

## A Case Study of Hong Kong Undergraduates Undertaking Their Disciplinary Writing Tasks and its Implications for EAP Pedagogy

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the results of a two year long case study on how university students cope with assessed written assignments in their discipline. Through such writing tasks assigned by their professors, students are enculturated (Berkenkotter, Huckin & Ackerman, 1991) into the discipline. The study shows that the students struggled to accomplish the tasks and that they were not able to transfer the writing skills taught in their general EAP course to their disciplinary writing tasks. It was also found that the participants lacked the genre knowledge of their assigned tasks, resulting in their inability to draw on the disciplinary context as a resource to help them interpret their tasks and to construct the appropriate texts with the right form and content to meet the expectations of the discipline. This paper argues that since genre knowledge “embraces both form and content” (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995: 4) it is important that writing courses that aim at helping undergraduates cope with the writing demands in their disciplines should focus on both form and content. In other words, a discipline-specific, genre-based pedagogy is more effective and can better engage students in their learning process as the course would be more relevant to their needs.

**Key Words:** disciplinary writing, EAP, discipline-specific, writing processes, genre-based pedagogy

### Introduction

English has been widely used as the medium of instruction (MOI) in higher education for many countries (Crystal, 2003:112). One of the reasons is that English has become “the medium of a great deal of the world’s knowledge” (Crystal, 2003:110). As Swales (2004) points out, English has been the pre-eminent language of research and publication, especially for research articles that aim at publication in international forums. Since higher education is concerned with access to knowledge in various disciplines, English is often adopted in advanced courses as the medium to acquire the knowledge of that discipline. Another reason, according to Crystal (2003), is the presence of international students in many universities, which makes English as the best choice of a *lingua franca*. This means that many non-native English speaking (NNES) students pursuing their overseas studies have to use English to learn and particularly to cope with the

different writing demands in their disciplinary courses.

Findings from previous studies have indicated that NNES students in universities encountered different types and degrees of difficulty in coping with the writing demands in their disciplinary courses. For example, in a case study of four international students in their first year of studies at a US university, Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) found that these students encountered a range of problems in coping with the writing demands in the disciplinary courses, including cognitive and social problems. Connor and Kramer’s (1995) study showed that NNES graduate students experienced difficulties in writing business case reports. Leki (1995) reported the strategies NNES students at a US university developed to cope with the writing demands they encountered in their disciplinary courses. In her longitudinal case study of the reading and writing strategies of an NNES undergraduate at a US university, Spack (1997) reported the “failures and struggles” (p.47) of the student

participant in dealing with the reading and writing tasks in the student's disciplinary courses. She also pointed out the inadequacies of English courses in helping the student cope with disciplinary writing: "she [the student] had extensive practice in paraphrasing and quoting course material in English 3 and 4 [English courses she took in her first year]...but in the second year those skills collapsed under the weight of confusion about how to write for PS 160 [a political science course]" (1997:50).

Such difficulties faced by NNES students in the US are also experienced by undergraduates in Hong Kong, where the present study was conducted. In a large-scale (involving around 5,000 undergraduates) investigation into the language problems experienced by local Cantonese-speaking students at a university in Hong Kong, Evans and Green (2007) found that these students experienced various degrees of difficulties in using English to study. Of all the different areas of difficulties, *academic writing* was found to be most difficult area for students. In another study on the perceptions of business lecturers about the language problems encountered by their Chinese students in five universities in Hong Kong, Jackson (2005) found that students "had generally weak language skills, especially writing" (p.299) and that these lecturers "had felt compelled to lower their standard of assessment..." (p.301).

