

Learning EAP at university: Perceptions of high-achieving ESL freshmen

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This study focuses on the perceptions of learning EAP of first-year undergraduates with high ESL proficiency admitted to an English-medium university in Hong Kong. Two in-depth individual interviews were conducted with nine participants and their written assignments were analysed. The data reveal several challenges among the high achievers in learning EAP. One evident aspect is how to properly cite academic sources. The participants struggled with selecting suitable texts from sources, paraphrasing them, and using them to support their arguments. They also perceived a need to abandon the recited formulaic expressions which may have helped them score high in the secondary school examination. This study reveals gaps between the English learnt in secondary school and EAP and offers insight into what first-year students need when they transition from secondary school to university studies. It argues that EAP should be made an essential component in first-year undergraduate programmes.

Introduction

Learners' transition from secondary school to higher education is a critical stage during which they need to adapt to a new academic culture and their beliefs about English learning may change (Peng, 2011). Research has shown that first-year undergraduates, particularly ESL/EFL students, may find the use of English at university challenging in aspects such as understanding technical vocabulary, adhering to academic style of writing and conforming to new institutional and disciplinary conventions (Evans & Morrison, 2011). In addition, students have a higher tendency to engage in "patchwriting" in source-based writing tasks when they use difficult texts because they are not well equipped in secondary school with the skills of paraphrasing (Hirvela & Du, 2013; Li & Casanave, 2012). In this regard, many universities in English-speaking countries require ESL/EFL students to take a pre-sessional or in-sessional EAP course unless they reach the entry requirements in gatekeeping tests (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL) (Jenkins, 2014). On the other hand, many English-medium universities in ESL/EFL countries such as China, Japan and South Korea mandate that first-year local undergraduates enrol in an EAP course, but students who can demonstrate high English proficiency with outstanding English language results in local or international standardised tests can be exempt (see, e.g., Hyland, 2014; Jenkins, 2014; Murray, 2016).

Research suggests that students with lower English proficiency struggle more in acquiring EAP skills (e.g., Evans & Green, 2007), but it should not imply that those with

high English competence find it less challenging. A major reason is that secondary school tends to focus on general English, which is essentially different from academic English for university studies (Campion, 2016; Liu, Chang, Yang, & Sun, 2011). As Evans and Green (2007) noted, a university English course which merely addresses students' weaknesses in grammar and lexical use does not serve the purpose of meeting new challenges in students' transition to higher education. EAP courses should not be designed only for low proficiency learners of English for remedial purposes (see also Evans & Morrison, 2011; Murray, 2016).

While weaker students may see the need of an EAP course at university, a question arising is how high achievers perceive such a need and engage with their EAP courses. This is a research gap because needs analysis of EAP tends to focus on students with a wide range of English proficiencies and not on high achievers in particular.

Understanding high-achieving ESL learners' perceptions and experiences, particularly their challenges, is crucial in letting university policy-makers see more clearly the role of EAP for these learners before they make decisions on whether high achievers should be exempt from an EAP course. EAP course developers can also design appropriate teaching strategies and materials to cater for learner diversity.

The study

This paper focuses on the perceptions of high-achieving first-year ESL undergraduates who attained the highest level in the secondary school leaving English language examination and chose to enrol in the EAP course in a university in Hong Kong. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do high-achieving ESL learners perceive the need to enrol in an EAP course?
2. What challenges do high-achieving ESL learners have in learning EAP during the transition from secondary school to university?

The context

The Hong Kong secondary school curriculum aims to develop students' general English proficiency. It is concluded by a high-stakes public examination called the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE). The examination results determine whether secondary school leavers can enter university and which university programme they can be admitted to. The HKDSE English language examination assesses

