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Preparing Students for the Challenges of the Academic Study

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Preamble

It is vital for year-one university students to be able to function in an unfamiliar learning environment and cope with new challenges and different academic tasks without much guidance from their lecturers. Hong Kong secondary schools, being examination-oriented, have not trained students for tasks requiring an independent and creative approach, and, therefore, not prepared them adequately for the challenges of the inquisitive style of tertiary education. The dramatic change in the structure of the learning tasks at university level leaves Hong Kong year-one undergraduates confused and often unable to achieve their maximum academic performance.

Abstract

When Hong Kong students first enter university, they often come with ineffective learning habits and have to adjust to a new study environment. They have to develop critical, analytical and independent thinking skills which were rarely nurtured in their previous schooling. This project was motivated by a belief that, in order to function effectively in a higher educational institution, students must gain independence in their study. To aid students in this process, the gap or discontinuity in their abilities has to be identified first. This was done through the comparison of study skills students were trained during their secondary schooling and the skills expected to be displayed in the assignments and examinations at university. Having established which study and language skills were relevant and needed to successfully perform academic tasks, specific instructional materials were created for the inclusion in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses.

Keywords

Study skills in English, transition to tertiary education, coping with academic tasks, academic skills

Introduction

For many year-one undergraduates, the transition from secondary to tertiary study is a difficult one involving a dramatic change in the structure of learning tasks (Ramsden, Martin & Bowden, 1987). In Hong Kong, students move from a secondary system in which success is exam-based and depends little on independence and creativity, into university study which requires them to be inquiring, self-motivated and self-directed (Kember, 1996). Current literature and the investigator's own studies suggest that, at the beginning of their first year at university, most students lack both the skills and the confidence to conduct independent research at a university level (Bankowski & Cotton, 1997) and that student's learning at secondary level would involve limited choice of resources and a high degree of teacher's guidance (Bankowski & Cotton, 1997).

As a result, many year-one students at Hong Kong Baptist University are unable to analyse some academic tasks and have great difficulty in carrying out assignments involving independent enquiry in English. They have little idea of how to identify and locate suitable resources for their academic tasks, to select and use materials, and to present the results in their own words and in an appropriate academic form. They are often confused and passive in the face of the new demands placed upon them and many are unable to reach their full academic potential.

Aims and Objectives

The objectives of this project were:

1. to analyse the nature and extent of the difficulties students encounter when handling research related tasks in their first year at university;
2. to make recommendations on how educators and institutions can help students develop skills, which will enable students to become more independent learners; and
3. to develop relevant instructional materials for study skills in English for students undertaking first year study in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences at HKBU.

It was intended that the instructional materials would cover the steps needed to produce a research paper, as well as provide practice in attendant skills such as incorporating the work of other writers, writing a bibliography, etc. These materials supplemented and expanded the existing EAP course materials. While some materials were written by this project team from scratch, others were selected from existing sources and in some cases adapted to make them more relevant to Hong Kong students. Due to the large volume involved (267 pages), the teaching materials developed as part of this project are not included in this report. They are however available in the HKBU Library and the Language Centre.

Methodology

Survey

A survey was conducted to give HKBU students an opportunity to indicate the areas in which, and to what extent, they experienced difficulty when handling research work or other assignments involving the use of research related skills. The questionnaire survey was administered to all year-one HKBU students enrolled in the Arts and Social Sciences Faculties. It was conducted during the EAP class and completed by 252 students.

The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions which took various forms. Student information questions such as their major, and medium of instruction at secondary school were asked in multiple-choice format, but the majority of the questions were a Likert-type scale. The final two questions were open-ended. Students wrote their answers directly onto the answer sheets which were then read and statistically analysed using the SPSS software. The results from this questionnaire are presented in the Results/Findings section of this report.

The analysis of the data produced in the survey indicated areas in which students felt they had particular difficulty, and these, combined with the list of skills considered by EAP instructors as essential for carrying out academic tasks in English, formed the basis for the development of the instructional materials.

Preparation of instructional materials

Once the topics had been identified, the relevant instructional materials were selected, adapted and in some cases developed. For some areas, adequate instructions were already in use in EAP courses, so they were carefully examined and possibly adjusted to match the style of other resources. Where no instructions existed, materials were either adapted from the work of other writers or developed by the members of the project team. Examples and models were derived from a variety of sources, such as local newspapers, areas of interest indicated by students and the project team's own experience of Asia in general and Hong Kong in particular.

All materials, old and new, were combined and skills arranged to logically follow the sequence needed when researching and writing an academic paper. Extra weight was given to topics that many students indicated as problematic in the survey (e.g. finding information and using the work of other writers).