Almost all universities in Hong Kong require undergraduates to take one or several English courses usually in their first or second year. Such courses aim at equipping students with English skills needed for university study and focus primarily on generic academic skills, i.e. English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP). The effectiveness of the writing component of such EGAP courses in helping students cope with writing in their disciplinary courses was questioned by Leki and Carson (1997). In their study conducted in the US, they found that, among other things, there was a disparity between "what is valued in writing" for EGAP writing classes and that valued in writing for disciplinary courses (1997:64). In another study of writing in business courses in a university in the US, Zhu (2004) also found that the skills required for writing tasks in business courses are different from those taught in EGAP courses. In my own experience of English language teaching in universities in Hong Kong, most EGAP courses I have taught are primarily form-focused with a deficit or remedial orientation (Mitchell & Evison, 2006). My students often told me about their difficulties in undertaking the writing tasks in their disciplinary courses and that what they learnt in their EGAP courses was largely not related to what they had to write in their disciplines. However, little is known regarding the extent to which the current EGAP courses in Hong Kong universities are effective in helping students to cope with the writing demands in

their disciplinary courses.

## The study

This study aims at finding out how non-native English speaking (NNES) business undergraduates in Hong Kong undertake their assessed writing tasks in their discipline. Specifically, it seeks to find out: (1) how they interpret the writing tasks, (2) what sources they use and how they use such sources in their writing, (3) what difficulties, if any, they encounter in their writing processes, and (4) what strategies they employ in accomplishing their writing tasks. These form the main specific research questions of the study.

## Research design and method

To investigate how students undertake their disciplinary writing tasks, a case study approach was employed. As mainly an interpretive and inductive form of enquiry, case study, with data collected from multiple sources, enables me to explore in depth the behaviour of the participants in response to their writing demands drawing on the resources available to them. The data sources for this study were mainly from questionnaires (to elicit the background information of participants), text-based interviews (Prior, 1995), participant diaries and various documents relating to the writing tasks under study. In order to increase the validity of the findings of this study, a prolonged engagement with extensive field contacts is essential (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, I adopted a longitudinal case study approach that covered several written assignments from the participants over a period of four semesters (two academic years). Data collected went through processes of organizing, coding and categorizing (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994) before interpretations were made.

### The research site

This study was carried out in one of the seven government-funded universities in Hong Kong. Almost 90% of the students are local Chinese with English as their second language (L2). All universities in Hong Kong adopt English as the main medium of instruction and assessment (except for Chinese-related subjects) against the backdrop of biliteracy (Chinese and English) and trilingualism (Cantonese, Putonghua and English) promoted by the government. (Note: Putonghua is also known as Mandarin.) The study was conducted in the Department of Marketing within the Faculty of Business. This university adopts a semester-based academic calendar. Each academic year consists of two semesters, each of which has 14 teaching weeks. Semester one usually starts in September and ends in early December; semester two starts in mid-January and ends in late April or early May. This study was conducted over four semesters in two academic years; the study carried out in the first semester was treated as

a pilot study.

The business administration field was chosen for this study for two reasons: (1) business administration has been one of the most popular programmes for Hong Kong students' undergraduate and postgraduate studies, and (2) students are expected to have relatively higher English standards to meet the language demands in their future workplaces in the business world.

### Participants

The participants, Joan and Susan (pseudonyms), were studying for a 3-year bachelor degree in marketing and had just completed their first year. Although they were studying in the same programme, they belonged to different seminar groups. Data collection started with a self-completion questionnaire, which is composed of two parts: part 1 was designed to elicit information on their personal and education background (language in particular); part 2 was about their own evaluation of their English proficiency and their experiences of learning/using English in an academic context. To ensure confidentiality of information collected and to preserve participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used to refer to the two students in this paper; also, the name of the university is not mentioned. Based on the data from the questionnaires, I present their general background information in Table 1 and briefly describe each participant below. [Note: The self-rating part of the questionnaire uses a five-point scale: Excellent (highest), very good, good, fair and poor (lowest)].

