Teaching English for Academic Purposes in a changing Educational context: A case of Midlands State University

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Abstract

The study looks at the importance of adjusting materials and teaching methods according to the students' needs and the prevailing situation. It looks at the value of needs analysis and material evaluation and adjusting the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) module to suit the needs of students at Midlands State University. The results were drawn from a survey of student's needs and their assessment of their topics. The study reveals that the most topical student's needs, such as the receptive skills reading and listening do not change over time. On the other hand, the productive skills are the ones to be checked time and again to suit the student's needs and the current developments such as the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (Zim Asset). The results of this study can be used to develop the EAP curriculum as well as maintaining relevance and acceptance of the module at Midlands State University.

Keywords: EAP, Needs analysis, learner's needs and change

Introduction

Students' needs are undergoing constant change due to the permanently varying socio-economic situation in the labour market that dictates the needs. Thus, it is critical to follow the changes and react to them. It is evident from literature that students of all backgrounds can find it difficult to develop the necessary academic writing skills to successfully navigate their university studies. Bennet (2009) notes that there are certain conventions and formalities associated with academic writing , in that English academic discourse is a clearly defined entity distinguished by a series of identifiable characteristics and that there is a broad consensus as to its general principles , methods of textual constructions and the kind of grammatical and lexical features to be used (p.44). Again, Whitehead (2002) asserts that academic writing places complex higher order analytical demands on students and requires not only a certain level of knowledge and

comprehension but also the ability to critically analyse and integrate ideas, as well as appropriately draw on and reference it. Even English speaking students struggle in their attempts to gain the necessary skills, and remain anxious, uncertain and daunted at the prospect of producing written assignments (p.502).

Adapting to change is a fundamental element in any educational set up. There is need to respond to changes that are taking place at Midlands State University .The change ranges from technology and scientific development , administrative issues, new thinking in economics and management, new literatures and entertainment genres (Graddol, 2000). In Zimbabwe, there are new developments like the economic meltdown and the government has introduced Zim asset to alleviate the economic situation.

As such, there is need for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) lecturers to acknowledge the developments and respond accordingly. This implies that academic demands and students communicative needs shift in response to the changing scene in higher education .Higher education worldwide is undergoing substantial changes in terms of organisation and function in response to globalisation forces such as demographics, economic structures and information technology which are introducing new concepts of educational markets, organisational structures, teaching methods and content (Morrison, 2003). The relationship between academic writing and tertiary education is undeniable and has long engaged the attention of educationalists, applied linguists and other scholars interested in the use of language by students. Flowerdew and peacock (2001) view English for Academic purposes as an international phenomenon, truly linked in with the overall trend towards the globalization of information exchange, communication and education. English is now established as the world language of research and publication and with this tremendous expansion there has been a parallel growth in the preparation of non-native English speakers for studies in English (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001).

A brief definition of EAP is vital since it provides some insights of what exactly is offered and the necessary aspects to be considered when implementing the module and will also assist in justifying the need to investigate the proposed area. According to Gillet and Wray (2006), EAP involves teaching students to use language appropriately for study, and it covers areas such as research genres, assignments, exams and dissertations. Gillet and Wray (2006) view EAP as an educational approach and a set of beliefs that is often constructed with general English courses, the starting point for EAP is the learner and their situation rather than the language. This has some implications on the tutor that the tutor has to carry out some needs analysis before anything else. This also means that the content in EAP courses is determined by the student and not by the lecturer. The fact that

EAP is a learner centred module means that the lecturer at one point in time needs to carry out one on one teaching methods and assessment procedures in class. Dudley Evans in Benesch (2001) concurs with this and was quoted as saying

> ESP is a practical affair most interested in investigating needs, preparing materials and devising appropriate teaching methods.

This also has some implications on the role of the Lecturer, that the tutor's role is not static, it should shift depending on the situation. As such, the researcher seeks to establish how lecturers are responding to such matters.

