

SIMON WEBSTER

## **VALUE CREATION IN A PARTNERSHIP ACADEMIC LITERACY PROGRAMME**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Current thinking in EAP emphasizes both the genre differences in the academic writing of different disciplines (e.g., Nesi & Gardner, 2012) and the range of academic literacies in which such practices are rooted (Wingate, 2016). With these understandings, there has been increased interest in decentralised EAP provision (Murray, 2016), particularly collaborations between EAP and disciplinary lecturers (Sloan, Porter, & Alexander, 2013). The question arises, however, of what form such partnerships might take and how complementary roles might be adopted (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). This paper presents a case study of an initiative in the UK higher education context which seeks to address these central issues. The research investigates a formal collaboration between EAP lecturers and disciplinary lecturers in the form of an academic literacy programme for postgraduate students which embeds an in-sessional EAP programme within a disciplinary practice assignment.

### **THE ACADEMIC LITERACY PROGRAMME**

Prior to the partnership, the disciplinary lecturers had offered an optional practice assignment for all students registered on two taught postgraduate programmes, the stated purpose of which was ‘to help [the School] share expectations of appropriate style and content of assignment writing for a Master’s course’. The task required students to produce a 1,500-word essay on a stated controversy within the disciplinary field. Students were instructed to provide their own views on the subject whilst making reference to stipulated academic reading and two self-identified additional sources. Following submission of the assignments, students received comprehensive feedback and an illustrative grade from the disciplinary lecturers in line with the disciplinary assessment criteria. Although the practice assignment did not sit within a specific academic module, uptake by the students was consistently high.

When the EAP lecturers were invited to develop an EAP programme for the students on these two postgraduate programmes, it was decided that there was strong potential for collaboration between the EAP and disciplinary lecturers for the design and delivery of a programme incorporating the existing disciplinary-specific practice assignment. Such an approach, it was believed, would allow the in-sessional programme design principles of contextualisation, embeddedness and mapping (Sloan & Porter, 2010; Sloan, Porter & Alexander, 2013) to be maximised. The resulting EAP provision, open to all the students (including those for whom English was a dominant language), was therefore designed to scaffold the students’ production of the practice assignment with a weekly two-hour EAP session running through most of the first academic semester. Table 1 (below) provides an overview of this integration of the EAP programme with the disciplinary practice assignment.

**Table 1** Course design

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| Week 1 | Disciplinary lecturers launch the practice assignment.  |
| Week 2 | EAP lecturers develop students' awareness of argumentation and use of evidence in the prescribed texts.   |
| Week 3 | EAP lecturers develop students' awareness of text structuring.<br>EAP lecturers develop students' awareness and use of introductions and conclusions.   |
| Week 4 | EAP lecturers and peers provide feedback on students' assignment drafts.<br>EAP lecturers develop students' awareness and use of academic referencing conventions.  |
| Week 5 | EAP lecturers develop students' awareness and use of summary and counter argument.<br>Students submit assignments to disciplinary lecturers.<br>Disciplinary lecturers provide assignment feedback to students with a copy supplied to EAP lecturers. |
| Week 6 | EAP lecturers discuss assignment feedback individually with students and provide cohort-wide feedback in plenary.<br>EAP lecturers develop students' awareness and use of paragraphing.   |
| Week 7 | EAP lecturers develop students' awareness and use of academic style.  |
| Week 8 | EAP lecturers develop students' awareness and use of sources.   |
| Week 9 | EAP lecturers develop students' awareness and use of coherence and cohesion in academic writing.  |

It should be noted that from week 5 onwards, following assignment submission, the EAP programme continues to use students' practice assignments as the basis for the academic language and literacy development listed.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The aim of the research was to explore the value of the partnership programme as perceived by the principal parties involved: the students, the disciplinary lecturers and the EAP lecturers. It did not, it should be noted, set out to evaluate the impact of the programme on student performance on the main postgraduate programme. The research question, therefore, was as follows:

To what extent (and in what ways) do disciplinary lecturers, EAP lecturers and students view the academic literacy programme as having value?

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study approach (Yin, 1994) was adopted for the research to facilitate an in-depth study of the academic literacy programme and '[to]capture its dynamic, complex and multi-faceted nature' (Wyness, 2010, p.161). It also allowed multiple data sets to be adopted, adding 'thickness' to the data (Geertz, 1973). The research instruments employed for the data generation in order to better understand the perspectives of the three stakeholder groups were the following:

- a) Semi-structured interviews with two disciplinary lecturers (DL1 and DL2)
- b) A semi-structured interview with one of the two EAP lecturers (EL1)
- c) A reflective journal by the researcher-EAP lecturer (EL2)
- d) Semi-structured interviews with a sample of six students (S1 to S6)
- e) Two focus group interviews, each with samples of 8 students (FG1:S1-S8) and FG2:S1-S8)

Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to for the study, including the obtaining of participants' consent for research findings to be published.

## THE FINDINGS

Selected findings are presented here according to four central themes which emerged in the data generated: academic literacy, collaboration, embeddedness and relevance.