**Table 1:** Background information of participants

<b>Names of Participants (pseudonyms)</b>	Joan	Susan
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Female
<b>Native language</b>	Chinese (spoken: Cantonese <sup>1</sup> )	Chinese (spoken: Cantonese)
<b>Programme of study at university</b>	Bachelor degree in marketing	Bachelor degree in marketing
<b>HKALE: Use of English result<sup>2</sup></b>	E	E
<b>IELTS score</b>	<u>Overall score:</u> 6.5 (academic module)	<u>Overall score:</u> 7 (academic module)
	Sub-scores:	Sub-scores:
	<b>Writing: 6</b>	<b>Writing: 6</b>
	Reading: 6.5	Reading: 6.5
	Speaking: 6	Speaking: 7
	Listening: 7	Listening: 7.5
<b>EAP result<sup>3</sup></b>	B	B

<sup>1</sup> Cantonese, widely spoken in Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Macau, is regarded as one of the major dialects of the Chinese language. It is mainly used in speaking but its written form is often used informally.

<sup>2</sup> *Hong Kong Advanced Level Exam*, similar to UK's GCE A-level Exam, is normally taken by students after completion of Form 7. The results are expressed in 6 grades (A is the highest and F is the fail grade; E is the minimum grade for university entrance). It was abolished in 2012 after the introduction of the 4-year curriculum and is now replaced by the *Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education*.

<sup>3</sup> *English for Academic Purpose (EAP)* is a generic English course for all first-year students in the participants' university. It focuses mainly on writing and speaking skills in an academic context.

### Joan

Like most local Chinese, Joan started to learn English in her kindergarten. This effectively means she had been learning English for more than 17 years. She rated her overall English proficiency as just 'fair' and her writing skill as 'poor' compared with 'good' for both listening and speaking skills; her rating for reading was 'fair'. Among the four skills, she found writing the most difficult skill to master, which is consistent not only with her own proficiency ratings but also with her IELTS scores. This shows that she knew her own strengths and weaknesses in her English proficiency.

Writing was difficult for her because she found it difficult to express her ideas in a grammatically correct way. On the other hand, she realised that writing was the most important skill for her study because all the written assignments were in English.

### Susan

Susan also started to learn English in kindergarten and had been learning the language for more than 17 years. Like Joan, she rated her overall English proficiency as 'fair'. Her rating for writing, which was 'fair', was slightly better than Joan's 'poor' rating. She also rated her reading skills as 'fair' compared with 'good' for both listening and speaking. Her self-ratings were again consistent with her IELTS scores: writing was the weakest while speaking and listening were the strongest.

Again similar to Joan, she found writing the most difficult skill to master; however, the reasons she gave were different from those given by Joan. She attributed her 'fair' writing skill to not having developed a "good foundation" and little chance of writing after secondary school. The main difficulties she encountered in writing were the use of the right format, right words and correct sentence structure. She also believed that writing was the most important skill for her study because it is the language used in all "paper work" (assignments) and written examinations.

Like most local students in Hong Kong, both Joan and Susan only use English in class: they rarely use it as their daily means of communication.

### Findings

The findings of this study have shown that the operations the student participants undertook in their writing process to produce academic writing

tasks in their disciplinary courses were complex and influenced by the contexts in which the writing took place. A seemingly ordinary, tidy task turned out to be complicated when students attempted to interpret the task specifications according to their own knowledge and background. Their task representation, defined by Flower (1987) as “an interpretative process which translates the rhetorical situation – as the writer reads it – into the act of composing” (Flower, 1987: 7, quoted in Connor & Kramer, 1995: 156-157), then triggered a series of operations that turned their multiple representations into the final written products. These operations or processes are not independent; instead, they are all closely intertwined and are also influenced, to different extent, by the disciplinary, institutional and students’ local/immediate contexts. Nine essential processes were identified and categorised into the three traditional stages (Zamel, 1983):

1. PREWRITING includes *task representation*, *setting direction*, *task allocation* (for group work), *searching for and collecting information*, and *planning/outlining*.
2. WRITING involves *drafting* and *collecting and integrating parts* (for group work).
3. REVISING involves *proofreading* and *final checking*.