candidates' four language skills. The examination papers typically include text types such as newspaper, letter-to-the-editor, blogs and stories. Students learn English for general communication in daily life. On the other hand, in the university of the current study, the EAP course aims to develop students' ability to critically identify and evaluate authors' stance, understand and produce coherent academic texts (e.g., essay and report), clearly express academic concepts, and use multiple academic sources to justify arguments. It is a "bridging course in English that brings students up to speed with general academic English" (Hyland, 2017, p. 27), and facilitate their learning in the compulsory Common Core (CC) Curriculum such as completing written assignments and participating in tutorial discussions. The course is compulsory for all first-year undergraduates. However, like those high-achievers with high English proficiency in other English-medium universities in ESL/EFL countries (Jenkins, 2014; Murray, 2016), Hong Kong students who have achieved Level 5** (the highest level) in the HKDSE English Language (equivalent to Band 7.51-7.77 in IELTS)¹ can apply for course exemption. In 2016-2017, among 270 first-year undergraduates who attained Level 5** in the university, only 36 (13.3%) chose to enrol in the EAP course.

Participants

The study involved students enrolled in the EAP course in the first semester of 2016-2017. All the first-year undergraduates who studied in the local secondary curriculum were invited to respond to a questionnaire and participate in two one-to-one interviews. Among the 1,013 survey respondents, 60 participated in both interviews on a voluntary basis. These participants came from a variety of disciplines and secondary schools with diverse English proficiency. Out of the 60 participants, nine attained Level 5** in HKDSE English Language and chose to enrol in the EAP course despite their entitlement to exemption. This article reports on these nine high-achieving students' perceptions of learning EAP. All names used in the paper are pseudonyms (see Table 1).

Table 1
Profiles of the participants

Participant	Gender	Faculty	Medium of instruction in secondary school
Amy	F	Medicine	English
Bonny	F	Medicine	English
Christine	F	Dentistry	Chinese
Elaine	F	Dentistry	English

Heidy	F	Dentistry	English
Jenny	F	Medicine	English
Kitty	F	Business	English
Oliver	M	Social Sciences	English
Pauline	F	Medicine	English

Data collection and analysis

To contextualise the qualitative data of learners' perceptions and experiences, the survey was administered at the beginning of the semester to elicit students' demographic information and the EAP skills they needed to improve. Two interviews were then conducted with each participant who consented to participate in the study, one at the beginning and one at the end of the semester. The interviews were in a one-to-one face-to-face format, and questions were semi-structured. Each interview lasted for 40-60 minutes. These interviews aimed to understand the participants' English learning experiences in secondary school and the EAP course, and their perceptions and challenges of learning EAP in university. Their three written assignments (a source-based argumentative essay or academic report) produced throughout the course were also analysed and discussed in the interviews for the investigators to identify the students' strengths and weaknesses in areas such as language use, argumentation and the use of academic sources.

To avoid conflict of interest, all interviews were carried out by the project's Senior Research Assistant (SRA) because the investigators were co-ordinators of the EAP course. All interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the interviewer's and interviewees' first language, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All the transcripts were translated into English by Chinese-English bilingual research assistants verified by the investigators for analysis. The data were coded and analysed through NVivo 11 by the SRA and then verified by the investigators to ensure the reliability of coding. Themes were determined and arguments were constructed to answer the research questions based on regular discussion of the data among the SRA and investigators.

Findings and discussion

The quantitative data contextualise the interview findings in various ways. In the questionnaire, we asked the students to indicate which language skill(s) they needed to improve when they transitioned to university. We analysed the data from the sample (N

= 1,013) in two groups, one attaining Level 5** in HKDSE English Language (N = 35) and one below Level 5** (N = 978) (Table 2)². The results indicate that citation was the only skill more than half of the Level 5** students considered necessary for improvement, compared to the rest (i.e., Level 5* or below) who regarded writing and speaking as more important. This can be attributed to the fact that students in general believe an English course, either focusing on general English or EAP, would increase their English proficiency and hence their competitiveness in future careers (see Liu, et al., 2011). In contrast, students who already possess high English proficiency may not see such a need, particularly when they do not have a clear idea of how EAP is different from the English they learnt in secondary school and perceive EAP courses as merely developing their English proficiency (Murray, 2016). However, the qualitative data reveal a more complicated picture. The following sections address the two research questions by reporting the participants' perceived needs to enrol in the EAP course and their challenges of using EAP when they transitioned to higher education.

