3 Students' Perceptions of the Use of English in a Core Business Subject for First-Year Business Students

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Abstract: English literacy and communication skills are crucial to business graduates for their future career development, and Hong Kong universities emphasize language competency across the curriculum to develop students as effective communicators. In the Faculty of Business at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, each core subject includes an individual English language writing task, contributing to at least 15 percent of the overall subject assessment. This chapter reports on a study investigating the ongoing English Across the Curriculum collaboration between the Faculty and the English Language Centre. The study examined student perceptions of the use of language as a grading criterion in a core business subject, as well as the usefulness of assessment language support materials. The findings indicate that most students used the language materials and reported improvements in their case study reports. However, some did not recognize the central importance of language competency, believing that language skills and professional knowledge are separate entities.

Keywords: collaboration, use of English, perceptions, business students, higher education

Introduction

Internationalization has been adopted as one of the core objectives of higher education for the 21st century in Hong Kong as well as in other parts of the world. In recent years the world of education has been tremendously affected by economic, cultural, and technological changes, and this has contributed to the current internationalization trends in higher education (Yemini & Sagie, 2016). The university student population has increased and become more

heterogeneous than ever before in terms of academic, linguistic, and cultural background (Dafouz & Smit, 2016). In the Asia-Pacific region, an important indicator of the extent to which a university is "internationalized" is the university's capacity to deliver programs in English (Wang et al., 2017).

The use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is a growing global trend in universities outside the major English-speaking countries in the world. The reasons for this trend include the increase in student mobility, the need to increase university rankings, and the fact that English is the principal language of research (Evans & Morrison, 2017). In Hong Kong, about 16 percent of the student population in universities are non-local students, including international students and mainland Chinese students (Yu & Wright, 2017).

Interdisciplinary Collaborations

As the English language is considered the lingua franca in the realms of scientific research, academic publication, and international business, more higher education institutions are offering programs in English (Hammond, 2016). However, studies reveal questions about the importance of English in the higher education classroom. University students report that their professors focus only on content and do not correct students' language errors, which negatively affects students' English writing and speaking skills (Ament & Pérez-Vidal, 2015). This issue highlights the need for teachers from different disciplines to work together to optimize the undergraduate learning experience. With a better understanding of students' perceptions of English writing in their courses, English teachers, discipline teachers, and students can bridge the gap between students' understanding of writing and that of teachers, and students can be better prepared for the globalized workplace upon graduation.

Indeed, both interdisciplinarity and collaboration are deemed "mantras for change in the 21st century" (Klein & Falk-Krzesinski, 2017, p. 1055). However, collaboration among disciplines in universities seems uncommon in Hong Kong (Braine, 2001). One reason for this lack of collaboration could be that the focus in higher education courses is mainly on covering content (Clughen & Connell, 2012; Zhu, 2004). Another cause could be that professors feel territorial about their area of expertise (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Pawan & Ortloff, 2011; Zhu, 2004). Some English teachers, likewise, may feel similarly and even be skeptical about embedding language use in content subjects (Fulwiler, 1988). Samer Annous and Maureen Nicolas (2015) maintain that this paradigm of "tribes and territories" (p. 104) is now outdated, and it hinders the students' development of all the skills that are crucial to be competitive

in modern life. The lack of collaboration among departments could also be partly a result of the reward system, as Julie Klein and Holly Falk-Krzesinski (2017) posit that universities should take steps "to establish greater clarity in assigning credit . . . in response to the challenge of judging individual contributions in collaborative research" (p. 1057).

Another challenge faced by collaborators in different disciplines is that collaborating researchers in different fields may use different words to describe the same phenomena because "what we see is largely dependent on what we have been trained to see" (Dixon & Dougherty, 2010, p. 3). Thus, individuals from different academic disciplines who work together will find themselves "always slightly at cross purposes" (Dixon & Dougherty, 2010, p. 3). It is, therefore, important for teachers from different disciplines to be aware of their differences and appreciate that they look at students' writing through different lenses. Together, they can provide students with an improved learning experience and successful outcomes.

Writing Practices

Studies conducted in Hong Kong and other regions show that students benefit from content courses that include the use of language as one of the assessment criteria, as well as from collaboration between English language teachers and content-area teachers (Bacha, 2012; Evans & Morrison, 2011; Jackson, 2005; Pawan & Ortloff, 2011). Marcelo Gaspar and colleagues (2017) conducted a "collaborative pedagogical experiment" (p. 209) in a Portuguese school of engineering for one semester, and suggested that collaboration between teachers "can take place in various situations, which may be globally classified as co-teaching" (p. 211). They conclude that the dedicated design strategies used in the team-teaching approach "contributed positively to the students' learning processes" (p. 214). While the teachers reported positive feedback about combining content with language, students stated they had more motivation for language learning, and that the discussion exercises, presentations, and writing activities helped to develop their communicative skills.