It was found that the participants, in response to a given task, would firstly go through the process of *task representation*, in which they interpreted the given task instructions or specifications to find out as precisely as possible what they were required to do and how they should present it. This process was found to be complex and often problematic but important in that it determined their direction. A perceived misinterpretation would mean they had to go back to this first process again and adjust or readjust their direction.

The next process was *setting direction*, in which they decided which way to go. This was especially important for group work, in which each member had to agree on the direction before *allocating task* among members. It was then followed by *searching for and collecting information*, in which they engaged in a process of seeking and gathering information needed for the task as they interpreted it. When they had gathered what they believed to be sufficient information, they progressed to *plan* their writing by outlining or sketching the content and organisation of the paper. Based on this outline, they started actual writing (or *drafting*) mainly using computer. They often revised their writing while they were in the process of drafting. Once they had completed their part (for group work), one group member collected different parts from other members and put the parts together to form the entire paper. Some *proofreading* and *final checking* was done only if

they were not in a rush to hand in their papers.

The three stages were found to be not exactly linear but recursive, which is consistent with the findings from previous writing process studies (e.g. Flower & Hayes, 1981; Zamel, 1983). The nine main processes identified in this study, however, were found to be generally linear in that the participants had to complete a particular process before progressing to the next one. Some processes were recursive, which means the participants often had to move back and forth until they finished their final written products. This recursive act was mostly triggered by *task representation*. If the participants found that they might have misinterpreted the task instructions, they would go backward to adjust their representation, which meant they would have to reset their direction, re-allocate the tasks and so on. This shows the overarching function of *task representation* in the entire processes. This process, however, was never straightforward and involved a great deal of guess work.

Of all the three stages, *prewriting*, which involved five processes, took up the majority of their time (around 80%). The *writing* stage took up much less time compared with *prewriting*. The *revising* stage often took place simultaneously with the writing stage while the overall revising (when all parts of the assignment had been collected and put together) was often skipped because of the approaching deadline for submission. This is in stark contrast with findings from a recent study of time allocation to writing processes of L2 writers, which showed formulation (converting ideas into language) was the dominant process (Roca de Larios, Manchón, Murphy & Marín, 2007). Roca de Larios et al.’s (2007) study, however, was carried out in a laboratory setting, where the participants were given an argumentative task to write without the need to collect any information from sources. With writing tasks situated in the participants’ disciplinary courses that involved multiple task representations, group interaction, and collecting information from sources, the *prewriting* stage in this study was far more complex than artificial tasks done for experimental purpose and thus it was the dominant stage. Having presented the findings of their writing processes, I will then move on to the more specific findings that address the specific research questions.

### **(1) How do they interpret writing tasks?**

The findings of this study suggest that *task representation* was an interpretative process (Flower, 1987) that was set in motion when the participants tried to translate the task specifications or instructions into a series of actions that turned the given task into the final written product. The data show that *task representation* was the first and crucial process in accomplishing their writing tasks. It is crucial in that it determined how they set

their direction, searched for the right information and organised the content. This interpretive process was found to be complex, multiple and often problematic. Since they were never certain that a particular representation was accurate, they often kept re-evaluating their representations throughout the entire writing process. It was found that their representations were also subject to many influences from, for example, classmates, a word said by the lecturer in a lecture, and further information from the lecturer. This finding is generally consistent with what other researchers have found in their studies (e.g., Allen, 2004; Flower, 1990).

Data from this research also reveal that different lecturers had different ways of encoding their task specifications, some of which were very detailed while others were fragmented and far from clear. This situation made the interpretive process complicated and confusing. To come up with the written products that could best meet the lecturers' expectations and thus get the best possible grades, Joan and Susan employed the following means:

- Adhering to the assessment criteria or marking scheme (if given)
- Clarifying with and seeking information from other classmates
- Looking for hints during lectures
- Guessing the reader's expectations
- Consulting with lecturers

The last means "consulting with lecturers" was often used as a last resort because both Joan and Susan found it difficult to consult their lecturers after class and most consultations they managed to get were not found to be very helpful.

