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Is EAP necessary? A survey of Hong Kong undergraduates

Introduction

Do students see any benefit in English support courses? Are they confident in their language abilities? Do they think language skills are important for academic achievement? Most language teachers believe that proficiency in the language of instruction is critical to academic achievement and that NNSs are often linguistically ill-prepared for the demands of university study. These issues are particularly pertinent in Hong Kong where Cantonese speaking students are obliged to study most subjects in English by an officially sanctioned immersion approach to education. The fact that Hong Kong is a monolingual and monocultural environment however means that most students rarely use or encounter English outside educational contexts. In such circumstances the provision of adequate language instruction is often crucial to students acquisition of their disciplinary knowledge. This paper investigates how 1600 Hong Kong undergraduates see the importance of English in academic success, their perceptions of the adequacy of EAP provision and their views on the main challenges of using a foreign language for tertiary study.

Some ESL Background

Education in Hong Kong exemplifies a special case of ESL. Despite the obvious western influences in the territory, Hong Kong is a racially homogeneous, monolingual society with 98% of the population ethnic Chinese and 89% speaking Cantonese as a first language (HK census, 1991). The Cantonese speaking community has a strong intra-group cohesion and speakers keenly maintain the use of their language (Bond & Hewson, 1988; Giles & Johnson, 1987). Cantonese is the language of solidarity (Cheung, 1985) and the preferred medium of communication. Consequently English plays a negligible social role in the daily lives of most Hong Kong people.

English however is the "language of success" and continues to be used at higher levels of administration and business, particularly in written communication (So, 1989). Knowledge of English correlates highly with income, social prestige and educational level (Fu, 1987; Cheng & Zi, 1987) and, as a result, English has a strong perception of marketability among the community. Because

of the material benefits the language offers, recent surveys have found a strong abstract motivation to learn English for academic and career purposes (Balla, 1991; Richards, 1993). The economic importance of English is reflected in a colonial education system where English is the *de facto* medium of instruction for virtually all secondary and tertiary students. But while language planners are increasingly questioning the validity of using a language of 'wider use' over a national language of limited international currency (Education Commission, 1995), there is a widespread belief among both parents and students that English medium education results in a better standard of English (Tung, et al, in press).

However, most secondary teachers are untrained in the language (Education Commission, 1995:26) and students' monolingual lives outside class offer limited opportunities to practice it (Littlewood et al, 1996). As a result bilingual instruction is prevalent in both secondary and tertiary classrooms, despite official prohibitions against what is seen as a pedagogically harmful interlanguage, to make material accessible to learners with limited English (Lin, 1996). But this predominance of English creates serious learning problems for many students (Yu & Atkinson, 1988) and at least 30% of students have difficulty following their L2 curriculum even when code-switching is employed (Kwo, 1987). In 1994, 21% of 25,300 candidates failed the "Use of English" examination and another 35% obtained only an E, making their future studies conditional upon success in a remedial "language enhancement programme". With 18% of the relevant age-group engaged in tertiary study, it is not surprising that many students often struggle at university. One purpose of this study therefore was to determine the extent difficulties in English contribute to these problems.

Procedure and method of analysis

A self-reporting questionnaire, a copy of which appears in the appendix, was used to discover student perceptions of the role of English in academic success. The questionnaire consists of a variety of question types and is loosely based on an instrument used by Grundy (1993) with a small sample of postgraduates at Durham University. The questionnaire also asked students to give their Use of English grade (proficiency), course and year of study in order to compare aca-

demic variations. It was administered to 1619 undergraduates at five of the six English medium universities in the territory. Figure 1 summarises the information on respondents.

Figure 1 around here

The results were subjected to statistical tests for reliability and significance using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), a powerful statistical program for personal-computers. A series of one-way ANOVA procedures was used to compare groups and identify significant differences between them. Where statistically significant differences between groups was found, a post-hoc analysis of the means was conducted to discover the precise location of these variations. The Scheffe test for the multiple comparison of grouped means was used for this purpose, set at the 0.05 level of confidence. Comparisons at this level indicate that there is a 95% chance that results are due to the differences between populations.

