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EAP and Occupations

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Introduction

Accompanied with the growth of global academic communication, teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is not confined to English-speaking countries alone. It has become one of the most popular English courses taught worldwide to help ESL/EFL learners develop specific skills to cope with their academic studies and research (Hyland, 2006). Specifically, EAP is widely acknowledged as an essential course designed on the basis of academic needs. The primary purpose of EAP is thus to prepare students with sufficient levels of language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) and to assist them in becoming independent learners for further study (Oanh, 2007).

Recently, China has been experiencing an innovation in College English teaching. EAP was accepted in 2013 as one of the key areas in college English teaching in the recent policy for College English Teaching in Shanghai (Cai, 2013) and in the latest China College English Teaching Guidelines. Since the new official documents for college English teaching have called for the integration of EAP into English classes (Cai, 2015), more universities and English teachers have shown an interest in offering EAP. A number of studies have been conducted to investigate EAP teaching and practice. These studies have highlighted positive findings that EAPs can effectively develop students' English and academic skills (Gong, 2015; Zhang, Zhang, & Liu, 2011; Zou, 2015). However, Du (2011) states that compared to the English teaching and linguistic research in foreign countries, China still falls behind, faced with many challenges in both theory and practice. Due to the lack of understanding and training for EAP, many Chinese EAP teachers have limited experience with selecting appropriate textbooks and teaching methods, and would only employ the long-held traditional translation method in class. Consequently, the EAP course they offer cannot satisfy the needs of students who intend to study abroad. In addition, there is not so much need for students to use English in college in China. Therefore, it has been argued that it is unrealistic to offer EAP curricula for all students in universities in China.

In fact, EAP researchers have shown that EAP is not only for academic study and research, but can also benefit students' future job developments. For example, Jordan (1997) suggests that occupational needs are one of the four basic factors in EAP lessons because EAP should meet the employer's needs. In 2001, EAP was reclassified into two categories: academic-oriented EAP and occupation-oriented EAP

(Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). According to Flowerdew and Peacock (2001), EAP can also provide occupational benefits for students because EAP can cover training for occupations. This implies that EAP can potentially facilitate students' future development in occupations. Dudley-Evans (2001) also mentions that EAP contains training for work-related skills such as writing technical reports, writing contract bids, and developing other documents. Students are willing to learn these skills as they may need to transfer and master these skills in their future jobs.

Despite the fact that a number of studies concerning EAP have concentrated on the academic aspect of the field, few have explored it in the Chinese context or investigated the English improvements that EAP has brought to graduates. Furthermore, the former studies did not seem to consider the effect of EAP on graduates' occupations. Moreover, it must be pointed out that very few studies seem to be able to fully support the hypothesis that EAP enhances career development in China. This report will examine how EAP benefits graduates' occupations. Two research questions are formulated to guide the research:

1. What is the impact of previous EAP instruction/courses on graduates in their work places?
2. Among occupational English skills, which area(s) of English ability have been enhanced most through EAP courses?

Methodology

Participants

The study focuses on graduates' perceptions of EAP courses in terms of the potential academic and occupational benefits EAP has brought them. Participants graduated from an international university in China where English is a medium of instruction (EMI) for all disciplines. Since EAP at this international university is a fundamental and mandatory course that is only offered to freshman and sophomores, all participants received two years of EAP instruction during their studies in this university. Students developed their skills in academic reading, writing, listening and speaking. In the academic writing module, they practiced writing academic essays and reports. In speaking practice, they developed skills in giving presentations and group discussions. They were also trained in critical thinking and team work. At the end of each semester, students had to pass all exams in EAP courses including reading, writing, listening and speaking to pursue further study (Zou, 2015). Sixty-six graduates aged 22 to 30 from a variety of disciplines participated in this study. These participants are now working in a variety of companies including state, foreign and private companies in various cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou, Xi'an and Shenzhen in China. All subjects completed a questionnaire. Then 12 of them volunteered to participate in a follow-up interview.