### ***(2) What are the sources they use and how do they use such sources in producing their writing tasks?***

The findings revealed that they relied heavily on information obtained from the Web to accomplish their writing tasks. Although they mainly used figures from various web sites to support their arguments, occasionally they copied chunks of texts from the source materials without providing proper in-text referencing. There was no evidence from this study to suggest that they deliberately engaged in the act of plagiarism; rather, they seemed to lack (1) the English proficiency to paraphrase and synthesise source texts, (2) the awareness of the conventions relating to using source texts in academic discourse, and (3) the feedback from teachers pointing out their inappropriate textual practice, which could amount to plagiarism in academic work. As Currie (1998) and Pennycook (1996) point out, the whole issue of plagiarism or "textual borrowing" is complex, especially for NNES students; penalty alone cannot tackle the issue.

In the process of *searching for and collecting information*, they spent a great deal of time using search engines such as Google to get the information they needed. It was found that the Web sites where they often sourced their information might not be as reliable and trustworthy as conventional sources such as books and peer-reviewed journals. However, the data suggested that both Joan and Susan were totally uncritical of the information provided by these Web sites. Also, the lack of feedback from teachers regarding this aspect could serve to reinforce their practice of writing from sources.

### ***(3) Do they encounter any difficulties in their writing processes? What are those difficulties?***

The findings show that they encountered a number of difficulties in their writing processes. These difficulties were primarily related to the areas of (1) application of theories/concepts, (2) readers' expectations, (3) lexicogrammar, (4) skills of writing from sources, and (5) group work.

As the findings also show, marketing discipline emphasises application. Thus, the faculty and the department, in translating the practices of the discipline into a programme of study, emphasised the understanding and application of theories/concepts in their learning outcomes and assessment criteria. Both Joan and Susan, however, found it difficult to apply theories to solve problems or explain issues arising from given situations.

As shown in the findings to the first research question, knowing exactly what they were expected to write in terms of content and organisation was a daunting task to Joan and Susan. When they started to write (the *drafting process*), they found it difficult to translate their ideas, mostly formed in their L1, into English mainly due to their lack of vocabulary and weak grammar. Their final written products were also weakened by their lack of skills in using information from source materials as evidence to build up convincing and cogent arguments.

It was found that almost 90% of their writing tasks were done in groups of three to six. The findings of this study show clearly that Susan (but not Joan), without any instructional support from the department, found it distressing and frustrating working with her group mates. Her problems mainly stemmed from the conflict and disagreement within the group, which were found to be caused by (1) leadership (who is in charge of the project?), (2) individual responsibility or commitment (such as participating in meetings and completing their parts in time), and (3) task allocation (who does what?). This supports the findings from Leki (2001) and Ho, Chan, Sun and Yan (2004). Leki (2001), in her study of the experiences of two NNES students in course-sponsored group projects, found that her participants had similar

problems working in a group. In their investigation into university students' learning difficulties, Ho et al. (2004) found that students encountered various problems in doing group projects, some of which such as leadership problems were also shared by the two students in this study.

#### ***(4) What strategies do they employ in accomplishing their writing tasks?***

The results indicate that the participants employed eight strategies to cope with various difficulties they encountered in accomplishing their writing tasks. These strategies were devised in response to four main demands of their writing tasks: (1) group work, (2) task-related information (mainly content and structure of the paper), (3) workload and (4) vocabulary.

As mentioned above, effective group work was essential in accomplishing the tasks on time but Susan experienced difficulties to harness the group dynamics, resulting in her strong dislike for group work. By contrast, Joan was able to collaborate with her group mates in such a way that she enjoyed group work. This was mainly due to her strategy of forming a group with her good friends. However, her carefully devised strategy had in a way defeated the institutional purpose of cultivating team work, i.e. the abilities to work with people (not just friends) in a team.