Results and Discussion

The survey shows that these NNS undergraduates believe English support classes and competence in English are important to successful study and that they may even be as important as subject knowledge. It also reveals that students do not feel their English is sufficient to achieve academic success. I will discuss the results of the study in terms of the main focus of the questions.

Are EAP classes important for success?

The value that students place on language support classes can be of some importance, both in terms of attracting resources and for the status of teachers working in English programmes. It may also reflect the difficulties that students experience with their content instruction and the degree of assistance they need to overcome these. Two questions addressed this issue. First, students were asked to evaluate the following statement on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly agree / 5 = strongly disagree):

> *A student can learn enough English through his/her subject without the need to attend English classes* (Question 5b)

Respondents tended to disagree, with an overall mean of 3.6, and although support for EAP classes weakened slightly with each year of study and with each increase in ability grade, there were few significant differences either by year or proficiency (data not shown). However, when comparing majors, means for students of different disciplines varied considerably (Figure 2).

Figure 2 around here

While all disciplines were positive about the need for language support, undergraduates in language and architecture / design differed significantly from all others as the most strongly supportive majors ($p<.007$). Chinese and Engineering students, on the other hand, were less decided on the issue ($p<.023$). A number of respondents commented on the value of EAP classes in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. These quotes are typical:

- *Unless I am studying an English course I cannot learn English well, despite my other subjects are taught in English.*
- *You need to learn by yourself more. Lecturers are not too helpful.*
- *Lecturers expect us to understand every word in English without helping us.*

Thus overall, these students appeared to see language instruction as necessary, and this was confirmed when they were asked to rank five facilities often considered important in academic study. As Figure 3 shows, English support was ranked second overall behind textbooks, although this varied considerably according to discipline. English was placed first by students of language related majors and third by science/engineering students with all differences significant at $p<.035$). Further analysis showed that scientists and engineers valued textbooks most highly ($p<.039$).

Figure 3 around here

Significance tests on the means also show that English support was seen as progressively less important as students moved through their courses ($p<.002$) and that third years gave far greater importance to the value of good texts ($p=.005$). This reflects Radecki and Swales (1988) study on feedback, where students were found to assign a diminishing role to language teachers over their course of study. The students in this study may also have perceived instructors' expertise as

restricted to Grammar and surface-level issues as they became more competent in their subject knowledge and more confident in their approach to their studies.

In tests comparing the responses of students of different proficiencies to this question, attitudes to English showed the most variation with almost all differences significant ($p<.030$). There was a strong increase in support for English classes as proficiency declined, with a mean of 3.06 for A grade students and 1.83 for F grades. This emphasis given to English by weaker students is also reflected in the fact that students educated at Chinese medium schools rated English more highly than those that had been taught in English ($p=.004$) (data not shown).

Is competence in English important?

Lecturers in HK claim that at least 80% of their lectures and 60% of their tutorials are conducted in English (Littlewood & Liu, 1996), suggesting that competence in English might be highly valued by students. To investigate how they saw the relative importance of English, students were asked to rank 5 (given) factors necessary for academic success. English ability was rated fourth overall (see Figure 4). Study skills and subject knowledge were rated highest by all years. Third years not only placed English significantly lower in importance (mean = 3.46) compared with other years ($p =.000$), but were more certain that subject knowledge was the most significant factor in achieving success ($p<.025$). Together with the results discussed above, it seems that English declined as a concern for these students as they gained greater familiarity with their academic subjects.

Figure 4 around here

Comparisons between students of different ability levels revealed no consistent patterns, although E and F grades appeared to be more dependent on the quality of their instruction (data not shown). However, while these students placed significantly higher value on good teaching ($p<.050$), it is uncertain whether this referred to teachers who explain issues well in English or who employ Cantonese in class.

Variations between academic majors were again considerable however, as Figure 5 below shows. Science and engineering students differed significantly from all others in the low value they attributed to competence in English ($p<.000$). Architecture and Design students also ranked English significantly lower than most other students ($p<.040$) while language majors (Translation and Language and Communication) rated it significantly higher ($p<.011$). In general, the importance attributed to language classes appears to reflect the role English plays in the students' disciplines.

