malaysia (1). Of the participants who had completed their secondary studies in Hong Kong, thirteen had obtained grade D in the Hong Kong AS Level Use of English examination, which they took in their final year at school (year 13). The sample also included students with grades B (1), C (6) and E (2).

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants' experiences were tracked in interviews conducted towards the end of each semester. The interviews, which lasted 20-40 minutes, were semi-structured in design, with an interview protocol outlining the issues to be discussed. The semi-structured interview was best suited to our research objectives since it allowed the participants and interviewers (who were each responsible for 14 students) to explore issues as they arose, to clarify or verify participants' statements or views, and to reformulate questions to ensure ready comprehension. Each round of interviews focused on a particular aspect of university life and study, namely, (round 1) the transition to English-medium university studies, (2) the teaching and learning of English, (3) experiences in lectures and seminars, (4) assignment writing processes, (5) out-of-class English use, and (6) reflections on the university experience. The interview data were complemented by data from questionnaires, diaries and activity logs. These other sources of data are described at relevant points in section 3.

Although each round had a particular focus, we commenced each session by asking the participants how their studies were progressing and, in particular, whether they were encountering any difficulties in the learning and use of English. We also asked them to complete a questionnaire about their perceived strengths and weaknesses in aspects of academic writing, reading, speaking and listening in English at the end of each year of the study. This enabled us to identify and track the micro-skills in each area that the participants found to be particularly challenging.

The recordings of all 137 interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis and interpretation of the transcripts involved a process of data reduction, which was accomplished through iterative processes of annotating, coding and checking the data. After initial annotation – or 'open coding' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) – of the transcripts, the data coding and analysis software NVivo was used to aid the subsequent process of 'axial coding' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This entailed sorting the data, identifying primary

and secondary themes, and subsequently cross referencing and re-categorizing data as the coding process progressed. The key results of the computer-based and manual analyses of the transcripts provide the basis for the next section, which explores the main issues and implications of the study.

ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

As noted in the introduction, this article does not present a detailed account of the study's findings (as might be the case in a conventional empirical research article). Instead, it identifies the key issues (or talking points) that emerged from each round of interviews as revealed by the analyses of the transcripts and other data. After identifying each issue, it proceeds directly into a discussion of the practical implications of the findings for teaching and learning. These implications are summarised in the conclusion.

Making the Transition to English-medium Higher Education

The first round of interviews sought to identify the challenges the participants encountered when adjusting to English-medium instruction in their first semester. Given the diverse backgrounds, abilities and characters represented in the sample, it is hardly surprising that a multiplicity of issues were raised and discussed. However, from the mass of messy data two particular issues emerged: (1) the problem of comprehending discipline-specific vocabulary and, to a lesser extent, general academic vocabulary, and (2) the influence of school teaching medium on the speed of adjustment.

The participants' principal challenge in the first term lay in understanding the torrent of technical terms they encountered in lectures, seminars and readings. Their difficulties in this area (Lucas et al., 1997; Jones & Schmitt, 2010) were revealed by the NVivo analysis, which uncovered 83 comments on vocabulary issues in the transcripts, by far the highest number of remarks about language-related problems. "I think there are many specialised words,"

observed Olivia (BRE), “and I haven’t learn it before so I cannot understand”. At first glance, this finding lends weight to Hyland & Tse’s (2007) argument that EAP courses should focus on discipline-specific vocabulary rather than on general academic vocabulary of the kind compiled by Coxhead (2000). However, such is the scale of the lexical deluge in the first semester – “thousands of new words I haven’t seen before” (Sally, ABCT); “none of the vocabulary I could understand” (Tom, ABCT) – that it would be unfeasible for even the most finely tuned, vocabulary-oriented EAP course to meet students’ immediate (let alone long-term) disciplinary needs. These needs could only begin to be addressed through close and continuing collaboration between EAP professionals and their colleagues in the various disciplines.