Their strategy of using an online translation dictionary to cope with the vocabulary demand of the tasks brings up the issue of using L1 in the writing processes. The results reveal that they used quite heavily their L1 mixed with some L2 in the planning/outlining process, in which they formulated and organised their ideas. This means that they had to go through a translation process to turn those ideas formulated in their L1 into English and they relied, to different degrees, on an online dictionary to assist their translation. Previous studies of NNES students' writing process (e.g., Gosden, 1996; Li, 2007; Shaw, 1991) also found that L1 was used at different stages of the writing process with mostly positive results. However, the findings in this study show that using an online dictionary was fraught with problems as the newly found words are often wrongly used in context.

## **Conclusions**

Together with previous studies on second language writing, particularly academic writing in disciplinary courses (e.g., Allen, 2004; Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Casanave, 1995; Chin, 1994; Connor and Kramar, 1995; Currie, 1993; Faigley & Hansen, 1985; Horowitz, 1986; Lea & Street, 2000; Leki, 1995; Prior, 2004; Riazi, 1997; Tardy, 2004; Yang and Shi, 2003), this study has provided a detailed account of the processes the two NNES business undergraduates (participants in this study) at a Hong Kong university went through to accomplish their disciplinary writing tasks. It has

shown that writing in the marketing discipline is not "a strictly cognitive activity" (Leki, 2007:3) but, rather, entails multiple interpretations of given tasks and texts, interactions with group mates and professors, and searching for and exchanging task-related information before production of texts. An informed awareness of these processes would allow teachers, especially EAP teachers, to better understand students' situated needs so that timely and appropriate assistance could be given. With the increasing number of NNES students from not only the secondary school system but also from other institutions (such as community colleges and vocational institutes) entering English-medium universities in Hong Kong, they all have to cope with their studies and assignment writing in English. The contributions of situated studies of academic writing in higher education are significant in that they can add to our existing body of knowledge in this ever-expanding and increasingly complex area. Based on knowledge gained from research, EAP teachers can improve their practices to better address the needs of this large group of NNES students. In the following section, I will put forth some pedagogical implications of this study and suggest some ways to improve practice.

## **Pedagogical implications for writing instructions in higher education**

This study has revealed that the participants encountered different degrees of difficulty at the prewriting and writing stages. To better help students cope with the writing demands in their discipline, I would put forward the following suggestions for teaching.

**(1)** The results of this study show that the prewriting stage was the dominant stage in the participants' writing processes. Of all the five processes in this stage, task representation and information searching were found to be the most challenging. Task representation has at least two aspects: (a) the degree of explicitness of the task specifications, and (b) students' knowledge of the disciplinary and institutional contexts in which the writing takes place.

For the first aspect, content teachers should be aware of the common problems encountered by students during their interpretation process and, based on this awareness, construct the task specifications in such a way that their expectations can be more explicitly stated.

For the second aspect, EAP course developers and teachers may consider adopting the genre-based approach in which disciplinary writing is seen as embracing "both form and content" (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995:4). The form, i.e. the use of language, and content occur in "a social context that conditions them" (Bizzell, 1982: 217). This study also shows that

the participants' lack of knowledge of the disciplinary context resulted in their inability to draw on it as a resource to interpret the tasks and produce the written assignments to best meet readers' expectations. In order to construct assignments that can demonstrate to their readers (subject lecturers) an adequate knowledge of that discipline (Faigley & Hansen, 1985), students have to be aware of the expectations, in both form and content, of the disciplinary community into which they are being enculturated. Although this enculturation should best be done by the content teachers being members of that disciplinary community (Spack, 1988), EAP course developers and teachers, nonetheless, have the responsibility to help students better cope with the writing demands they will face beyond the EAP classrooms (Leki & Carson, 1994). As the findings of this study show, the participants' marketing subject lecturers seldom commented on the language aspect of their assignments. It would be almost impossible that they can learn the disciplinary writing skills from their content teachers (Spack, 1988). Furthermore, as Lea and Street's study reveals, content teachers know what a good assignment is but "cannot describe how to write it" (2000:40). Thus, it seems that EAP courses should be going in the direction of discipline-specific to better prepare students to cope with the discipline-specific writing demands they face in universities (Hyland, 2002). This would require materials and teaching methods that are underpinned by research with closer collaboration with content teachers.