Figure 5 around here

Are students confident in their English abilities?

A recent survey of university lecturers in Hong Kong found that one third of respondents believed students lacked confidence in using English (Littlewood & Liu, 1996). The present study sought students' views on this issue. Respondents were asked to self-assess their ability on a scale from 10, representing the level of English needed for academic success, to 0, indicating no appropriate proficiency. The results produced a surprisingly low mean of 5.54 (Figure 6), suggesting that these students believed their English needs to be almost twice as good as it is now to guarantee success.

Figure 6 around here

Students' perceptions of their English proficiency appeared to increase as they progressed through their studies, with significant differences between third and earlier years ($p=.000$). This result was confirmed by a further questionnaire item which asked students to evaluate the following statement from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree):

The longer I study my subject, the more confident I become about the level of my English.

(Question 5c)

Again students responded slightly more positively with increasing years of study, although the overall mean of 2.8 did not differ significantly between different years.

Given the relatively substantial provision for language needs in tertiary institutions in Hong Kong, it is perhaps discouraging that students fail to perceive any substantial progress in their ability to tackle their academic subjects in English. This is particularly so given that the largely monolingual life-world of the students provides only limited 'incidental' exposure to English and that students appear to receive little language assistance from subject lecturers (responses to 5b above). These factors, together with the fairly high value that students seemed to place on the provision of EAP support (Figure 3), offer a case for providing English to students throughout their tertiary studies.

Turning to proficiency, the self-assessment data closely mirrored students' objective proficiency as measured by their Use of English grades, with all variations significant below p.05 (Figure 7).

Figure 7 around here

All proficiency levels felt that confidence improves with length of university study, with the strongest ratings given by A and F students. An English medium high school education also appears to give students significantly greater confidence ($p=.000$) in using the language. With regard to different disciplines of study, students of English-oriented subjects such as Communication and Translation assess themselves more highly than most other majors ($p<.040$) and were also more positive that length of study increased language confidence ($p<.050$). Science students, on the other hand, were the least optimistic about developing their proficiency ($p<.002$). Some students addressed this issue in the open-ended section, with increased confidence often attributed to the greater exposure to English and the need to use it more at university. A typical comment was:

- *There are now more opportunities to practice and enhance my English ability so now I have more confidence in communicating with lecturers.*

What do students perceive as their main language difficulties?

To determine the skills in which they were least confident, respondents were asked to rank six areas of language proficiency in terms of their difficulty. The overall results, shown in Figure 8, suggest that most of these students perceive productive skills as presenting the greatest problems.

Figure 8 around here

It is unsurprising to find writing ranked first as this is frequently cited as the most important language skill for university success in Western contexts (Bloor & Bloor, 1991). Speaking is often considered relatively unimportant by lecturers (Littlewood & Liu, 1996), but its ranking as a major source of difficulty demonstrates its significance to students.

This may reflect the peculiarities of the Hong Kong context where students often have to interact orally in English in tutorials but find few other opportunities to converse in the language. The passive speech roles adopted by Hong Kong students often noted in the literature (eg Flowerdew & Miller, 1995; Littlewood et al, 1996) contrasts markedly with the varied speaking activities frequently required in tertiary study (eg Ferris & Tagg, 1996). But while students apparently have a strong preference for interacting with one another in their mother tongue in class (Walters & Balla, 1992), many respondents expressed a need for speaking skills to perform in tutorials and relate to their foreign lecturers:

- *English became the main language to communicate with lecturers.*
- *I must now answer questions and talk with lecturers in English*.

In addition, as a number of students observed, English is widely regarded as an important symbol of higher education in Hong Kong, although many are conscious of a failure to meet this standard:

- *A university student should have good English. This is expected by the public.*
- *I feel embarrassed when I tell people I am an undergraduate as my performance in English is poor.*

The results also offer some support for Savile-Troike's (1984:199) claim that "vocabulary knowledge is the single most important area of second language competence" in academic achievement. Subject lecturers have endorsed the need for vocabulary improvement among L2 students (Flowerdew & Miller, 1996; Santos, 1988) and a recent Hong Kong study shows that the early acquisition of a vast specialist lexis, about 2, 000 terms in the first semester, is the most important determining factor in the success of medical freshmen (Lucas et al, in preparation). Students perceptions of their obvious difficulties in this area therefore reflects the fact that undergraduates are forced to deal with a host of new terms, many of which have no Cantonese equivalent.