The starting point for such collaboration should be a clear sense on the part of disciplinary specialists of the magnitude of the problem, since, on the evidence of the present study, the participants’ professors were evidently oblivious to their students’ difficulties. Having established this crucial point, EAP professionals need to work with disciplinary specialists to devise strategies to minimize vocabulary overload, particularly in lectures, and to facilitate the acquisition and use of core disciplinary lexis. This would entail analysing lecture and reading input to identify, prioritize and then sequence key terminology. The results of these analyses could be incorporated into online glossaries and provide input for tightly focused vocabulary learning and teaching in EAP. However, given the limited time available for such courses in the curriculum, the multitude of topics that often need to be covered in EAP (e.g., academic writing, presentation skills) and therefore the difficulty of making significant headway in discipline-specific vocabulary learning, it might be more advisable for EAP teachers to focus on vocabulary-building and learning strategies (e.g., word roots, collocation) and general academic vocabulary. Such an approach would apply particularly to contexts in which EAP provision is restricted to the first semester, students come mainly from EFL backgrounds and disciplinary specialisation is delayed.

The second key issue that emerged in the first-semester interviews was the

influence of secondary-school teaching medium on adjustment (Lin & Morrison, 2010). Unlike their counterparts from English-medium backgrounds, the participants from Chinese-medium schools endured an extremely testing transition. Having studied English only as a language subject (i.e., EFL), these participants were initially overwhelmed by a flood of specialist and general academic vocabulary, which impeded their comprehension of lectures and inhibited their participation in seminars. For example, Rita (BRE) claimed that she could understand only around 50 per cent of her lectures, while Sally observed that there were ‘so many new words for me and I can’t catch them, so I don’t know the meaning of the lecture’.

Like the other participants from Chinese-medium schools, Rita and Sally eventually adjusted to English-medium teaching, but they were acutely aware that their EFL background provided insufficient preparation for university study. In fact, only those students from the most prestigious English-medium schools were able to make a comparatively smooth transition to higher education. This has implications for university policy-makers in EFL societies, where there has been a significant expansion of English-medium teaching in recent years. As noted earlier, this trend has been accompanied by a growing body of evidence that some EFL students are undertaking English-medium programmes without the proficiency needed to study effectively in English, thereby undermining the quality of the student experience and perhaps also forcing institutions to compromise standards.

Learning English for Academic Purposes

When we met them again towards the end of their first year, most participants – irrespective of medium-of-instruction background – reported that they had largely come to terms with the demands of English-medium teaching. Rita was now able to understand around 80 per cent of her lectures, whereas Sally felt sufficiently confident to abandon her painstaking ritual of recording and replaying lectures to help her grasp her professors’ otherwise

impenetrable presentations. How had Rita, Sally and the others come to grips with English-medium studies and, crucially, what part had their EAP course played in the adjustment process? These questions topped the agenda for the second round of interviews.

All the participants had taken a 42-hour, credit-bearing EAP course in the first semester. This was a generic course in that the syllabus and in-house textbook were common to all freshmen, irrespective of discipline. However, as classes were formed on a disciplinary basis, coordinators responsible for each specialism could supplement the textbook with discipline-specific materials and design assignments with a disciplinary flavour. This was the extent of EAP teaching at the university; in their second year, the participants took a workplace English course organized along similar lines. One of the study's main objectives was therefore to determine the relevance and efficacy of English courses (and other forms of English provision) during the participants' university careers.

On the evidence of the second round of interviews (and the study as a whole), the participants' adjustment to and progression through university seemed to owe little to the instruction they received in their English classes (Leki, 2007). It is perhaps not surprising that their essentially generic EAP course was barely able to meet their immediate needs, although it must be doubted whether a discipline-specific course could have achieved much more in practical terms. In fact, the evidence suggests that a raft of regular discipline-specific courses would have scarcely scratched the surface of their manifold and evolving needs; and only the most munificent university management would be prepared to sanction such a programme.