Instruments

The questionnaire designed for this study was to explore the graduates' opinions of how EAP had improved the English and working skills beneficial to their careers. A total of 20 questions appeared on the questionnaire and were in either multiple-choice formats (with or without more than one answer) or Likert-scale type questions. In addition, a 30-minute individual interview was used to obtain more in-depth data and triangulate the questionnaire data.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was conducted in the summer of 2015. Questionnaires were anchored on an on-line platform, a website designed for questionnaire distribution and analysis, and then social networking tools, such as emails and *WeChat*, which is a mobile app for chatting, were used to invite graduates to respond

to the questionnaires through the embedded generated link to the assigned website. To ensure content validity of the data, during the interviews, the researchers asked participants to further explain and clarify some of their responses on the questionnaires. Questionnaire and interview data were then synthesized and analyzed. A simple analysis report on the 66 responses was automatically generated by the website when the on-line survey was closed, illustrating the proportion of each option within the question. Furthermore, all the interviews were digitally recorded and manually transcribed into written form by typing into the computer with each interviewee coded as G1, G2, G3, etc. Relevant information of the two types of data was identified and categorized for further analysis. When some interviewees stressed that the speaking and communication skills such as making presentations were their greatest advantages at work, the corresponding questionnaire responses were examined to determine whether this was the case for other students as well. Triangulation between the two data sets ensured validity and reliability.

Findings and Discussion

How Can EAP Course Influence the Occupation of Graduates?

The frequency and situations to use English in the workplace

The first focus of this study is the general use of English in the workplace. Per the questionnaire findings, one-third of the respondents work in typical foreign corporations, which indicates that foreign companies are the largest employer for graduates from this EMI university. Moreover, 36 (55%) graduates stated that their frequency of using English is higher than fifty percent; 30 (45%) graduates used English less than 40 percent and none claimed it to be zero, which indicates that graduates tend to use English often in their work environments despite the differences in company profiles. Additionally, the distribution of their majors suggests that no matter what field graduates work in, business, architecture or electronics, they will encounter English situations in their work.

When asked about the most common circumstances of English use, the majority of participants chose emails (88%) and face-to-face conversations (65%). In these communications, there is a need to manipulate the skills of writing, listening and speaking. If students are limited in listening and speaking abilities, it will be a great challenge for them to do tasks such as telephoning clients and communicating face-to-face with colleagues. Graduate interviewees also highlighted this advantage. For instance, G12 said that apart from communication with Chinese colleagues, he spoke English in every situation, mainly through phone calls to clients, mentors or suppliers of purchasing departments and occasionally to customs and FDX (an American Courier Delivery Company) as well. G6 also affirmed that listening should be granted more importance because it can play an essential role in daily work, especially when the exposure to foreign clients is frequent. This indicates that both listening and speaking skills influence effective communication. In general, it can be seen that EAP course graduates have a better command of speaking and listening skills in different working contexts. Therefore, they perform better by effectively communicating in English with others.

The practical job skills EAP brings to graduates

With regard to practical skills that students gain from EAP class, the data from the questionnaire illustrates that report writing, presentation skills and team work are among the three most useful job skills graduates developed from EAP classes. Moreover, these graduates benefited from other skills. Of the 12 interviewees, half of them maintained that through regular training in EAP, graduates had strengthened their ability in logical thinking, learning how to look at the whole picture, and grasping the main point of a problem simultaneously. Regarding presentation skills, graduates remarked in interviews that through

their EAP courses, they felt more confident in English environments and dared to speak in public. They were not afraid to make mistakes, although they knew the mistakes might always occur. Such psychological benefits are thought of to be more valuable than academic skills for a graduate about to start his/her career. As G6 stated: "As a graduate from the international university, I'm confident in speaking English, having ideas on how to express my opinions accurately." Taking G12's company as another example, employees in the company often need to call foreign clients to exchange ideas, but graduates from Chinese universities are reluctant or even intimidated to do so. However, G12 said he is confident in communicating with clients on the phone.