The relatively lower rankings that students give to difficulties with reading and listening may be because the acquisition of subject knowledge urgently demands these skills. The need to process academic content almost exclusively in English is a compelling reason for quickly enhancing receptive proficiency. The apparent lack of anxiety by these students concerning their listening proficiency however is not confirmed by the views of lecturers, and several Hong Kong studies have commented on this weakness (Flowerdew & Miller, 1995 & 1996; Allison & Tauroza, 1995). Despite this, students frequently mentioned their increased confidence in listening in the open-ended section:

- *Most of the lecturers are native speakers so this can enhance my listening.*
- *Because English is the teaching language, my listening skill is better now.*
- *I've gained experience in listening to English in lectures.*

Most year of study differences were not significant, although students appear to identify greater problems with writing as they proceed in their studies ($p<.030$). This may be because both the importance of writing (Johns, 1993) and the complexity of tasks (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984) increase as students progress through their studies. It is also possible however that students also develop an increased sensitivity to audience and generally become more aware of their limitations in written communication. On the other hand, students reported experiencing progressively less difficulty in interpreting assignments as they became more familiar with the norms of their subjects and grew more confident in dealing with their demands ($p<.018$).

The literature has identified disciplinary variations of academic tasks, particularly writing (eg Braine, 1995). Writing however was perceived as the most problematic aspect of English by all majors except Chinese (speaking) and Business Studies (vocabulary), both groups ranking writing in second place. Engineering students differed from all others by ranking listening second ($p<.000$) and by expressing relatively greater general confidence ($p<.021$), perhaps because engineering faculties do not generally seem to require productive competence (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984) and set written assignments only infrequently (Jenkins et al, 1993). Translation students

differed significantly from all others in the low priority given to listening as a problem ($p<.000$) and in their emphasis on reading difficulties ($p<.022$).

While disciplinary variations were fairly uniform, proficiency comparisons exhibited considerable differences in how students perceived their language difficulties.

Figure 9 around here

Figure 9 shows that both A and B students ranked specialist vocabulary as the most problematic aspect of English while other grades placed writing first with vocabulary (C & D) or speaking (E & F) second. There was little evidence to suggest that higher proficiency students were significantly more focused in their perception of their problems as standard deviations showed a minimal spread of responses between groups. Comparisons between these proficiency groups showed the most significant differences in listening ($p<.003$) and speaking ($p<.034$) with progressively less concern expressed by the more proficient students.

Is English proficiency or subject knowledge the bigger problem?

Studies conducted overseas are unclear whether students perceive academic subject study or English language use as the more problematical, with students seemingly reporting both views (Leki & Carson, 1994; Kroll, 1979). In order to discover Hong Kong learners' views, the questionnaire included the following 3 items in a Likert format:

> *It is harder to reach a good academic standard in my subject than to gain the necessary ability in English.* (Question 4a)
>
> *The difficulties I have reading academic books and articles are caused more by the nature of the subject than by the level of my English.* (Question 4b)
>
> *If I succeed in my university studies I will succeed because my English has improved.* (Question 4c)

The first two questions may be paraphrased to mean that the specialist area causes more problems than English, while the third seeks to determine respondents' commitment to these views.

The results are no more conclusive than those of earlier studies however, with means clustering around the mid-point for each statement. But the results do, once again, emphasise that many stu-

dents' lack confidence in the adequacy of their language skills and suggest the need for continued and effective English support. Analysis showed clear group variations in these responses with students appearing to regard subject knowledge as increasingly important the longer they studied. Third years, for example, were more certain that reading difficulties were caused by subject comprehension ($p<.050$) and disagreement strengthened with the proposition that academic success would result from improved English ($p< .003$). Figure 10 shows the means for each statement by year.

Figure 10: English language competence and academic subject knowledge by year of study.