How then did the participants overcome the challenges of English-medium teaching? The foundations of their success, it emerged, were strong achievement motivation, hard work, relentless practice and supportive peer networks (Kember, 2000). When asked how they had developed the ability to (inter alia) listen to lectures, give presentations and read textbooks, they offered variations on the following theme: "I think practice really makes perfect and just by practising more and more, then I think I can feel more

confident (Michael, AF).” The participants did not learn how to write disciplinary genres in their EAP course but through their own initiative and effort: “Every time I read the literature and journal I try to understand the structure, in what way they express their ideas. I try hard to understand that ... so basically getting more practice and I get on with it” (Carrie, ABCT). When they encountered difficulties, they did not turn to their professors or to their English teachers but to their peers, for, as Laura (RS) noted, “they give the most support”.

Although English courses may have contributed only minimally to the participants’ success at university, this does not mean that English-language provision was valueless. As Cantonese is the dominant language of out-of-class communication on Hong Kong campuses, English classes together with supplementary programmes and self-access language learning play a crucial role in enhancing students’ language skills and reminding them – despite some evidence to the contrary – that they are studying in an English-medium institution. According to Iris (CBS), EAP was “the only chance I can improve English because in the class from my department they don’t focus on English.” Another theme that emerged in the interviews was that motivation to improve was dependent on the provision of compulsory English classes. “If I have English lessons,’ observed Hazel (OT), ‘I will push myself harder.”

The key to the success of these classes, it seems, was not necessarily the relevance of the content but the quality of the teacher. “The teacher was really great,” recalled Ann (AF). “He was tough but he really push me up.” Conversely, an uninspiring teacher – even one delivering relevant content – unsurprisingly provoked frustration and apathy. While this may not appear a startlingly original insight, it is worth stressing, because without skilful and engaging teaching, discipline-specific EAP courses based on the meticulous analysis of concordance lines or survey data are likely to founder. The centrality of the teacher in shaping the classroom mood in both language and content subjects was noted by several participants. Belinda (RS) underlined the importance of a teacher’s personality in creating a lively and relaxed atmosphere: “We perform actively I think because he has open mind and

attitude is quite open and his topic is quite funny and we often ask question during his lesson and we enjoy the lesson.” In contrast, a very strict professor elicited only a little response from Ann’s somewhat inhibited classmates.

Listening to Lectures

The third round of interviews explored the participants’ experiences of listening and speaking for academic purposes. To provide input for the interviews, the participants were asked to keep a detailed record of their exposure to and use of English during a typical university week. In addition to recording the nature and duration of the various speech events such as lectures and seminars, the participants commented on the difficulties they encountered when listening and speaking in English. Their language logs served as a stimulus for discussion in the interviews, which took place a week or two after the week in focus. Two particular issues emerged from these sessions: lecturers’ accents and presentation styles.

The participants’ difficulties understanding some lecturers’ accents was a recurring theme in the study, and one indeed that accords with research conducted in other contexts (Mulligan & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Robertson et al., 2000; Campbell & Li, 2008; Crawford Camiciottoli, 2010). Most lecturers at the University are from Hong Kong and thus (like their students) are bilingual in Cantonese and English. However, the University employs a sizeable number of professors from Anglophone countries, Mainland China and other parts of the world. In general, the participants – like Miller’s (2009) informants – encountered little difficulty comprehending local lecturers’ English because “their accent is quite similar to us” (Nicole, MM) and they were able to “explain in more simple English (Helen, MM)”. However, the participants sometimes found it difficult to understand lectures conducted by non-local professors. “The local teacher I can follow,” reported Flora (MM), “but of the foreigner, I have to study again after attending the lecture.” This was partly because some foreign lecturers “talk a bit fast so that we hard to catch their pace” (Helen) and partly because their accents were hard to

understand, the Australian accent being particularly problematic. Michael, for example, reported that after the first lecture with an Australian professor, “I ask my other friends “Can you follow what he is saying?” And also my friends can’t follow. We just simply don’t get used to that kind of accent.” William (ABCT) had a similar experience: “His Australian accent is so hard to follow.” The students’ problems may have stemmed in part from some Australian professors’ use of colloquial language in effort to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the lecture theatre. In this respect, it is perhaps significant that the characteristics the participants valued most in local lecturers’ presentations were their unhurried pace and plain language: “The pace was slow,” noted Laura, ‘and there are not much use of the idioms.”