Teamwork was ranked the third most popular working skill among the respondents. It is unavoidable for graduates to cooperate with other colleagues to complete tasks, and thus, team work skills developed in EAP class have no doubt facilitated this ability at work. A case in point from G7 has demonstrated this benefit, who said that "graduates from this international university have a strong sense of cooperation and they will actively communicate with others to solve the problems. When there is trouble in the process of the project, they can report to the supervisors in time to meet the deadlines."

It seems that as all the graduates have been used to conducting projects within deadlines, they appear to be responsible and efficient. It can also be seen that one of the EAP course's strengths is to let students experience a real working environment in advance, which is consistent with previously noted learning transfer research (Dudley-Evans, 2001; Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). Arranging assignments, working in teams, cooperating with partners, and meeting deadlines are all practical steps of finishing a task when graduates start their careers. Further, EAP has equipped graduates with the ability to take thorough consideration when solving problems, which could influence them for a long time in both their occupations and life.

In general, the data from the questionnaire show that 83% of the graduates surveyed deem the skills they learned in EAP as having positive effects on their current work, with only one respondent giving a negative answer, and about 92% of the participants believed that what EAP had taught them is helpful in terms of its continuous effects for future career development.

In addition, the interview data revealed that graduates are generally satisfied with the design and contents of the EAP courses they took. For instance, G10 commented that the design of EAP is generally beneficial. For junior students, the course is based on actual study and working environments abroad. Thus, it has also improved their oral skills such as group discussion and communication. The interview records imply that EAP courses have satisfied the needs of graduates, and the English training they received has more or less added weight to their original language basis, corresponding to Oanh's (2007) view. In general, most participants believed that EAP has a positive effect on their occupations, at least in their current occupations. They may not be sure of its influence on future career development but have recognized generally the skills learned in EAP are advantageous to work.

Among Occupational English Skills, Which Area of English Ability Has Been Enhanced Most Through EAP Courses?

The second research question identified the most important English skill that EAP has brought to graduates. A summary from the questionnaires shows that graduates used English in presentations, internal conferences, social events, negotiations and visits. Among these occasions of speaking English, making presentations accounts for the highest number (70%).

In the EAP learning context, students have abundant opportunities to prepare and practice presentations in class or on exams. As such, the graduates are familiar with such contents and do not panic about speaking publicly in English. In the interviews, the majority of respondents asserted that they could make presentations in a confident, accurate and fluent manner. A graduate who is working at the university remarked that compared to students from top universities in China, students who have been trained in EAP skills stand out by their confidence, in that they are courageous enough to show themselves and impress others when making presentations. In writing applications, the graduates surveyed responded that

apart from writing emails they often wrote English reports. At this international university, the ability to write academic reports and commercial analyses is also highly valued. Not only are students taught the academic vocabulary and grammar, but they also learn the essential structure for different types of academic writing. A Ph.D. student studying Biology recognized that EAP courses provide the foundations for further academic writing, as EAP includes some professional uses of the words and rules of structure that are only known to native speakers. When students are trained with this knowledge, they make fewer grammar errors. Finally, academic reports and newsletters have shown to be the most frequent reading materials. Other reading materials include industry analysis reports, official documents, or feedback from colleagues. Since all the teaching materials in this university are in English and students need to read many articles or journals when writing reports, graduates in the interviews all affirmed that they had practiced reading techniques such as skimming and scanning and could take less time to read the essential working reports. G1 and G2 mentioned that EAP provides great chances for them to surf foreign websites or seek information on English articles. The study experience in EAP does improve their speed of reading and the ability to grasp important information in quick reading. A triangulation of the data from both questionnaires and interviews indicates that speaking is the most improved skill via EAP learning. Graduates extensively revealed that through the two-year EAP experience, they obtained many opportunities to communicate with foreign teachers and classmates, understanding the native speakers' way of interaction. The skills they learned in making presentations or group discussions are of great help to their current jobs. G9 once maintained that when she attended a world-wide academic conference in Singapore on behalf of her company, she could talk freely with foreign scholars in English the same way that she talked to teachers during her studies at this international university.

