

THE EFFICACY OF THE ENGLISH FOR GENERAL ACADEMIC PURPOSES (EGAP) COURSE AT OUSL: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

A significant innovation in relation to the provision of English Language support for undergraduate students at OUSL is the commencement of a common English Language programme that focuses on developing core skills for academic purposes. This new programme is innovative as it is a departure from the current practice of subject specific English language support programmes. This new innovation is underpinned by research and theorizing in the field of teaching English for academic purposes. According to Jordan (1997) English for Academic Purposes (EAP) can be divided into the two major categories: English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP). Furthermore, he points out that EGAP may represent '*common core*' or '*study skills*' in English language. This new programme belongs to the second category as it aims to equip students with a range of generic academic skills that would help them succeed in their undergraduate studies. Pragmatic considerations such as the enhancement of employability of undergraduates were also taken into account in choosing the EGAP model.

One key consideration in language learning and teaching in distance contexts is the learners needs and preferences and their perceptions of the courses of study. This study is therefore timely and relevant in that it focuses on the perceptions of the first cohort of learners who are enrolled in this programme and their perceptions of its efficacy. Dooley (2010) notes in relation to English language support programmes that very little is known about students own perceptions and impressions of these programmes. In her own research of the perceptions of international students in a Western Australian University undertaking an English pathway programme prior to commencement of tertiary level study, it was found that many students felt that they had benefitted from taking a course that focused on academic skills. However they also felt that there were still many challenges to overcome in relation to their English Language proficiency. Similar findings could also be seen in Terraschke and Wahid's (2011) study where they made a comparison of the academic experiences of international students who had undergone an EAP programme and those who had not. The authors comment that the qualitative data gathered by means of interviews revealed that EAP students felt that they had benefitted in areas such as communication skills, learning strategies and overall ability to deal with the academic demands of their course. On the whole therefore such research supports the validity and importance of gaining students' perspectives on the overall outcomes of a language course for academic purposes. In relation to the context in question a previous study by De Silva and Devendra (2011) investigated learners' needs, expectations and their plans to improve their English prior to following the English for General Academic Purposes course offered by the Department of Language Studies. They found that learners' needs were diverse and only a few learners had their own plans for improving their English.

The current study also situates itself in the wider body of research that aims to gain an understanding of students' own perspectives and impressions of courses designed to improve their academic language skills. The main objectives of this study were

- To ascertain students' perceptions of the main academic skills they had gained from the EGAP programme
- To determine students' views as to what extent the EGAP course met their expectations
- To explore students' perceptions regarding their readiness to study in the English medium on completion of the course

METHODOLOGY

The sample consisted of 200 students who were enrolled in the EGAP programme. This study utilized a mixed methods approach which involves the collection and analyzing of both quantitative and qualitative data. Cresswell (2003) notes that that chief features of this “Multi method matrix” is that biases inherent in a single method could be minimized. Such an approach also facilitated data triangulation where “the results from one method can help develop or inform the other method” (p.16). A variety of strategies is associated with mixed methods approach but this study in particular uses *concurrent* procedures where qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously and converged to provide a comprehensive analysis of the issue being investigated. In this study data were collected using the following instruments

- A questionnaire to students enrolled in the Colombo regional centre of the 2011/2012 student cohort of the EGAP programme
- In depth one-to-one interviews with a selected group of students to ascertain their impressions of the course.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected using the questionnaire were analysed quantitatively using SPSS 16.0 and the interview data were analysed qualitatively. Out of the 200 questionnaires that were distributed among the sample, 191 completed questionnaires were returned. The quantitative analysis showed that 91% of the sample perceived the course to be useful to a great/fair extent in developing their use of four skills, namely, reading, writing, listening and speech. However, 8.9% of the sample believed that the course helped very little in developing their abilities in the two skill areas, speech and writing. The sub skills like writing a summary, taking part in a debate, making an academic presentation were among some of the sub skills which the students perceived as not developed fully in the course.

On the whole, students were found to be satisfied with the course and 78% of the sample responded positively to the question “On the whole, are you satisfied with the course?”. A high percentage of the students believed that the English for General Academic Purposes Course has helped them to develop both General Language Skills (79%) and Academic Coping Skills (76%). A fairly high percentage (74%) of the sample responded positively to the question, “Do you think this course has helped you to study in the English medium?”. However, a considerable number of students (20%) were not certain about the application of the skills learnt in the English for General Academic Purposes Course in other contexts.

The interview data were useful in supporting the questionnaire findings and the researchers were able to get more elaborate data on students’ perceptions of the course through these interviews. A coding of data using techniques of qualitative data analysis indicated that learners responded positively to the inclusion of four skills, the thematic approach and the teaching methodology adopted.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The results clearly indicate that a majority of the participants have a positive view of the outcomes of this course which was designed to improve their English language skills in order to function successfully in an academic environment. The fact that some skills did not receive adequate focus is understandable given the limitations in time that students can spend on EAP instruction. However it is clear that in future students need to be given explicit instruction regarding the application of the skills learnt in the English classroom to their undergraduate study. Tutors need to be briefed to give further guidance to students to apply the skills gained in real academic contexts.

The study also points to the importance of gaining the views of academics in main study programmes regarding the English Language skills that would be most appropriate to the academic tasks that they are expected to perform.

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