Regarding the second issue, presentation styles, three particular problems were identified. First, a number of participants expressed frustration at their professors’ unfocused or disorganised presentation of content, which meant that they often lost the thread of the explanation or discussion, thereby (in some cases) rendering entire lectures worthless. Second, some participants were far from inspired by their professors’ monotonous, unenthusiastic style of delivery. “They just read the whole text on the PowerPoint,” complained Tom. “They just read and then lack of organization and just bored voice. Make us feel like he don’t want to do the teaching and we don’t want to listen to them.” Third, when lecturers read from their PowerPoint slides, the participants would often stop listening if they had the print-out of the slides. “He just read every single line about the PowerPoint slides,” recalled Flora. “I would not listen to him because I know the content is on the slides.” Nicole also stopped listening when notes were provided, but “if I don’t have any notes, I will pay more attention to the lecturer.” In some cases, the slides on the print-outs were annoyingly dense. “That was a horrible slide,” exclaimed Carrie, recalling one particularly opaque offering, ‘that was like three hundred words in a single slide!”

These findings have a number of implications for the preparation and delivery of lectures. First, it is essential that lecturers make the purpose and organisation of their lectures explicit at the outset, signal transitions from

topic to topic as they progress and clearly indicate the relative importance and function of the information and ideas they present. Second, this material should ideally be delivered at a measured pace, with pauses at regular intervals to summarise key points and to encourage student participation and activity (e.g., in the form of short, focused tasks). This would help to avoid the problem reported by Edward (MM), that “the lecturer just keep talking, talking, talking and we listen, listen, listen.” Third, presentation software such as PowerPoint, Prezi and Keynote should be used to complement and elucidate the oral communication of lecture content rather than function as the primary vehicle for the delivery of this material via impenetrable slides and associated print-outs. In language-rich disciplines it may be better to present lecture content in clearly designed, word-processed handouts.

If an unfocused lecturer delivers new content laden with specialist terminology at great speed without pausing in an unfamiliar accent via incomprehensible slides, it might be supposed that the obvious method of mitigating these problems would be to study the material prior to the lecture. Such an approach would also enhance the value of well delivered lectures and perhaps encourage greater interaction since students would already possess a certain understanding of the topic. However, when questioned about this strategy, the participants acknowledged its merits but admitted that they rarely adopted it as they were busy or lazy. When planning their lectures, professors should not therefore assume that students have done the required reading or preparation.

Planning and Writing Assignments

Writing plays a central role in the academy as it is the main means by which student learning is demonstrated and assessed. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that issues related to academic writing were raised repeatedly during the interviews. Nor is it surprising, given the results of previous research (Littlewood & Liu, 1996; Evans & Green, 2007), that writing was the participants’ principal source of difficulty during their

undergraduate careers. The fourth round of interviews explored this crucial facet of academic literacy and, in particular, the process by which the participants planned and produced major assignments in their disciplines. To help them recount this process in the end-of-semester interviews, the participants were asked to record and reflect on their research, planning and writing activities in a weekly log. The evidence suggests that the participants' primary challenge lay in planning the writing process effectively.

Most participants reported on a project which they completed in small groups over 10-15 weeks using assignment guidelines distributed at the beginning of the semester. In some cases, the participants' planning problems simply stemmed from ineffective time management. When asked what he did when he received the guidelines, Eric (BRE) said that "after form a group we just throw the assignment away." This meant that the semester's work was compressed into a frenetic few days before the deadline, a period described as death week by another participant well versed in the art of brinkmanship (Gary, ABCT). Despite (or possibly because of) their approach, Eric's group received a satisfactory grade for the assignment, thereby confirming his pragmatic view that a semester-long process of research, planning and writing was otiose: "After getting the mark, all of our group think that we are very, very effective because we are paying the less effort to get an above average mark."