The English Skills in Need of Improvement

Furthermore, this study found some areas of English skills that need to be improved from the respondents' perspectives. The data shows that a large proportion of graduates claimed oral communication skills and discussion or negotiation skills as the ones that are in need of enhancement, although many graduates in the interviews asserted that EAP was beneficial in preparing them for communicative challenges at work. The paradox of graduates' attitude to speaking is also demonstrated when graduates were asked whether they agreed that speaking, listening, reading and writing skills taught in EAP contributed to their work. Although the contribution of English skills from EAP to work is greatly valued by the majority of participants (strongly agree + agree) with listening (85%), reading (86%) writing (77%) and speaking (77%), fewer graduates support the contribution of writing and speaking skills, and more of them were uncertain about it. In short, speaking and writing skills are thought to be less useful in the job but need more improvement in the future. This contradiction can be explained from two perspectives. Firstly, graduates neglected the need to improve English listening on most occasions as it was always mixed with speaking and seldom used on its own. Secondly, among graduates who had a higher need to speak English more frequently at work, the benefit of speaking skills learned from EAP classes could be obviously discerned and thus it would be valued. However, not all the respondents had to use oral English skills at work as discussed in the first section, and those who did not have to communicate in English may consider it to be of little or no use. Therefore, when exploring attitudes toward speaking, it makes more sense to elicit data from the groups who speak English more often at work.

Another look at the data revealed that all the respondents agreed that listening contributed to their work. Even though graduates mentioned little about listening in the interviews, they still valued the advantage of listening in their impressions, as shown in the questionnaire data. G9 once pointed out, for example, that listening should be granted more importance, because it can play an essential role in daily work, especially when the exposure to foreign clients is very frequent, whether it be on the phone or face to face. It is common sense that both listening and speaking matter in effective communication. To some degree, listening can even count more for understanding what others said is the first step of a conversation.

Therefore, given that most graduates stressed speaking skills, listening should have been allocated more attention to in EAP class as well.

Conclusion

The study explored graduates' perceptions of EAP, specifically, how this course affects graduates' occupations and career development. It also investigated which areas of English have improved most through EAP intervention to enhance their occupational skills and competence. The findings suggest that these graduates often used English at work and their speaking skills were considered to be the most advanced among all skills in EAP teaching. The two-year EAP experience is believed to have a positive effect on their current work, consistent with Flowerdew and Peacock's claim (2001). Graduates in general would benefit from EAP classes in confidence building, thorough thinking skills, team work skills and more career choices.

For improvements in English abilities that EAP has brought to the graduates, the results indicate that graduates spoke highly of the curriculum structure of EAP. They remarked that the course not only contained beneficial English training for further study abroad, but also touched on specific or technical terms in their majors as well as a wide range of factual knowledge. Secondly, concerning the contribution of speaking, listening, reading and writing respectively to the workplace, participants in large proportions agreed that the four skills were all of great help for their work, especially speaking and writing. They pointed out that English work situations often required significant use of conversations and e-mails.

However, when investigating skills in need of improvement, speaking was also given top priority. On the one hand, graduates recognized that they do benefit from the speaking skills they learned in EAP in their daily work. On the other hand, they maintained that it was still the speaking ability that needs to be improved while dealing with various situations at work. One explanation can be that graduates need to manipulate specific aspects of English ability when conducting real tasks in different fields.

Apart from the English benefits, EAP has a more positive impact on graduates' occupation. Based on the qualitative data in the interviews, graduates built up confidence in English work situations. For those using English less at work, they still benefited from EAP in that they had been given a chance to simulate real-life tasks in their future jobs while conducting assignments and tasks in EAP classes. The awareness of fulfilling deadlines, the enhancement of teamwork skills, and efficiency and attitudes toward responsibility were thus established via EAP intervention. As such, graduates developed team efficiency and interpersonal skills during group work in EAP classes. They might even have more career choices in addition to their specialized majors, as the English skills they obtained can add weight to their professional development, resulting in more possibilities in the pursuit of their future careers. Therefore, the occupation skills learned in EAP courses can help graduates at the beginning stages of their careers and can have a positive influence on their current work.

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