Table 2
Skills that need to be improved

Level 5** (N = 35)			Below Level 5** (N = 978)		
n	%	Skill	n	%	Skill
23	65.7	Citation	630	64.4	Writing
15	42.9	Writing	503	51.4	Speaking
12	34.3	Oral presentation	455	46.5	Oral presentation
10	28.6	Speaking	431	44.1	Vocabulary
10	28.6	Vocabulary	410	41.9	Citation
9	25.7	Discussion	346	35.4	Discussion
8	22.9	Note-taking	314	32.1	Grammar
5	14.3	Intercultural communication	243	24.8	Listening
4	11.4	Listening	238	24.3	Intercultural communication
3	8.6	Grammar	235	24.0	Reading
2	5.7	Reading	177	18.1	Note-taking

Perceived needs to enrol in the EAP course

In the first interview, when the participants were asked why they enrolled in the EAP course even though they were allowed exemptions, many replied with pragmatic reasons such as not being able to find other free elective courses that fit their schedule. Bonny, like many other high-achieving students, expected that it would be “safer” if she took the EAP course because “the grades in free electives varied a lot” (Interview I), which could be “risky”. She would rather choose a course she was confident in. On the

other hand, these high-achieving ESL learners seldom mentioned the need to improve their general language skills in the EAP course. Even though some participants did see other values of learning EAP in the first year, they tended to mention citation. This finding complements the survey data in that high-achieving ESL learners did not see much need to improve their language skills in the EAP course, at least at the beginning, but citation was a novel skill they did not learn in secondary school. For instance, Kitty enrolled in the course because she had heard positive comments from previous students:

I heard from people who took this course before. They said that the course is useful, like some skills about writing and citation. They have good feedback about the course. [...] Now in Year 1, it is good to have an English course for the transition to university. (Kitty, Interview I)

Like Kitty, Amy, Heidi and Pauline also mentioned the need to learn citation in EAP after getting advice from senior students. In addition, they believed that they could keep their English standard at university by being regularly exposed to English in the course. Heidi added that she wanted to learn to think critically in the EAP course:

Every time I write and speak, our professors ask us to elaborate more, and really use a critical angle to view things, instead of simply presenting ideas. (Heidi, Interview I)

These students generally cared about English learning at university, if not only for pragmatic reasons, so they tried to explore how EAP is different from the English they learnt in secondary school before making the decision to enrol in the EAP course.

In the second interview after they had completed the EAP course, the participants were asked again how they perceived the need to enrol in the course. They no longer answered any pragmatic reasons. Instead, they mentioned the benefits of learning EAP and were glad that they did not apply for exemption. For example, Heidi said that she would not be exempt from the course even if she could choose again:

I realise that English learnt in university is very different from that in secondary school. If I had not enrolled in the course, I don't think I could handle my assignments, and I would miss the important skills about academic writing and speaking. (Heidi, Interview II)

Christine believed that she would not have been able to manage her CC course assignments if she had not taken the EAP course:

If I hadn't attended this course, it is possible that my CC essay would... have looked like the composition in [secondary school]... like no proof or evidence. I have a classmate who was exempt from this course and his CC essay didn't have any citation, but he didn't know about that, so at the end he borrowed my course materials. He lamented that as he didn't attend the course, he didn't know about citation and many marks were deducted. (Christine, Interview II)

The case of Christine's classmates who chose not to enrol in the EAP course echoes Murray's (2016) argument that students without learning EAP might be disadvantaged when completing assignments despite their high English proficiency. Bonny, Elaine, Heidi and Pauline shared the same view that the EAP skills for academic writing and tutorial discussion required in CC courses were not covered in secondary school. Jenny added that she might have regretted it if she had not taken the EAP course because she might have had to borrow the materials from others taking the course when she worked on her CC assignments.

Based on their explanation, while many of these high-achieving undergraduates chose to enrol in the EAP course with pragmatic reasons, their perceptions changed gradually throughout the course when they were more aware of the differences between secondary school English and EAP at university.