Year	4a	4b	4c
1	2.94	2.78	2.83
2	2.89	2.69	2.99
3	2.81	2.50	3.11

Responses to the three statements also tended to reflect proficiency levels. As can be seen from Figure 11, higher ability students do seem more firmly convinced that specialist knowledge is a greater obstacle to academic success than English, although these views are not clear-cut. While only A grade students agreed firmly with 4a ($p=.050$), agreement with 4b was more pronounced and related to Use of English grades, with most inter-group differences significant below $p=.050$. Once again, trends were reversed with 4c, where agreement with the view that English is more important than subject knowledge increased with each downward step in ability grade ($p<.050$). This picture was confirmed by the school language of instruction data, where Chinese medium students were emphatic that improved English was the key to academic success ($p=.004$).

Figure 11 around here

Overall, weaker students seemed to feel that they needed to improve their English before they were able to make serious headway in their studies, although this may be true only in those disciplines where English plays a significant role. The information for subject majors tends to suggest, once again, a broad division between Arts and Science students regarding the relative importance of English and subject knowledge in achievement.

Should subject lecturers help students with English?

Previous Hong Kong studies have found that university teachers are generally concerned about the inadequacy of their NNS students' English language skills (eg Flowerdew & Miller, 1995 & 1996; Littlewood & Liu, 1996; Walters & Balla, 1992). An attempt was therefore made in this study to determine the extent to which students believed subject lecturers had a responsibility to provide assistance with English. Figure 12 shows the results obtained on a scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree) to the statement that

A subject lecturer ought to help students with his or her English (Question 5a)

Figure 12: Lecturers and English language support by year of study.

Year	1	2	3	overall
Mean	2.6	2.42	2.86	2.57

All years differed significantly in their response to this question. As can be seen, second years demonstrated the strongest agreement ($p<.001$) and third years the weakest ($p<.005$). This is perhaps because second years often continue to experience serious problems with their studies as a result of continuing English deficiencies, despite the withdrawal of the language support they received as freshmen. Hong Kong universities receive substantial funding for language enhancement but this rarely extends beyond the first year of study. Subject tutors may therefore be the only sources of language assistance to which second and third years have frequent access, although the extent to which they are competent or willing to do this remains an open question. The absence of language support appears to cause third years fewer concerns as they are likely to be more confident with their ability to work in English and more focused on discipline knowledge.

Unsurprisingly, the desire for lecturer assistance with English increases with lower levels of language ability, with most differences significant ($p<.050$). Weaker students are often challenged by both their lack of competence in English and the demands of their subject and see their lecturers as the solution to both problems. Finally, disciplinary variations were considerable. Figure 13 shows that Science, Engineering and Business Studies students were significantly less likely to see subject lecturers as a source of English assistance (all $p<.030$) while Language-based majors viewed this as a primary role (most differences $p<.010$).

Figure 13 around here

Have students views of English changed at university?

Nearly half the respondents indicated that their view had changed since beginning tertiary studies and comments addressed three main areas. Most students who completed the open-ended question mentioned that they felt English was now a means of facilitating communication and learning:

- *I think English is a language now. Not a subject.*
- *In the past English is only one subject among many. But now English become the tool of learning the other subjects and to communicate with others.*
- *English is extremely important in the business field. It is much more important than I think before I came here.*

Related to this appreciation was a definite need to express ideas effectively:

- *English influences my ability to represent my opinions.*
- *Sometimes I don't know how to use a suitable word to express my ideas. In school I seldom encountered this problem.*
- *To become a successful scientist/engineer it is not enough to have a technical background. We also need to study English language very well in order to present his/her ideas clearly and confidently.*

A number of students also mentioned that university life required more intensive study methods and greater self-reliance, which placed extra demands on their English skills:

- *Unlike secondary school, lecturers do not tell us everything we need to learn, we must read the books at home. This means our study depends on good English.*
- *It is a hard job to search for information in a lot of textbooks. Better English will help me read the textbooks faster.*
- *There are many assignments and projects to do and the time schedule is very short. I need to improve my English to meet the deadline.*

The difficulties of processing large amounts of English language input, both in lectures and books, is cited by students as a major problem of university study. This concurs with Leki and Carson's (1994) finding that many students view developing their English competence as an efficiency is-

sue: learning is driven by a need to increase their work rate by reducing the time spent in writing and comprehending in English.