Results/Findings

Survey

The results obtained from the survey showed that a large majority of the year-one students at HKBU experienced problems with a wide array of university level skills. Students readily admitted that they had a substantial amount of difficulty with skills ranging from the more technical library skills to intellectual skills such as critical analysis.

Table 1. General Academic Skills

	Very Difficult/ Difficult (%)	Moderately Difficult (%)	Quite Easy/Very Easy (%)
In some university courses, I was required to critically analyse issues.	62.8	33.6	3.6
At university, I was required to be more creative than I was in secondary school.	54.6	42.1	3.3
At university, I have to study in different ways than I did at secondary school.	51.8	42.8	5.4
I was required to draw conclusions about a subject.	40.1	48.0	11.9
I was required to create supporting arguments in my written or oral assignments.	57.9	37.4	4.6
	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree (%)
I could not think of enough ideas to write about.	59.4	30.3	10.4
At university, I had difficulty organising ideas for my assignments.	46.8	39.6	13.6

When being asked about the level of difficulty they encountered when first required to critically analyse issues, only a handful of the students replied that they found this task easy. As many as 62.8% of them found critical analysis to be a very difficult skill while 33.6% found it moderately difficult (Table 1). The second skill identified by students as problematic was creating supporting arguments in their written and oral assignments. More than half of the students responded that they found this skill very difficult to put into practice. Similar responses were given to a question about the comfort students felt in drawing conclusions. While 48% of them reported some difficulty with this task, 40.1% found drawing conclusions very challenging, only a small number found this skill easy.

Again, students expressed a significant degree of difficulty when required to exhibit creativity in their university work. Creativity came easily to only a handful of students responded, while 42.1% had some difficulty when coming face to face with this challenge.

Problems adapting to ways of studying that were new and different from those used at secondary school were also reported by most of the year-one students. This transition was very difficult for just over half of the students and moderately difficult for the rest of the respondents. Interestingly, while most of the students (88.4%) felt that they had to study in ways that were different from those at secondary school, up to 11.6% of the students surveyed did not perceive the need to reform their study techniques. This group of students may have already been using advanced

study techniques or continued to apply the same study tactics in a university setting.

Responses to questions about producing and organising ideas suggested that year-one students are not accustomed to working with their own ideas or creating their own lines of thought. A modest 10.4% of students felt able to produce

enough ideas for their written assignments, while 59.4% of students admitted that thinking up ideas was an area in which they experienced problems. Although a slightly greater proportion of students (13.6%) felt at ease organising ideas for their assignments, almost half indicated that this task was a difficult one.

Table 2. Working with Resources

	Very Difficult/ Difficult (%)	Moderately Difficult (%)	Quite Easy/Very Easy (%)
I was required to search independently for information using the library facilities.	54.1	42.4	3.5
I had to determine by myself which information was relevant or useful for a project.	48.6	47.3	4.2
I had to combine information from two or more different resources into one project/ assignment.	54.6	41.1	4.3
	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree (%)
At first, completing assignments was difficult for me because I didn't know how to find the necessary information.	67.4	24.7	8.0

Prior research by the Principal Investigator highlighted the fact that students in their secondary schools, for a variety of reasons (e.g. both inadequate facilities and the exam-oriented nature of the curriculum), have little opportunity to discover or to work with library resources or other materials (Bankowski, 1998). This lack of experience is evident in the responses of the students to this survey's questions about working with resources (Table 2).

Almost all students who were required to search independently in the library for information for their assignments found such a task difficult. Only 3.5% of the

students found searching independently relatively easy. They also found it difficult to determine which information was relevant or useful for a project. Selecting useful information was very difficult for almost half of the students who were required to do so and somewhat difficult for 47.3% of the students. In general, many students (67.4%) felt that one of the reasons that assignments at the university level seemed difficult was that they did not know how to find the information to use it for their assignments. Even combining information from different resources for a project was an exercise that almost half the students surveyed found problematic.

Table 3. Language and Communication Skills

	Strongly Agree/ Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree (%)
I found it difficult to paraphrase from my resources.	59.8	33.5	6.8
I found it difficult to express my own opinions when preparing my assignments.	53.8	36.5	9.6
I have difficulty expressing myself effectively in English.	62.5	28.3	9.2
In my academic studies, I found it difficult to use information in English.	40.4	41.6	18.0

Many students struggled with their English language skills at university (Table 3). A majority of them (62.5%) admitted that they had difficulty expressing themselves in English and many (40.4%) found it difficult to use information that was conveyed in English.

In general, the majority of students had problems expressing themselves in their work, whether it involved their own opinions or a restatement of others'. Paraphrasing was almost as troublesome as expressing their own opinions when preparing assignments.