While team teaching may be beneficial to students' learning, collaboration between teachers can be difficult. David Lasagabaster (2018) notes the need for "strenuous efforts" to develop content teachers into "new advocates of this language and content integration" (p. 413), with the time required for collaboration a hindering issue. Shari Lughmani et al. (2016) conducted studies in three universities in Hong Kong, and found team teaching to be "the deepest form of collaboration" (p. 31). They maintain that different forms of collaboration can lead to greater integration of English in content subjects

and increase mutual understanding between content teachers and language teachers.

In a study conducted at one Hong Kong university, 20 teachers from four faculties were interviewed about their students' writing and their feedback to students (Hyland, 2013). The study revealed that even though some subject tutors who "recognize the importance of writing conventions" do provide students support with their writing assignments, "students cannot always depend on this" (p. 252). The "information about faculty writing practices, about subject teacher beliefs, and about learner performance . . . form a key part of the context of writing at university" (p. 252). With a better understanding of university students' perceptions of the integration of language into discipline-specific subjects, teachers from different departments can collaborate and work together more effectively. To provide students with a better understanding of effective writing in their field of studies and to prepare students for the workplace, the study reported in this chapter aimed to explore business students' perceptions of integrating English and communication skills in a content subject.

Background and Context of the Current Study

Hong Kong, an international finance and logistics center, attracts a significant number of multinational enterprises to engage in business and in many cases to establish their headquarters in the city. To supply competent professional young talent to the market, universities in Hong Kong emphasize students' literacy and communication skills. A common learning outcome for university undergraduate programs is to develop students as effective communicators. Graduates are expected to be able to skillfully connect and establish positive relationships with different people across a range of professional and personal contexts. They are also expected to communicate effectively in English and Chinese, both orally and in writing, in professional/work-related contexts. Lughmani et al. (2016) explored English Across the Curriculum (EAC) initiatives in Hong Kong universities and collaboration between English language teachers and general education teachers and the faculties of social sciences and engineering. Studies, however, have not yet investigated the collaboration between English language teachers and teaching staff from business faculties.

In order to develop students' language skills, the Faculty of Business at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University adopted a policy in 2008 that mandated every subject should contain a significant element of individual writing tasks in English. This chapter reports on a collaborative EAC project between a

business faculty subject instructor and the English Language Centre (ELC). The study pertained to an assessment which accounted for 15 percent of the overall course grade in one business course. The students were required to select one case from a list of six and write an essay that addressed the questions included at the end of the case description.

The Study

The study was conducted in the second semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. The co-investigator from the ELC prepared guidelines and a checklist to help students with various aspects of English writing. The guidelines included information on the structure, coherence, and referencing style of a case study report. The checklist aimed to help students include all necessary items in their case study report before submitting the assignment.

Questionnaire survey

One hundred and seventy-four business students who took LGT2106 "Principles of Operations Management" in the second semester of the 2018-2019 academic year participated in this study, and more than 90 percent were first-year students. The students were enrolled in four classes taught by four business content teachers, and all were required to write the case study report as one of their assessments. The ELC co-investigator offered a briefing session to all classes on how to use the checklist and guidelines two weeks before their assignment submission.

After students submitted their assignment, they were invited to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix). The questionnaire was designed to explore how business students felt about integrating English into a core business subject. Both open-ended questions and closed questions were used in the survey. Hard copies of the questionnaires were distributed in class by the four business content teachers one week after the case study report was due. These teachers collected the questionnaires at the end of the class and passed the completed questionnaires to the ELC instructor. The student responses were then analyzed.

Findings and Discussion

Students were first asked if they were aware of the weighting of the assignment with regard to their use of English (40 percent of the total marks). About 56 percent (97 respondents) reported that they did know the weight-

ing. However, as shown in Table 3.1, among the 97 respondents who reported they knew the weighting, only 68 respondents actually knew the correct percentage. Therefore, only 39 percent of all respondents (174 respondents) knew the correct weighting of English in the assignment. The students' responses to this question ranged from 10 percent to 100 percent. This result indicates that only a small proportion of students were aware of the importance of language competency in this business core subject. This could be because of the nature of this core subject—Principles of Operations Management. The subject's intended learning outcomes focus on students' ability to recognize the key techniques and concepts in operations management, and to apply various quantitative models and approaches to inform decision-making in a real business situation. With the emphasis on quantitative models and application in this subject, the students might not focus on their use of English in the case study report.