### ACADEMIC LITERACY

For the first theme, that of academic literacy, the interview data indicated that the design of the practice assignment had involved explicit consideration of the literacies sought by disciplinary lecturers. As one of these lecturers put it:

*It is an assignment that clearly focuses on the kinds of literacy practices which we need our students to display, to master, and the kinds of practices that the EAP programme can help them to develop. (DL2)*

Indeed, my reflective journal comments at the time noted how dialogue with the disciplinary lecturers had increased my own understanding of their expectations of student work:

*Even though I was familiar with the kind of writing produced on the [MA] programmes, discussing the practice assignment task made the lecturers' ideas about the required literacy very explicit and that's useful for us. (EL2)*

The choice of required reading for the assignment was similarly guided by disciplinary lecturers' understanding of 'typical' texts in their field. The other EAP lecturer observed how such representative texts could then be exploited pedagogically on the EAP programme:

*The texts are good examples of the ways in which ideas are put forward and supported through reasoning, personal experience and through other literature. There's a lot that we can help students to become aware of and practise in the EAP sessions. (EL1)*

## **COLLABORATION**

The EAP and disciplinary lecturers were highly positive in their evaluations of the collaboration that had taken place, with one of the disciplinary lecturers also highlighting the complementary nature of the EAP and disciplinary lecturers' respective activity in providing the overall academic literacy programme:

*It's an excellent collaboration [...] there is a disciplinary collaboration with a task set and marked by disciplinary staff but supported by Language Centre staff. That seems to me to be a logical answer. (DL2)*

The EAP lecturers noted in turn that they felt valued in the collaboration, and that they believed the arrangement was significant in establishing the credibility of the EAP programme with the students. The EAP lecturer interviewed explained his perception as follows:

*It was a very reciprocal arrangement and there was an engagement there with the academic staff that made me feel very valued. It gave us credibility that we were working on an assignment set by the School. (EL1)*

In addition, I recorded in my reflective journal that the disciplinary lecturer feedback on the assignments provided invaluable insights into student performance at a mid-point in the EAP programme, and that it also provided a means for EAP lecturers to better understand the disciplinary lecturers' expectations. Comments by the disciplinary lecturers, I noted, represented 'a concrete reflection of their interpretations of the fairly generic School descriptors' (EL2).

## **PROGRAMME EMBEDDEDNESS**

The third theme, that of embeddedness, refers to the institutional framing of the EAP programme. The integration of the EAP programme with the practice assignment, the inclusion of the EAP programme on students' timetables and the launching of the overall academic literacy intervention by the disciplinary lecturers meant that many students, as in the interview extract below, regarded the literacy programme as an integral component of their main degree programme:

*The message that is pretty clear is that we need this kind of literacy development and are all expected to attend. As it appears on my timetable, I just naturally went like I do with other classes. (S6)*

Indeed, two of the students commented that they had assumed that the EAP lecturers were actually disciplinary lecturers, owing to the lecturers' involvement in the academic literacy intervention. The findings also indicated that the students rated such integration very highly, with one student commenting the following:

*'It [was] good to have the EAP programme inside the Master's [programme])[...] Unlike a pre-sessional, it was part of the real study experience. (S3)*

### **PROGRAMME RELEVANCE**

The programme embeddedness described above is related to the fourth theme, that of programme relevance, in that they both contributed to student valuing of and investment in the EAP programme. A substantial number of the students stated that they were aware of the transferability of the understanding and skills they had developed on the academic literacy intervention to their summatively assessed assignments. Several of them also commented that they valued the positive impact of the EAP programme on the quality of their submitted practice assignments, and that they gained increased confidence from this experience. One of them put it as follows:

*The [EAP] classes felt like a scaffolding for the assignment and helped us to have a positive early experience on the [academic] programme before we started submitting other work. (S4)*

For one student, however, this transferability was not so apparent, and she sought a closer alignment between the academic literacy intervention and summatively assessed course assignments:

*We still have to work out the structure of other assignments and even if we learn from this one, the other work needs a different approach. It's not always clear which way we need to go [...] we need it to be directly related to our [summatively assessed] assignment. (FG1:S3)*

For many other students, the relevance of the EAP programme to students' academic studies seemed to become apparent through the consistent messages provided by EAP and disciplinary lecturers. This can be seen in the following student comment:

*I realised once I was working on my assignments and talking to my tutor that it was the same messages they were giving us about academic writing. [The EAP programme] really helps us to develop the skills we need. (FG2:S7)*

Significantly, the EAP programme was also regarded as relevant by students with English as a dominant language who attended. One such student explained her participation as follows:

*Well, I really didn't know anything about academic writing and I've had to really apply myself to this [EAP] programme. The international students have actually learned how to write in the past so they know much more about it. (FG2:S5)*

The programme uptake by students with English as a dominant language was viewed very favourably by the two disciplinary lecturers with one lecturer noting that '[it] avoids the course being seen as remedial by the students generally' (DL2). Indeed, overall, the disciplinary lecturers regarded the relevance of the EAP programme very positively in that it 'either directly or indirectly scaffold[ed] the writing of the assignment' (DL1).