Table 4. Independence

	Strongly Agree/Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree (%)
University assignments were difficult for me at first because I didn't receive the same amount of guidance from teachers as in secondary school.	70.4	24.0	5.6
The teachers at university don't give us enough help with our assignments.	41.9	38.2	19.9

As many as 70.4% of the students surveyed were quick to identify the relatively lower level of teacher guidance at university as one of the reasons that they had difficulty with their assignments (Table 4). However, the responses for another question suggested that the students did

not necessarily feel that teachers ought to be giving them more help. Many of the students seemed to understand that in the university environment they are expected to accept challenge without being spoon-fed by teachers as they used to be in secondary school.

Discussion

The survey confirmed that the majority of students lacked confidence in tackling independent research because of their lack of previous experience. Particular areas of concern were highlighted by the survey, such as using the library, selecting appropriate material, using resources, etc.

In an attempt to help these students, the project team has compiled a series of units covering the steps required to produce a research paper/essay. From the initial stage of deciding on a topic, the students are guided through the stages of using the library to find information, choosing appropriate materials, arranging them into essay form with the students' own original ideas, to finally producing a polished academic paper. Emphasis has been placed on those topics which the students found difficult - as indicated by their own admission (e.g. paraphrasing) or as demonstrated in their assignments (e.g. writing paragraphs). EAP instructors were able to comment on the materials and offer suggestions for improvement (e.g. changes in the order of exercises, additions, etc.). Alterations were subsequently made before the completion of the units for binding. All 10 units were bound together to form a 267-page EAP course manual providing a step-by-step guide to academic skills in English, including small scale research. This course manual was used in EAP classes with all students majoring in Arts and Social Sciences. The manual could also be used for self-study and by EAP instructors in other disciplines to refer

students to the appropriate units for help with basic queries on research or essay writing.

Included in the manual are units on report writing and oral presentations, as well as the research project models. Teacher's notes, containing possible answers to some of the exercises, were prepared but not included in the final bound volume designed for student use. They were given to the instructors separately for use in class or in individual consultations. Many of the EAP materials developed in this project had been adapted from available resources and made more relevant to Hong Kong students. These changes ranged from minor word alterations to the inclusion of Asian news stories. It was hoped that the inclusion of materials familiar to students' own situation would enable them to accept more readily the concepts and ideas these examples and exercises illustrated.

The contents of EAP course for Arts and Social Sciences manual consist of 10 units developed under this project are listed in Table 5. The actual course manual is not reprinted here due to its volume but copies are available from the Library, the Self-Access Learning Centre and the Language Centre office.

Table 5 Table of Contents - EAP Course manual

Unit 1	Choosing and Researching a Topic for an Academic Paper	Topic outline
	Carrying out small scale research in English	Sentence outline
	Choosing a suitable research topic	Practices exercises
	Using HKBU Library	Unit 5
	Finding books and reference materials	Essay writing
	Narrowing your topic	Essay structure
	Evaluating resources	Thesis statement
	What to put in and what to leave out	Introductory paragraphs
	Gathering information	Concluding paragraphs
	Using resources in your writing	Unit 6
	Practice in library research	Patterns of development in essay writing, cohesion and style
	Referencing and bibliographies	Comparison and contrast
	Sample paper / bibliography in APA style	Cause and effect
Unit 2	Integrating other writers' work	Time relationship
	Plagiarism	Transitions
	Paraphrasing	Using transitional words or phrases
	Summarizing	Using parallelism
	Paraphrasing and summarizing exercise	Transitional paragraph that summarizes
	Further practice in paraphrasing	Using adjective clauses
	Synthesizing	Unit 7
	Using source material - practising skills of summarizing, paraphrasing and synthesizing	Writing, revising and editing an academic paper
Unit 3	Paragraph writing	Writing the first draft
	What is a paragraph?	Revising and editing: what, when and how?
	Topic introducer	Proofreading and its importance
	Topic sentence	Some strategies to use when proofreading
	Developing and supporting sentence	Practice in proofreading
	Concluding sentence	Unit 8
	Practice paragraph writing	Abstracts
	Developing clarity and exactness	Writing abstracts
	Distinguishing general and specific statement	Models and exercises
	Making general statement more specific	Unit 9
	Narrowing ideas for topic sentences	Making oral presentation
	Practice in editing paragraph	Phase 1: Ideas / information gathering
Unit 4	Writing outlines	Phase 2: Planning / organisation
	What is an outline?	Phase 3: Delivery / presentation
	Organising ideas	Unit 10
	Purpose of outlines	Primary research and report writing
		Data collection method
		Questionnaire design (opinion survey)
		Short report - format and structure
		Language of the report
		Using graphs and tables in report
		Generalisations and facts
		Example of the report

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

Though a formal study of the effectiveness of these materials was not conducted, it was apparent that students responded well to the instructions. In the course and the teaching evaluations, students commented that they recognised the benefits of EAP course materials. They highly endorsed the components of the course that tackled specific skills such as finding and using resources, preparing oral presentations, using an appropriate format for writing academic papers and presenting ideas in a logical order. They appreciated the shift in emphasis towards Asian concerns, and showed themselves well able to face the challenge of more demanding materials. These perceptions of benefit corresponded to the improvements evident in the work that students submitted under the programme.