**(2)** To help students use sources in their writing more effectively, the writing component of EAP courses should place more emphasis on writing from sources, especially the more critical use of Web sources. Based on the findings of this study, I suggest that EAP courses, generic or discipline-specific, should cover the following areas:

1. information search skills, particularly using popular Internet search engines;
2. critical Internet literacy: raising students' awareness of being more critical in using Web sources as a research tool for academic purposes;
3. writing skills for synthesising information and ideas from sources to construct convincing and cogent arguments; and
4. paraphrasing and summarising skills to avoid copying chunks of text from Web sources.

As explained in the preceding paragraph, these skills would be more effectively acquired if they are taught and learned in a discipline-specific EAP course.

**(3)** The findings of this study clearly show that the participants had problems with using a dictionary to help them find the right words in translating their ideas

formulated in their L1 into English. The skills of using dictionaries (particularly monolingual dictionaries for advanced learners, collocation dictionaries and thesaurus) are often ignored in regular curricula in universities; however, such skills are essential to foster independent language learning. With the advent of the Internet and the development of online corpora, students should learn how to use a free online concordancer to check the common usage and collocations of a particular word. Adding this element to English courses can, to a certain extent, help them encode their ideas more accurately and correctly.

To conclude, in the 25 hours of interviews with the two student participants, only Susan mentioned once using something learned from their university EAP course in her disciplinary writing when she talked about "the use of thesis statement [in paragraph construction]; organisation of essay..." (Interview number 7). This seems to imply that the general EAP course they completed in their first year at university had little impact on their disciplinary writing. The findings in this study show that the skills taught in the EAP course did not transfer well to their assignment writing in their disciplinary courses. This seems to indicate that they were not able to connect such general skills with the actual academic writing they had to undertake in their discipline. A comment made by Joan in her last interview suggests that the general EAP course did not serve her well:

*"I think EAP writing [course] should make use of students' assignments [in disciplinary courses] for practice and feedback. This is far more motivating and effective than asking us to write essays of some artificial topics for practice. We dislike writing such essays because we've already had our heavy workload; why not using our assignments [in disciplinary courses]..." (Interview number 16)*

The findings in the present study support findings from previous research that general ESL or EAP courses are not effective in preparing students for their disciplinary writing tasks. Therefore, EAP courses should be more discipline-specific, as advocated by Hyland (2002), in order to improve students' motivation and, more importantly, to prepare them for the writing they would encounter in their disciplinary courses. However, there can be potential practical difficulties in implementing this suggestion. Because of the differences in teaching philosophy and practices between the English department/language centre and the faculties as well as workload issue, there can be difficulties in, for example, involving content teachers in designing or team teaching writing courses (see, for example, Barron, 2002).

Given such potential difficulties, recent development in *Writing in the Disciplines* (WiD) is encouraging

(Deane & O'Neill, 2011). In her case studies of two dissimilar approaches to teaching disciplinary writing in a UK university, Wingate (2011) finds that the “embedded approach” in which writing instruction is integrated into subject lessons was “clearly effective in involving and engaging all students and developing their understanding of academic writing” (Wingate, 2011:83). One challenge of the embedded approach, as observed by Wingate (2011), is the high involvement of subject lecturers resulting in heavier workload for these lecturers. This would make them reluctant to voluntarily collaborate with EAP teachers in this regard. Although such reluctance “may be gradually reduced through dialogue and staff development measures” (Wingate, 2011:83), it would be further reduced if senior management of universities understands the situation and the potential benefits of discipline-specific writing instruction; as a result support is given and resources are allocated to enhance students’ English abilities in their disciplinary writing.

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