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that both disciplinary and EAP lecturers placed a high value on the fact that the practice assignment clearly identified dimensions of the academic literacy to be developed by the EAP lecturers. In addition, the EAP lecturers valued being able to further develop their knowledge of the disciplinary lecturers' academic literacy expectations through the assignment feedback that was also made available to them. Understanding the literacies that disciplinary lecturers believe students should be developing has traditionally proved challenging for EAP lecturers (Crawford & Candlin, 2013). The practice assignment task, however, appeared to provide the EAP lecturers with a concrete expression of these literacy practices, and served to identify the 'paradigmatic heart' (Pilcher & Richards, 2016) of the disciplinary subject. Furthermore, the EAP lecturers' interests were also served by the disciplinary lecturers' identification of representative disciplinary texts for the assignment task, which could then be employed for classroom genre-analysis purposes. EAP lecturer selection of such texts can otherwise be problematic owing to a lack of familiarity with the disciplinary literature (Campion, 2016).

The positive assessment by both disciplinary and EAP lecturers of the collaborative nature of the academic literacy intervention can, it seems, be attributed to its meeting their respective needs. For the disciplinary lecturers, the partnership was viewed as being resource-efficient, with EAP lecturers' activity complementing that of the disciplinary lecturers. With the substantial existing demands placed on disciplinary lecturers in the delivery of discipline programme content, such valuing of a 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 2014) of EAP and disciplinary lecturer roles is understandable. Indeed, workload implications have arguably been responsible in the past for the lack of wider introduction of literacy development initiatives, such as those involving team teaching between EAP and disciplinary lecturers (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998). The collaboration in the academic literacy intervention under discussion also appeared to result in EAP lecturers viewing themselves as working *with* rather than *for* disciplinary specialists (Hyland & Hamps-Lyons, 2002). This therefore addresses a widely-perceived imbalance in EAP and disciplinary lecturer professional status within higher education institutions, where EAP lecturers 'operat[e] on the edge of the academic world' (Ding & Bruce, 2017, p.107).

For the EAP lecturers, the collaboration also appeared to afford them highly desired credibility with the learners (Barron, 2003). Indeed, the degree of embeddedness contributed to a student perception of the EAP programme as an integral part of their postgraduate disciplinary programme. The emphasis EAP lecturers placed on this credibility can perhaps in part be explained by the issue of student engagement with the EAP programme. Attrition is a perennial concern for those involved in in-session EAP provision (Sloan & Porter, 2010), and EAP and disciplinary lecturer observation of a high level of student participation on the EAP programme is significant in terms of its satisfying the lecturers' shared investment in the effectiveness of the academic literacy intervention.

The fact that the academic literacy intervention permitted the EAP programme content to be closely related to the disciplinary programme provided the EAP lecturers with a strong sense that the programme they were delivering was both relevant and impactful. Pedagogically, it provided a valued means of introducing the subject-specific purposeful activities required for EAP development (Bruce, 2005). Disciplinary lecturers similarly placed a high value on this relevance of the EAP programme to student academic literacy needs in recognition of the programme's potential to improve overall student performance on the disciplinary programme. The value of the EAP programme was also reinforced, from the students' perspective, by the consistent communications regarding academic literacy development from both disciplinary and EAP lecturers. Such a finding further emphasises the significance of disciplinary buy-in for the credibility of the EAP programme with students (see Sloan et al., 2013).

The perceived relevance attributed to the EAP programme by those students with English as a dominant language was also regarded positively by the disciplinary lecturers, owing to their interest in reducing differentiation within the student cohort. Indeed, such high levels of participation across the student cohort serve to better frame the EAP programme as developmental rather than remedial in nature (Wingate, 2012), and reflect the fact that all students necessarily begin on the periphery as users of their discipline(s)' academic discourses (Thesen & Van Pletzen, 2006). The data, then, suggests the universal value of such positive early experiences of scaffolded assignment writing adopting a 'process' approach (Salter-Dvorak, 2016) with integrated academic literacy development.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The academic literacy intervention presented in this case study research was a semi-embedded collaboration between EAP and disciplinary lecturers. Overall, it was viewed by the main stakeholders as being of substantial value. Such value creation is significant, given the correlation between interest-satisfaction and personal investment in such educational interventions. Based on the positive evaluations by students, EAP lecturers and disciplinary lecturers, therefore, the academic literacy intervention model appears to represent an efficient and effective means of achieving the desired goal of situating EAP programmes within the students' discipline (Nesi & Gardner, 2012). In so doing, it also serves to offer a credible alternative to the curricular expansion which is required for fully-embedded programmes (Green, 2016). As the practice assignment becomes

increasingly established in higher education contexts (Lam, Cheng, & Yang, 2017), there appears to be strong potential for a model based on similar principles to be introduced in a range of disciplinary and institutional settings.

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