Overall students' response to the new materials was positive, conveying a significant degree of interest and enthusiasm. It was apparent that most students gained a real sense of achievement and satisfaction from the work in which they had engaged using the new course materials. The common perception was that the skills acquired in the course were applicable and transferable to other subjects and that they helped students to learn how to study independently. Students indicated that they enjoyed the materials and the method; that they found them interesting and appreciated the opportunity of creative thought and work.

Limitations/Difficulties

Some limitations were imposed by circumstances, timing and design. In retrospect, it has emerged that a number of elements in the project design which initially did not seem important have proved to be significant when subjected to more detailed analysis.

Whilst enabling the use of a large sample, the questionnaire did not allow for the open or multiple responses which in turn might have clarified answers or suggested ways in which the programme could be extended or modified. Interviews did serve to fill this gap to some degree. However, the small sample used and the need for those students to be reasonably confident and proficient in their use of English meant that responses could not necessarily be generalised to the wider sample population.

In collating the data from the survey, it became evident that some questions should have been presented to invite scaled responses and that the format used in the survey yielded results which were limited in their application. Despite careful piloting, these shortcomings had not come to light earlier.

Conclusion

It is impossible to confirm the direct enhancement this project made on the development of the English skills and independent learning skills of the students involved; a longitudinal study would need to be carried out to positively establish a change. However, the results of the

investigations throughout this project supported previous informal observations that confirmed the educational dichotomy faced by year-one undergraduate students in Hong Kong. This has been noted by other researchers (Biggs, 1992; Cheng, 1995; Hamp-Lyons, 1998) and was outlined in the Education Commission's report on Higher Education (1996, 2000) and the Education Commission Blueprint (1999).

It is clear that, given their lack of confidence in English and lack of experience in investigative tasks, year-one students may be limited in achieving their maximum academic potential and that one of the roles of tertiary teachers is to help them acquire relevant skills and strategies for learning. The training materials that formed the basis of this project were designed to that end.

It is the investigator's hope that this project will provide encouragement and assistance to teachers as they endeavour to help current students make the demanding transition to the tertiary level of study, and from one learning style to another. It is also hoped that this project will serve to guide the development of new programmes, and will thereby encourage in future students the curiosity, independence of thought and skills needed for life-long learning.

That being the case, on the basis of the findings, it is highly recommended that the educational authorities acknowledge the role that independence plays in such learning and that they provide the

resources necessary to facilitate changes in learning and teaching environments within Hong Kong's educational institutions. These proposed changes should concentrate on providing a favourable learning environment to foster independence and help students become more self-directed and more effective learners. Learners need to be supported and encouraged in their efforts to take individual responsibility for their own learning. They should be helped to develop, strengthen and understand their own learning styles and learning goals.

The design of the curriculum and the application of the teaching and learning methods should facilitate the development of students' critical and analytical abilities, assisting them to become aware of the contexts and promoting interest in disciplinary inquiry. Training courses should be offered to help students develop skills needed to successfully perform academic tasks and better prepare them for the challenges of living and working in the ever-changing world. To help bridge the gap in students' study habits, a choice of supporting and elective subjects covering study skills, learning strategies, project-work skills and library research skills should be made available to students in their first and second years at university.

Lecturers should give structured feedback to students and consider innovative forms of teaching, encouraging them to use their creativity and imagination, and helping them to develop resourcefulness. Students should be helped to develop their problem-

solving and critical thinking potential. There is a need to allow time for students to contemplate knowledge in order to develop original and creative thoughts. This could be achieved through well-thought-out and well-planned assignments. The importance of project work or other academic tasks requiring researching should be viewed as the main vehicle through which students develop skills that could be transformed to a life-long learning pattern.

Space is at premium at the University but dedicating some areas for students to set up “information sharing” or “experimental stations” would be a long-term investment that would benefit the educational outcomes. The purpose of these would be for students to help, advise and support each other and to promote team research and experimentation. Independent thoughts, creativity and techniques for self-study could be fostered through peer support and discussion groups. Institutions should provide settings where students could gather to support each other and share resources.

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