In the majority of cases, however, the participants apparently worked on their projects with steadily increasing intensity throughout the semester, culminating in a final flurry of effort as the deadline loomed. The problem for many of these students was that this process was not guided by systematic planning. The essence of the problem was that the participants and their group mates devoted an excessive amount of time to collecting and reading material that was generally relevant to the assignment topic, but evidently lacked the ability to analyze, appraise and synthesize this material effectively. As the semester unfolded, this mass of material grew progressively larger, but was not apparently accompanied by a purposeful process of critical reading, note-taking, data reduction, information structuring, paraphrasing

and drafting, which is the essential basis for any finely tuned written assignment and one that inexperienced academic writers often find problematic (Wette, 2010). As they entered death week, many participants had no plan or draft, and thus faced the challenge of turning a mound of ill-digested material into a coherent and pertinent report. The participants were generally able to rise to this challenge in that the product was judged to be satisfactory by their professors; but, unlike Eric, a number of them acknowledged that their approach was ineffective, and that their work would have benefited from detailed planning. Interestingly, the only participant who reportedly engaged in a systematically staged process of research, planning and writing (Freddy, AF) was in a group that included a German exchange student. This student apparently took the initiative in setting objectives, arranging meetings and assigning tasks, which enabled the group to work incrementally and efficiently towards their goal.

These findings suggest that content-area specialists need to reassess the way they organize major assignments. It appears that student activity during the lengthy period between the distribution and the submission of the assignment was often unproductive or unfocused. One way of preventing these problems, and perhaps of enhancing the quality of the product, would be for the project process to be incorporated into the semester's teaching schedule. This would entail breaking the project down into several stages, each involving the completion of a specific and required task that would build towards the assignment outcome, such as the production of an annotated bibliography, a critique of a key source, a detailed plan and an initial draft. In essence, this was the approach adopted by Freddy's group; one that he readily acknowledged was much more effective than that adopted in previous projects, and one that he continued to practise for the remainder of his undergraduate career.

Using English Outside the Classroom

One of the challenges associated with English-medium higher education in

Hong Kong is the disjunction that exists between the official medium of instruction and the usual language of out-of-class communication. This issue was explored in the fifth round of interviews, which took place halfway through the participants' final year and which sought to determine the extent of their English use outside the classroom. To facilitate the discussion, the participants completed a questionnaire detailing patterns of out-of-class English use in the areas of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The predominant theme of the interviews was the participants' very limited use of spoken English for both academic and social purposes. As Iris observed, "it is not really like an English university, but I guess that is normal in Hong Kong." Similarly, Andrew (AP) noted that 'it's not my habit and it's not the culture' to speak English unless strictly required. The lack of an English-speaking environment largely stems from the fact that most students are mother-tongue speakers of Cantonese and thus have little need or desire to speak English on campus, except when interacting with the growing (but still proportionally minimal) number of international students. The participants' use of Cantonese rather than English with local classmates was motivated by three interrelated factors: first, their obvious facility in the language, which meant that it was easier to express our idea (Flora) in academic-related discussions; second, their concern that using English would be perceived as showing off (Gary); third, their understandable discomfort at using English in informal communication with other Cantonese speakers: as Karen (CBS) observed, "it is weird for us to speak English among us".