It must be admitted however that not all Hong Kong students find this purely study-oriented approach in their English classes a facilitative factor. Some respondents believed their study of English had become too utilitarian and was no longer a means of creative communication.

- *Now English is rigid since everything has its standard and format. No imagination is needed. I can't run freely in the field of English.*

Clearly, while EAP may be valued as important in their studies, we must guard against being too rigidly focused on academic goals so that students do not become alienated from their learning and lose their appreciation of English as a means of creative expression.

Conclusions

The survey shows that these Hong Kong students appeared to recognise the importance of English competence to their academic success and acknowledged the value of EAP classes, although support for these views was less firmly held by more proficient students and by science undergraduates. While it is encouraging that the students reported themselves as progressively more confident in their English during successive years of study, all groups confessed to difficulties with English, giving particular weight to writing, speaking and specialist vocabulary, and admitted that they considered their English skills inadequate to meet their academic goals. Moreover, it appears that these perceptions persist into postgraduate levels of study (Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995). Overall, these results of student perceptions reflect those of Hong Kong lecturers, although students' relative equanimity about their receptive skills indicates a mis-match of perceptions which might reward further research.

Like many other countries, tertiary study in Hong Kong confronts students with a more independent, active and analytical approach to learning than they knew before. In Hong Kong however these challenges are compounded by the peculiar nature of its colonial education system, which imposes a second-language medium education on a largely monolingual society. Students are placed under a heavy burden by the need to study in a language to which their socio-cultural envi-

ronment offers insufficient exposure and few opportunities to practice. The fact that many students struggle to master their subject disciplines with inadequate linguistic resources not only frustrates both students and lecturers, but also encourages learning strategies, such as classroom passivity, rote memorisation and copying from textbooks, which fuel this frustration.

Hong Kong learners are expected to bridge the gap between their Cantonese home-world and their English study-world with little difficulty, but the pressures of studying in English clearly weigh heavily on most of the respondents in this survey. In this situation effective EAP support is all the more necessary and, while their are obvious implications for teaching here, the solution ultimately requires an appropriate institutional response. Students clearly require language support throughout their studies and this should be a priority if English is to remain the principal language of tertiary instruction beyond 1997.

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Appendix: Summary of Questionnaire items.

1. On the following scale, 10 represents the level of English you need for academic success and 0 represents no appropriate proficiency. Please mark the point you consider yourself to have reached.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. Here is a list of some of the facilities often thought to be important in successful academic study. Please LIST them in order of importance from 1 (most) to 5 (least).

Access to journals; Libraries; Good textbooks; English classes; Computing facilities.

3. Here are some of the factors often thought important in successful undergraduate study. Again, please LIST them in order of importance from 1 (most) to 5 (least).

English language competence; Good subject teachers; Good study skills;

Good understanding of academic subject; Good support facilities (eg libraries, computers)

4. Please respond to the following statements by marking them 1 to 5.
1 = strongly agree 2 = agree 3 = undecided 4= disagree 5= strongly disagree

a) It is harder to reach a good standard in my subject than to gain the necessary ability in English.

b) The difficulties I have reading academic books and articles are caused more by the difficulty of my subject than by the level of my English.

c) If I succeed in my university studies I will succeed because my English has improved.

5. Again, please respond to the following statements by marking them 1 to 5.

a) A subject lecturer ought to help a student with his or her English.

b) A student can learn enough English through studying his or her subject without the need to attend English language classes.

c) The longer I study my subject, the more confident I become about the level of my English.

6. The main difficulties I have with my English at this stage in my academic studies are:
(Please LIST these from 1 = most difficult to 6 = least difficult).

Listening in lectures / tutorials; Writing essays; Speaking in tutorials;

Understanding assignments; Reading textbooks; Specialist words.

7. a) Has your view of the role of English in your studies changed since you begun studying at this institution? Yes No

   b) Can you say how it has changed in a few sentences? Are there any other comments you would like to make on your view of English teaching?