The definition of EAP provided shows that needs analysis is a vital element in the teaching of EAP. Needs analysis in EAP mainly describes critical needs analysis, which considers the target situation as a site of possible reform (Benesch, 2001). Leaner's needs have been defined by Dudley Evans (1991) as identifiable elements of students target English situation. It also involves consulting faculties about course requirements, observing students in naturalistic setting e.g. lecture classes and noting the linguistic and behavioural demand or combing these techniques to obtain a description of assignment, discourse and classroom behaviour, this will allow teachers to provide students with the specific language they need to succeed in their courses and future careers.

The impact of change on the English language and the education set up cannot be denied . Individual teachers are required to fulfil certain roles and engage in particular practices in accordance with the ethos of their school, and to meet ever changing government guidelines, requirements and targets (Woods, 2006). Change also affects the student's writing that is it poses new communicative challenges on them. As such, the writer's task is complicated by the varying and ever changing nature of the elements of writing (Silva and Matsuda, cited in Schmitt (1999). Silva and Matsuda go on to say that the writers self construction may also be constrained by his or her past self constructions, especially if the writer is in the same discourse community. A sudden change in self representation can be highly marked and even distracting.

Again, in relation to change, Fairclough (1995) observes a shift in academic writing styles in which there is a pressure for specialised academic identities to give way to private domain or the life world identities (p.230). Graddol (2000) also notices a change in language and he says;

> As the world is in transition, so is the English language itself taking new forms? English has changed substantially in the 1500 years or so of its use, reflecting patterns of contact with other languages and the changing communication needs of people.

The changes taking place in the English language has been attributed to the fact English is now being used for more purposes than before. Everywhere it is at the leading edge of technological and scientific development, new thinking in economics (Graddol, 2000). This has given rise to new vocabularies, grammatical forms and ways of speaking and writing.

The English language has been described as a hybrid and flexible language. According to Graddol (2000), English has always been an evolving language and language contact has been an important driver of change. The English language has borrowed freely from other languages. This then means that teachers of English should take note of this element of change and should always be on the lookout for change. For Graddol (2000), the English language is very unpredictable and he says

> One of the few certainties associated with the future of English is that it will always continue to evolve, reflecting and constructing the changing roles and identities of its speakers.

Graddol's sentiments about the English language help us to understand that change has a direct impact on the language, and it is against this backdrop that the study seeks to identify the change taking place and its impact on the English language, specifically English for academic purposes.

Apart from change, there are other factors that are affecting the teaching of EAP and need to be considered in the construction of a new EAP. A review of the challenges faced by EAP tutors in the process of implementing the module provides an insight into the nature of the module. This clearly shows that the module is characterised by a number of challenges. Mhundwa (1998) observes that the basic content of the course is seen by some students as an extension of work covered at secondary school. As a result, students will have the impression that they are being called upon to revise O' level work. He goes on to say that when they compare the content of the course with the content of other university modules like linguistics , maths and science , students conclude that communication skills is less challenging than other modules.

The other problem observed by Mhundwa (1998) is that of negative attitude. Lecturers in disciplines in which they think that students do not require a high level of proficiency in written and spoken discourse may regard the teaching of communication skills as a waste of time. Inevitably, students will regard the subject in the same way. Mhundwa (1998) also claims that students in most cases find themselves working without a clear goal and tend to absent themselves frequently from EAP lectures and pay greater attention to other subjects. Brookes and Grundy (1991) note a similar problem; they observe that there are some anomalies that exist amongst

departments in terms of language support practices (p.31). They claim that departmental cultures within universities constitute a game of insiders and outsiders, and power relations in which a cultural mismatch can frequently occur, sometimes with severe consequences. As such, It is the researcher's conceptualisation that ensuring relevance of the module, will help to solve some of the problems being encountered by EAP practitioners

Furthermore, there is increasing diversity in the student's population in terms of culture, socio-economic status, educational and linguistic background and in most cases , lecturers ignore such aspects. These developments have a direct impact on how academic writing is understood , traditional teaching methods are taking on new shape and meaning while new methods are being introduced . Moreover, the change does not affect the teaching methods and the curriculum only, but it poses new communicative challenges to students, especially to non native speakers of English who have to adopt to learning in English and to cope with various genres in different contexts. As such, the researcher found it appropriate to investigate ways to sustain the teaching of English for academic purposes .It is the researcher's belief that in some situations, change is ignored and tutors deliver or implement the module without acknowledging the developments taking place within the universities.