The growing presence in recent years of international students and Mandarin-speaking students from the Chinese mainland has stimulated the use of English on campus and, as Freddy discovered, has exposed local undergraduates to different ways of thinking and learning. The participants generally appreciated the opportunity to engage with overseas classmates, while their professors evidently valued international students' enthusiastic participation in class, Nicole highlighting their tendency to direct questions towards these students "because they are more willing to answer questions during the lecture." The interviews did, however, uncover some evidence that

local students were not always favourably disposed towards their overseas counterparts. According to Betty (MM), “we usually don’t have the preference to form groups with the foreigners because all the time when we are discussing the problems, we just have to use English and of course there are many communication problems.”

When viewing the study’s findings as a whole, it appears that the participants’ use of spoken English, both in and outside the classroom, tended to be limited to assessed presentations, where language use was dictated by institutional language policy, and seminar discussions, where the extent of English use was determined by the attitude of the teacher or the presence or otherwise of non-Cantonese speakers. Teachers who tried to stimulate whole-class discussions in English were often discouraged by their students’ reluctance to participate. “Our lecturer always want some interaction,” reported Laura, “but we get used to answer those question in short sentences or just the phrase.” In some cases, as Michael recalled, teachers’ efforts to enforce English went unheeded: “sometimes in the class and the teachers ask them, ask us to use English to discuss, and then just ignore this and they just speak in Cantonese.”

These findings underscore the point made earlier about the importance of EAP courses in a university milieu in which spoken communication in the language is often confined to carefully scripted, set-piece presentations. While the participants were rightly sceptical about the value of such courses in terms of significantly improving their proficiency or in seriously addressing their disciplinary needs, they recognized the importance of English classes (and other forms of provision) in enhancing their interest and confidence in the language. This was manifested in their willingness to participate in voluntary English courses and make regular use of the University’s Centre for Independent Language Learning. In this regard, it is interesting that they took advantage of these courses and resources to enhance their general English proficiency (e.g., grammar, vocabulary), to develop generic skills (e.g., delivering presentations, writing application letters), or to be entertained or informed (e.g., watching films, reading magazines) rather

than to work on discipline-specific English. It may be the case that they already received a surfeit of specialized English in their departments, which (as we have seen) they mastered themselves, and that instead they wanted to return to basics, refine their skills or rediscover the pleasures of learning and using a language for anything other than purely practical purposes.

Reflecting on the Undergraduate Experience

In the final round of interviews, conducted a few weeks prior to graduation, we asked the participants to reflect on their experiences of learning and using English at university. The preceding discussion has perhaps inadvertently conveyed the impression that these experiences were not especially agreeable. In fact, this is very far from the case, for although the participants continued to be perplexed and occasionally vexed by certain aspects of English-medium higher education (notably lecturers' accents and specialist vocabulary), they generally enjoyed stimulating and satisfying university careers. The fact that they graduated with respectable degrees is clear evidence that they had overcome the challenges of studying in a second language.

When reflecting on their undergraduate experience, the participants generally felt that their English skills had improved over the three years. Their perceptions in this regard were in fact borne out by data from a 45-item questionnaire on academic English skills which the participants completed at regular intervals throughout the study and which therefore enabled us to track their progress. It should be emphasized, however, that evidence of 'progress' was gathered only through the participants' perceptions and not through systematic tests of proficiency or meticulous analyses of written assignments. This may be regarded as a limitation, but tracking English ability was beyond the scope of the study. In many cases, they attributed their greater confidence in English to participation in semester-long exchange programmes overseas. Notwithstanding their apparent progress in learning and using English, the participants were far from satisfied with their English skills just prior to graduation, lamenting (*inter alia*) their unsophisticated writing style, limited

repertoire of sentence patterns and imperfect mastery of grammar. This raises an intriguing question: How important are English skills in an English-medium university?

