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Transferring Academic English Skills to Disciplinary Study: Pedagogical Challenges in Developing an English-in-the-Discipline Course in an Undergraduate Curriculum

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Overview of the Presentation

- Research objectives
- Project significance
- Background of English-in-the-Discipline (ED) courses
- Curriculum innovation
- Pedagogical challenges
- Opportunities and future plan
Research Objectives

• Funded by the Teaching Development Grant from the University of Hong Kong (HKU)
• to evaluate an English-in-the-Discipline (ED) course for disciplinary-defined group of learners in HKU for the 4-year new undergraduate curriculum
• to evaluate the extent to which course facilitates students’ learning in their discipline and to investigate how the course can improve students’ disciplinary-specific skills
Project Significance

• The project outcomes such as course templates, developed resources and procedures have immense learning potential for being transferred to other foundation courses within other programs in the Faculty of Education (Cross-disciplinary) and to other faculties (University-wide) to benefit diverse learners.

• The research outcomes inform us of any potential advantages of developing discipline-specific courses with relevant and specific input from Faculty members.
What is an English-in-the-Discipline Course?

• introduces students to relevant academic English discourse in which to support their disciplinary learning and enrich their learning experience

• builds connections between specific language needs and subject knowledge
Curriculum Innovation
Innovative Features of this ED Course

- **Close mapping** with the Faculty-level learning outcomes
  - Learning components are closely aligned with language requirements in the Faculty assignments
  - All source texts for class activities are discipline-specific

- **Ongoing convergent feedback** and **timely language support** from English teacher and subject teacher

- Close alignment between independent learning tasks on *Moodle* and **in-class teaching topics**
Course Background

• Majored in **Speech & Hearing Sciences** in the **Faculty of Education** at **HKU**

• Year 2 **compulsory** English course

• **Consolidated English course**

• **Problem-based Learning (PBL)** Approach in the discipline
Course Assessment

- Problem-based Learning
  - Reading Form
  - Moodle Online Tasks
  - Academic Essay
  - Reflective Journal
Curricular Model

1. Use of Exemplars
   • Samples supplied by Faculty teachers
   • Useful for students to learn the organization and linguistic devices of the writing genres

2. In-class Peer Critique
   • students identify strengths and weaknesses of their peer’s work
   • Students take control of their learning
   • WHAT to critique vs. HOW to critique
Curricular Model

3. In-class Writing
   - Students upload writings to a forum on Moodle
   - Teachers give immediate collective feedback
   - Collaborative learning
   - Co-construction of ideas within the writing process

4. In-class Sharing- Reflective Learning Experience
   - Verbal exchanges with classmates
     - share their views, reflect their learning, learn from their classmates’ experience
   - Apply what they have learnt into their writing
Data Collection Methods (N = 49)

- **Questionnaires** with students
  - Interim (42 respondents) 86%
  - End-of-course (37 respondents) 76%

- **Focus group interviews** with students
  (29 participants) 60%

- **Personal interviews** with Faculty teachers

- **Assignments** from students
  - Pre-course and Post-course Reading Form and Reflective Journal
Pedagogical Challenges
Challenges: Materials Design

- **Expertise of English teachers** to develop discipline-specific course materials
  - Students’ perception of the **immediate relevance**
  - **Alignment** between the English course materials and Faculty assignments
  - Teaching **language skills vs subject-knowledge** (Faculty’s vs students’ expectations)

(“I won’t say CAES solely focuses on language. [...] [The teacher] sometimes gives comments regarding how to apply the concept [into the reading form]. CAES also helps, on top of language.”)
Challenges: Collaboration

• **Sustainability of the collaborative mode** between the Faculty and the Centre
  – Ensure close **consultation** and **collaboration** between the Faculty and the Centre
  – Identify **achievable goals** to make learning more **motivating**
Challenges: Independent learning

Students’ involvement in online independent learning tasks

- Should independent learning tasks be made **compulsory** and assessed?
- How to **motivate** students to complete online Moodle tasks if they are **not assessed**?
- If assessed: lose **interest**, not for learning, lack of **self-motivation**
Independent Learning Tasks on MOODLE

• Possible factors **discouraging students to do the Moodle tasks:**
  
  – **Busy** study schedule (“In fact, I worked on the tasks at the beginning because I was not that busy at that time, but then I became busy so I didn’t have time to work on the tasks.”)
  
  – **Types** of Moodle tasks (choices, interactive, short, self-check answers)
  
  – **Conflicting vs complementary role** with Faculty (students’ feeling too intense in PBL – therefore expect more teacher support in language) *(cont.)*
Challenges: Course Implementation

Students’ expectations: Content Vs Language

– **pragmatic skills** to help them complete Faculty assignments
  - handy materials e.g. essay checklist, vocabulary list, useful language expressions, good samples

– **Sociocultural context** in Hong Kong: teacher-dependent → learner-centered & independent?

– **Contextual constraints:** (“When the time becomes tight, everything is forgotten; language is completely ignored.”)
Challenges: Assessment Methods

• **One assignment two courses**
  – Reading Form and Reflective Journal
  – Content (Faculty) vs Language (CAES)

• **Assessment and feedback**
  – **Peer** assessment (Moodle & peer critique on essay drafts — focus on process) vs **teacher** feedback
  – (“I think the practice of peer critique is so-so only since we do not quite know what to do; this makes it hard for peers to give comments.”)
  – (“I think the amount of time for the teacher to give feedback can be increased, maybe on an individual basis”)

Conclusion & Implications
Conclusion & Implications

• **Course feedback: POSITIVE** in general in facilitating students’ disciplinary learning

• **Room for improvement**: Out-of-class online learning, Teacher-dependent vs Student-centered

• **Transfer**: Other ED courses, promoting **collaboration** between language teachers and faculty teachers
THANK YOU

Question-and-Answer Session
Opportunities

• An early trial of implementing ED course to cross disciplinary-defined groups of learners
• A solid case example for different Faculties and a key reference point for other courses in other departments
• This ED course on academic literacy exemplifies ways in which students can transfer their learning experience from one context to another
Future Plan

- To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed changes to the ED course
- To investigate the roles of independent learning tasks within our ED course
- To revise and streamline independent learning tasks
  - further cater for students’ language need and support students’ language subject knowledge
Favorable Reasons for the Success

• Supportive faculty staff
  – active in research collaboration

• Collaborative teaching effort
  – Students can learn better and benefit from teachers’ expertise

• Regular consultation with the Faculty
  – assessment methods; assessment criteria; course materials

• Close relevance to the Faculty courses
  – The objectives of the ED course are closely aligned with the program/institutional learning outcomes.
Roles of Faculty Teachers

**Consultative roles** in course planning and materials development:

- provide sampled students’ assignments and source texts for materials development
- participate in co-assessment procedure
- give feedbacks to students
- keep close collaboration with the course coordinator and update her on the students’ language needs in their subject knowledge