A description of EAP and the Challenges encountered in its teaching.

Since the study's focus is on academic writing, it is also vital to provide a brief background o f the EAP module. According to Gillet and Wray (2006), EAP is a branch of English for Specific Purposes which involves teaching students to use language appropriately .It covers areas such as research genres, student's writing for example assignments, exams and dissertations. For Gillet and Wray (2006), the starting point for EAP is the learner and their situation rather than the language or the module. This implies that EAP is a learner based module , much attention is directed towards the students before looking at the teaching methods and the curriculum. Looking at the developments that are taking place within the universities, one would then ask the feasibility of the learner based approach given that the universities are now enrolling large numbers of students.

For the purposes of this study, it is also important to note that the implementation of EAP in most universities has not been an easy task . EAP tutors have encountered quite a number of challenges in trying to teach this module . In most cases, the problems emanate from lack of understanding of the module. At Midlands State University , the module is fairly new and there are resistance and adaptation issues

involved. When the module was introduced in 2006 it was meant for the students in the faculty of arts and social sciences . However, it was later introduced to the rest of the faculties in 2008 and this worsened the situation , in terms of relevance and acceptance. In some situations , lecturers have received very hostile and unfriendly remarks about the module from other members of staff from various departments . Mhundwa (1998) supports these claims when he says

> Lectures in disciplines in which they think students do not require a high level of proficiency in written and spoken discourse may regard teaching communication skills as a waste of time. Inevitably, students will regard the subject in the same way, especially those who intend to major in sciences and law.

It is against this back ground that the researcher found it appropriate and necessary to investigate means of upholding the EAP module and ensuring its relevance.

The teaching of English for academic purpose is a sensitive affair and Benesch (1999) calls it a practical affair, most interested in investigating needs, preparing materials and devising appropriate teaching methodologies. The implementation of this kind of module is marred by quite a number of challenges. These challenges include the acceptance of large numbers of students by universities and this has implications on the teaching methodologies to be employed in such situations whereby a class would have one hundred students or more. The issue of large numbers is change in response to globalisation. As such, the study seeks to investigate appropriate ways to implement the module given such a situation . In conducting EAP classes there is a strong need to conduct 'one on one' consultations . However, with the changes in the enrolment of students, it is difficult to conduct such consultations and there is need to find suitable methods and assessment procedures to substitute the existing ones

Apart from adjustments issues, the implementation of the EAP module is marred by quite a number of challenges. These challenges include lack of seriousness from students, negative attitude from both students and lecturers from various departments. The researcher's conceptualisation is that the problems emanate from lack of understanding of what EAP modules offer on the student's side as well as the concerned lecturers. To this end, Mhundwa (1998) contents that students find themselves working without clear objectives. They therefore tend to absent themselves frequently from lectures and pay greater attention to other subjects.