Table 3.1. Student awareness of the weighting for language use

Awareness of weighting for language use	Students
Stated knowing the weighting for language use.	97 (55.7%)
Stated the correct weighting	68 (39.1%)
Stated the incorrect weighting	29 (16.6%)
Stated not knowing the weighting for language use.	77 (44.3%)
Total	174 (100%)

Table 3.2. Student perceptions of the appropriateness of the weighting for language use (for those 97 students who were aware of a weighting for language)

Appropriate	Students
Yes	52 (53.61%)
No	40 (41.24%)
Missing answer	5 (5.15%)
Total	77 (100%)

Among those respondents who reported they knew the correct percentage, around 54 percent of them (52 respondents) thought that the weighting was appropriate, while 41 percent thought that it was inappropriate, as shown in Table 3.2. However, after checking the feedback of those respondents who thought the weighting was appropriate (52 respondents), only 27 of them actually knew the correct weighting (i.e., 40 percent), which means that more

than 48 percent of the respondents' comments on the appropriateness of the weighting were made based on their wrong judgement of the weighting. This result made it difficult for us to analyze students' perceptions of the importance of language use. Nonetheless, it could clearly be concluded that the students were not aware of the importance of the use of English in this subject.

Students' Perceptions of the Weighting

The common reasons given by those students who thought the weighting was appropriate included "Language is important," "Essay structure, organization and presentation are important for Business students," "Essay should be reader friendly and easy to understand," and "It's important to have clear expression, generation and elaboration of ideas in writing essay." Among those respondents who thought that the weighting was inappropriate, most of them thought that it was too heavy, while only a few respondents thought that the weighting was too low. The reasons for claiming the weighting to be too heavy included "Content and ideas are more important" and "This subject is a major discipline subject instead of a language subject."

We further asked the students if the weighting affected their preparation for writing the essay. Around 80 percent (77 respondents) thought that the weighting had "some" or "a lot" of impact on their writing of the essay, as shown in Table 3.3. Even though some students did not agree with the high weighting of their use of English, they acknowledged that their language competency affected their academic performance in this business subject.

Table 3.3. Effect of the weighting for language use on students' preparation of the case study report (for those 97 students who were aware of weighting for language)

Effect	Students
A lot	22 (22.68%)
Some	55 (56.70%)
Little	13 (13.40%)
No change	7 (7.22%)
Total	97 (100%)

Effectiveness of the Language Tips and Checklists

Close to three-quarters of the respondents reported referring to the guidelines and checklist while they were writing the essay. As displayed in Table

3.4, a large majority of the students who had referred to the language tips found them useful. In particular, over 95 percent of the students found the tips on writing the case study report very useful or useful. This could be because most first-year undergraduate students have not written a business case study report before and they focused specifically on the language appropriate for the assignment. The tips on coherence, use of references, referring to sources, and the quick referencing guide for academic writing (APA 6th Edition) were also described as very useful and useful by over 80 percent of the students. In addition, around 80 percent of the students found the report writing checklist and the referencing checklist very useful or useful.

Table 3.4. Student perceptions of the effectiveness of the English tips

Tips	Very useful/ Useful	Not useful	Did not use
Writing a Case Study Report	95.32%	3.91%	0.78%
Coherence in Academic Writing	85.94%	10.94%	3.13%
Use of References in Academic Writing	83.59%	10.94%	5.47%
Referring to Sources in Academic Writing	82.03%	13.28%	4.69%
A Quick Referencing Guide for Academic Writing (APA 6th Edition)	85.15%	10.16%	4.69%
Report Writing Checklist	82.82%	9.3%	7.81%
Referencing Checklist	78.13%	13.28%	8.59%

Over 96 percent of the students reported finding the language tips provided by the ELC helpful in improving their case study reports. Those students who did not find the language tips useful reported that they found the tips too general (*n*=3), or they did not know how to use them to improve their case study report (*n*=1). This could be because there were six cases for students to choose from, and students might have found the tips more relevant to some cases but not others.

Among the students who did not refer to the language tips, nearly 40 percent of them mentioned time as a reason (see Table 3.5). Over 20 percent of the students stated that they felt that their English was good enough. Another 20 percent of the students commented that they either did not know the language tips were available, or they did not know where to find them. Even though the language instructor conducted briefings in all the classes and told students how to access the language tips on the Blackboard learning management system, some students might have been absent on the day of the briefings, which resulted in them not knowing where they could find

the guidelines and checklists. Less than five percent of the students stated that they did not care about their language use, or that their grades would not be affected. The remaining 20 percent of the students who did not refer to the language tips stated that they have seen similar language tips in other courses, or they forgot to use the language tips, or they believed that writing a well-structured report required an excessive amount of time.