Challenges in the transition from secondary school English to EAP

While the high-achieving students were most concerned about the mechanics of citation at the beginning as shown in Table 2, they gradually realised that the challenges of using this skill were closely linked to writing and reading. As Oliver mentioned, "Writing is challenging because I didn't learn how to cite sources in secondary school" (Interview I). This can be attributed to the fact that questions in secondary schools in Hong Kong, as revealed in past HKDSE papers, tend to ask candidates to express views based on their personal experience and logical argumentation instead of academic sources. This is considered a significant difference between secondary school writing tasks and what is required in university:

I remember in HKDSE, questions were rather personal. They asked you to write

your personal experience, so I feel weird when I study at university. It seems that I need to be more objective. (Elaine, Interview I)

The participants mentioned that even though sometimes they needed to use sources to write articles, the way they wrote was different from the source-based academic writing in university:

The test would provide you with information you needed, but the difference is that the required information was very obvious in secondary school, so you could even copy different parts into your own writing and then you got the scores; but this can't be done in university because you have to paraphrase. (Pauline, Interview II)

The lack of skills to paraphrase and cite sources in source-based academic writing potentially leads to the reliance on direct quotations, engagement in patchwriting, or even plagiarism (Bruce & Hamp-Lyons, 2015; Hirvela & Du, 2013; Li & Casanave, 2012). Moreover, from the reading perspective, the participants struggled with the appropriate selection of information from multiple sources and integrating texts into their writing:

I can't handle writing an essay based on so many source texts. I didn't learn English like this. I can't handle when I'm suddenly asked to do this. (Bonny, Interview I)

Based on the survey results, the high-achieving students, as well as those below Level 5**, tended not to consider reading as a skill they needed to improve at the beginning, but they later realised that reading in EAP was not simply about comprehension but critical analysis of academic sources. This aspect of "reading to integrate, write and critique texts" has been highlighted by Grabe and Stoller (2011, p. 7) as an important skill in "reading-to-write" academic tasks, but it can be challenging even for high proficiency ESL learners.

Interestingly, although the high-achieving students could handle grammar and vocabulary well, they struggled with another dimension of language use. They lamented that the way they learnt English in secondary school was driven by the high-stakes public examination. They were provided with clear guidance in school or tutorial classes and might recite formulaic expressions and idioms to impress markers (see Yung, 2015). This assessment washback may have created challenges for them to learn EAP:

In secondary school, we aimed at getting high marks, so we used many long and

difficult words. Then we could make our writing look grand... But when we do academic writing in university, we don't need to use those difficult words or complex grammar. (Christine, Interview II)

I don't know how to do academic writing. As I was accustomed to the rigid style used in [secondary school] exams, I find it hard to express myself when there are no clear guidelines. (Bonny, Interview I)

Some examples of using “beautiful vocabulary and structure” (Jenny, Interview I) can be observed in Christine's writing:

The insufficient quota in higher education of Hong Kong has always been a big concern of the education system. *To combat the problem at its roots*, expanding higher education was suggested by scholars and experts. Yet, when some pious advocates of the expansion praise it with compliments, *some critics point their fingers at* the potential risks might be brought after the increase. It's high time for us to delve into their points. *Should we expand higher education in Hong Kong?* In the writer's view, the answer is positive due to the following reasons. (Christine, Diagnostic writing, emphasis added)

Christine's writing demonstrates some features of “secondary school English” such as the use of rhetorical questions and idiomatic expressions. When we asked her why she wrote some of the expressions, she explained:

My secondary school teacher made a small booklet with many similar phrases inside, like “point the fingers at”, and then he used these phrases to make quizzes. [...] I have learnt many phrases like this for composition. (Christine, Interview I)

However, like other participants, Christine later realised that those “flowery” expressions she recited for attaining a higher level in the secondary school examination may no longer be suitable for academic writing at university. After completing the EAP course, the participants also pointed out that they lacked the language for reporting views from academics, linking arguments from sources to their own writing, and hedging their claims. These have been listed by Hyland (2017, p. 27) as some of the areas that a bridging EAP course needs to focus on.