The present study suggests that the participants' professors were not particularly interested in the quality of students' English skills when assessing written and spoken assignments, their primary concern being students' ability to demonstrate their understanding of disciplinary content (Leki & Carson, 1994; Zhu, 2004; Leki, 2007). Linguistic and organizational features of assignments such as grammar, style and cohesion were generally not included in assessment criteria and thus received less attention in the planning and production of assignments than information and ideas. Dora's (RS) professors, for example, "would not quite focus on the English. If they understand what I am talking about then that is OK." Candy's (BRE) testimony suggests that her EAP teachers' efforts to develop students' presentation skills may have been in vain: "the teacher wouldn't really look at that, your presentation skills. They will put the focus on how well you understand the question." Olivia claimed that "because in the subject I learn, the grammar and the writing skill is not very important, so if we can express ourselves clearly is OK". Eric saw little need to use Standard English since he judged that his professors had learned to disregard language issues when marking assignments: "because maybe most of our lecturers are Hong Kong people, so they would know what you are writing into the paper when you are using a Chinese style English."

Another factor that discouraged the participants from attending to language-related issues and, more generally, impeded their academic progress, was their professors' apparent failure to provide detailed comments and suggestions on their work (Ferris, 2003; Storch, 2009). William, for example, complained that "they seldom give feedback" on written assignments, whereas Sally observed that "maybe the problem is that I may not get good enough feedback from the professors", who in any case "may not focus on your English." The key implication of these findings is that if disciplinary specialists wish to read or view assignments presented in

effective English, they should ensure that items relating to language and organization are incorporated into their assessment criteria and/or feedback. In the case of the present study, those professors who did assess the linguistic and organizational features of students' work motivated their students to address such features when preparing their assignments and thus presumably received work of a higher quality than those colleagues who ignored them. If professors disregard those features of student writing and speaking that preoccupy EAP professionals, it invariably raises the question as to whether EAP courses and other forms of English provision serve a useful purpose.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the key issues that emerged from a longitudinal study of the student experience of English-medium higher education in Hong Kong, together with their pedagogical implications for both content-area professors and EAP professionals. With regard to the former, perhaps the main implication is that such professors need to be better informed about the specific difficulties that many undergraduates experience when studying in English, particularly during their students' crucial first semester at university. These difficulties include comprehending specialist vocabulary, understanding unfamiliar accents, grasping the purpose and structure of lectures, processing visual aids and planning major assignments. This article has proposed a number of strategies to negate or mitigate these problems, which are far from being unique to Hong Kong. These include the need for disciplinary specialists (1) to assist with the identification, prioritisation and sequencing of key terminology; (2) to deliver lectures at a measured pace in plain language using readily comprehensible slides; (3) to break semester-long assignments down into several focused, staged tasks which enable students to work incrementally towards the final product; (4) to include aspects of language and organisation such as grammar, style and coherence in their assessment criteria; (5) to provide specific and timely feedback on

students' work.

The study also has a number of implications for EAP professionals, not least concerning the nature and purpose of EAP provision. One of the central issues in EAP theory and practice is whether EAP courses should be general or discipline specific. Although the study has uncovered a good deal of evidence that students would benefit from a discipline-specific approach, organizing courses purely on a disciplinary basis overlooks a major factor influencing student adjustment to higher education: secondary-school teaching medium. Unlike their counterparts from English-medium backgrounds, students from Chinese-medium schools found the transition to university studies extremely taxing because (inter alia) they possessed a limited 'general' academic vocabulary and had little experience of writing essays, giving presentations and listening to lectures in English. In this regard, their readiness for English-medium studies was probably comparable to that of many exchange and international students around the world. Such students would probably benefit from general EAP courses before proceeding to more specific courses. However, the orientation of such courses is perhaps immaterial if, as this study suggests, disciplinary specialists take little or no account of English skills when assessing students' assignments, which raises doubts as to the point of the entire EAP enterprise.

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THE AUTHORS

Stephen Evans is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at

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The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research interests include colonial language policy, language planning, world Englishes, advanced academic literacy, and professional communication.

Email: egsevans@polyu.edu.hk

Bruce Morrison is Director of the English Language Centre at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research interests focus primarily on the non-native speaker tertiary learning experience, independent and self-access language learning, and language programme evaluation.

Email address: ecbruce@polyu.edu.hk

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