Mhundwa (1998) goes on to say that most communication skills courses are quite vague on what it is that students are linguistically
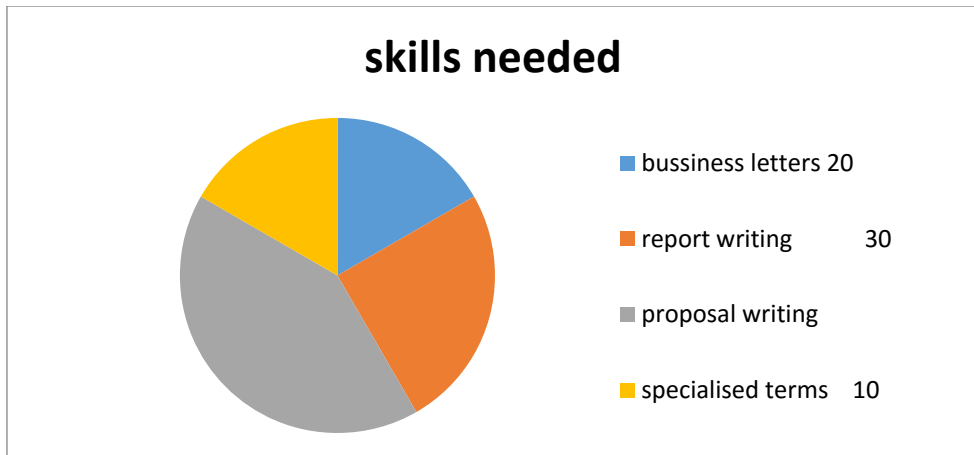
deficient in when they enter university. No needs analysis are available in most departments that teach the course .The content provided is intuitively designed. This implies that, communication skills modules are lagging behind in so far as maintaining standards and quality is concerned. As such, the study seeks to find ways of upholding the standards of the module in order for it to suit the present educational context. This is because the researcher assumes that some of these problems encountered in the process of implementing the module arise from the module's lack of relevance.

Rating the importance and relevance of the EAP module

Basing on the findings drawn from a survey carried out by the researcher, it was noted that the module has been rated as one of the most important modules at Midlands State University. Answering the Question what do you need EAP for? Most of the students indicated that the module is vital as it assist them to navigate through their academic journey. Many of the students interviewed highlighted the importance of academic writing, specifically academic referencing and essay writing. However, some students doing science programmes indicated the need to add a vocabulary component, where the students are exposed to specialised language specific to their various disciplines. The pie chart below shows the different skills needed by students and how they rated each skill.

Fig. 2.Additional skills needed by students

	Very useful	Useful	Not useful	N/A
Speaking	90	25	2	3
Reading	50	60	5	5
Writing	100	20	-	-
Note taking	100	20	-	-
CV writing	40	60	10	10
Listening	49	51	9	11

skills needed

- ■ bussiness letters 20
- ■ report writing   30
- ■ proposal writing
- ■ specialised terms   10

The pie chart above shows the additional skills which are lacking in students at their different levels. In order to define the needs of the students and to check whether the needs of EAP students change in the long run, the qualitative survey was carried out by interviewing fifty level four semester one students from Midlands State University. Level four one students were selected basing on the assumption that these students have had a working experience after their work related learning period which is the third year. Again, some lecturers who had paid supervision visits to various students who were on work related learning indicated that some employers complained that the students lacked business writing skills. The survey shows that the needs of the students change over time. Students from work related learning indicated the need to include proposal writing and business letter writing; this is because they noticed that these skills are a requisite in the industrial field. Again, the students also indicated the need to include a component of specialised vocabulary, the reason being that as they proceed with their studies many students find it difficult to understand specialised terms used in their respective areas. Some of the students made reference to the Zim-asset which emphasises indigenisation and empowerment. As a result of this blueprint, a number of business men have emerged, so the students indicated the need for report writing and proposal writing to enable them to kick start their own businesses. Again, the students emphasised the need to add proposal writing to the module since the skill will be useful when they are asked to write their research proposals for their dissertations in the final year.

Conclusion

The study emphasises the need of student's needs analysis for modules such as EAP. The survey findings indicate that: All students are motivated to learn English For Academic Purposes as they regard it as an

important means of communication, both for studies and professional life. The results of students' survey show that the needs for the development of particular English skills do not change much over time despite their different background and experience in English learning practices .Both groups of students felt a lack of productive skills, with business proposal writing and business letters being the top priority. Grammar was regarded and specialised terms were also considered to be a vital component to be incorporated into the EAP module at Midlands State University.

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