Conclusion and implications

This study aimed to understand high-proficiency ESL learners' perceptions of learning EAP when they transitioned to university. In response to the first research question about their perceived needs to enrol in the EAP course, the data reveal the participants' pragmatic reasons at the beginning, but gradually these participants were more aware of the value of learning EAP in supporting their university studies. Answers to the second research question suggest that the high-achieving ESL learners not only found the use of citation challenging, but also critical reading in selecting and integrating sources into their own writing through paraphrasing and the need to abandon the formulaic expressions learnt in secondary school. These aspects were considered missing in secondary school, creating a gap between secondary school English and EAP in universities.

What distinguishes the current study from previous ones is its focus on the homogenous group of high-proficiency ESL learners. Despite their struggle during the transition to university, many may not be aware of the challenges and hence choose not to enrol in an EAP course. As Murray (2016, p. 438) argues, students are "highly pragmatic" and they "will not invest time in attending such courses unless they are seen to offer a clear and tangible return in terms of an increased ability to meet their immediate course needs and secure good grades." Meanwhile, faculty members may not see the need for those high achievers to enrol in an EAP course. Therefore, it is important for EAP centres to promote their courses within the university. This requires close collaboration with faculty members, who need to see the value of EAP and hence encourage their students to enrol in an EAP course at the beginning of their university studies. Senior management in universities also need to understand that EAP is not a remedial general English course only for students with low English proficiency, but a course necessary for all first-year undergraduates to bridge the gap between secondary school and university English. General English courses may also be offered to students who are admitted with lower English scores or still struggle with the accurate use of grammar and vocabulary so that their English foundation can be consolidated before enrolling in an EAP course.

Pedagogically, EAP practitioners need to understand students' background of what they have learnt in secondary school and what can and cannot be transferred to university. In this regard, as Campion (2016) suggests, both similarities and differences between

general English and EAP should be emphasised to students when they deliver the lessons. It would therefore be helpful for EAP course designers and teachers to be familiar with the local secondary curriculum. More importantly, as Evans and Green (2007, p. 14) observed, since high achievers already possess “a substantial foundation of knowledge in the language” when they enter university, they need help in “applying what they know in academic contexts.”

This study offers insight into how universities worldwide decide who can be exempt from enrolling in an EAP course. Internationalisation in higher education has led to a dramatic increase in the number of ESL/EFL students. In response, many universities offer EAP courses for these students and they need to complete and pass the course before enrolling in their subject courses, unless they attain a certain score in international language tests (Fenton-Smith, Humphreys, Walkinshaw, Michael, & Lobo, 2017; Jenkins, 2014). However, are scores in these tests appropriate indicators to determine whether the students have acquired the necessary EAP skills for their university studies? As the current study has shown, high achievers in secondary school examinations also find EAP challenging when they transition to university. We believe EAP should be made an essential component in the first year in universities, and no one should be exempt based on the results of language tests which mainly focus on general English and do not cover the necessary EAP features.

An inevitable limitation of the current study is the small number of participants for in-depth analysis because, by default, there were very few Level 5** students choosing to enrol in the EAP course due to the exemption policy. However, the findings derived from multiple sources of data with in-depth analysis add to the existing EAP literature, which tends to focus on students of a wide range of language proficiency. This study is one of few addressing the challenges of high-proficiency ESL learners. Further research may investigate the perceptions of the same type of students in other contexts or even on native speakers of English in learning EAP. It would also be meaningful to focus on how high-proficiency ESL students who do not attend an EAP course cope with their studies when they transition from secondary to higher education.

(3,924 words)

Note

1 In the HKDSE, candidates' performances are reported in five levels (Level 1 to Level 5), with Level 5 being the highest. Among the Level 5 candidates, those with the best performance are awarded a Level 5**, and the next top group are awarded a Level 5*. Students generally need to attain a minimum of Level 3 in English Language in order to be eligible to be admitted to a university degree programme. For a comparison of the standards between the HKDSE English Language Examination and IELTS, see <http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/recognition/benchmarking/hkdse/ielts/>

2 The respondents could tick on the questionnaire as many skills as they thought they needed to improve. The relatively small sample size in the Level 5** group is inevitable due to the small percentage of students attaining this level. According to the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, only 1% of candidates attained Level 5** in HKDSE English Language in 2016. See http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/Media/PR/20160712_HKDSE_FULL_Results_ENG.pdf

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