Table 3.5. Students' reasons for not referring to English tips

Reasons	Students
My English is good enough.	10 (23.26%)
I didn't have time.	16 (37.21%)
I didn't know they were available.	6 (13.95%)
I didn't know where to find them.	3 (6.98%)
I don't care about my language use.	1 (2.33%)
My grade will not be affected.	1 (2.33%)
Others: I have made use of it with my ELC 1012 notes. I already take ELC class this semester and the two are similar. The English tips provided are very basic, that university students should have known (previously written assignment). I thought I know it already.	9 (20.93%)

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore business students' perceptions of the value of integrating English and communication skills into a content subject. The results show that students have mixed feelings about the weighting of the use of language in their case study report assessments. Some students reported that they did not use the English tips because the guidelines/tips were similar to those used in their other ELC classes or that they were too general.

In light of the student feedback, we have designed an assessment rubric with clear grading criteria. In addition, we have gathered samples of students' case study reports, analyzed them, and revised the English tips accordingly. We have also made changes to the tips for the case study report by specifically stating which part of the tips applies to which case study. It is hoped that more students will pay attention to the use of language in this course and that more students will find the revised English tips relevant and helpful for their case study reports.

There are two main limitations of this study. One is that LGT 2106 is only one of the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) core subjects and that it is more quantitative in focus compared with other BBA core subjects. The other BBA core subjects are more qualitative in nature, and students are given more written assignments that allow them to practise their English language skills. Another limitation is that this is a small-scale study that involved a small percentage of BBA students in the university. There are around 500 first-year students taking this subject every year. The subject is offered both in the fall and the spring semesters, and this study was conducted with students who took the subject only in the spring semester, which accounts for about 50 percent of the population.

While this survey is a small-scale study of first-year business students, the nature of the findings may be transferrable to other disciplines and students in other years of study. An important perspective for future research would therefore be to investigate students' perceptions of the use of English in other academic disciplines. Future research could also consider investigating final-year students' perceptions on the use of English in their capstone projects and their confidence in applying their language skills in the workplace. With this extension, we would be able to better understand students' journeys of growing awareness of the importance of language competency for their study and future career.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix: Post-Questionnaire for LGT 2106 (Principles of Operations Management) Students

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect your views about the <u>use of English</u> in content subjects at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. All information given in this questionnaire will be kept with strict confidence and be accessible only to the research team members. By filling in this questionnaire, you agree that we can use the given information for teaching and research purposes.

Circle the appropriate answer and/or write in the space provided.

1. Do you know the <u>weighting for language use</u> in the case study report?
    Yes, _____ %   No, I don't know. (Go to Q4)

2. Do you think this weighting is <u>appropriate</u>?
    Yes,   No,
    because _____

3. How did this weighting <u>affect your preparation</u> of writing the case study report (i.e., the attention that you paid to language use)?
    A lot   Some   Little   No change

4. Did you refer to the English tips provided by the ELC while writing the case study report?
    Yes   No (Go to Q8)

5. How would you rate the following English tips provided by the ELC? (3=Very useful; 2=Useful; 1=Not useful; DNU=Did not use)

Tips (1) on Writing a Case Study Report	3 2 1 DNU
Tips (2) on Coherence in Academic Writing	3 2 1 DNU
Tips (3) on Use of References in Academic Writing	3 2 1 DNU

Tips (4) on Referring to Sources in Academic Writing   3 2 1 DNU

Tips (5) A Quick Referencing Guide in Academic Writing   3 2 1 DNU
(APA 6th edition)

Tips (6) Report Writing Checklist   3 2 1 DNU

Tips (7) Referencing Checklist   3 2 1 DNU

6. In general, did the English tips provided by the ELC in Q5 above help you improve the quality of writing the case study report?

Yes, a lot. **(The end. Thank you!)** Yes, some. **(The end. Thank you!)** Not really. (Go to Q7)

7. The English tips provided by the ELC were not so helpful because …
(You can choose more than 1 item.)

    i.   I know these language-related topics really well.
    ii.   I didn't know how to use the tips for my case study report.
    iii.   I found other English resources more helpful, e.g., _____
             _____
    iv.   Other reasons: _____
             _____

(The end. Thank you!)

8. I didn't refer to the English tips provided by the ELC because …
(You can choose more than 1 item.)

    i.   My English is good enough.
    ii.   I didn't have time.
    iii.   I didn't know they were available.
    iv.   I didn't know where to find them.
    v.   I don't care about my language use.
    vi.   My grade will not be affected.
Other reasons: _____