Evaluation of the Writing and Communication skills course taught at Quaid-E-Awam University of Engineering, Science and Technology

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Abstract: This study evaluated the current Writing and Communication Skills Course provided to assist students enrolled on the undergraduate engineering programme at Quaid-E-Awam University of Engineering Science, and Technology (QUEST), Sindh Pakistan .The questionnaire was used as a main tool of data collection to seek the perspectives of the currently enrolled final year students from Civil Engineering Department, and English teachers of English Language Centre (ELC). The present study explored the extent to which the Writing and Communication skills (WCS) course taught by ELC teachers met the academic literacy and learning needs of undergraduate students of QUEST. The course was evaluated from its two aspects: contents (themes and topic) and methodology (instructional approach, resources/materials, and assessment criteria). Findings based on the students' scaled responses and open-ended responses and teachers open-ended responses by and large showed an agreement that the WCS course was falling short in meeting the needs of undergraduate students of QUEST both in terms of its contents and methodology.

1. Introduction

The most straightforward definition of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) is that it "describes language programmes designed for groups or individuals who are learning with an identifiable purposes and clearly specifiable needs" (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p.105). ESP is an umbrella term that can be subdivided into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) courses. English for Academic Purposes can be further divided into English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP). ESAP mainly focuses on the terminology, text types and tasks required for competence in a specific academic discipline, whereas EGAP courses enable students to attain command over basic and transferable academic needs. Figure 1 below provides an overview of different types of ESP:
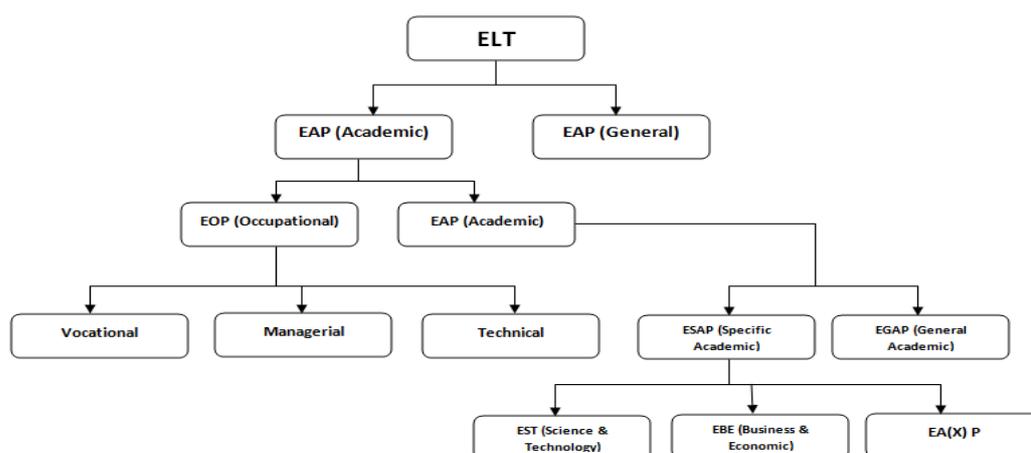
Figure 1:   **Classification of ESP based on its purposes (Swales, 1988, p. 44)**

Therefore, there has been some debate in recent years as to the relative value and applicability of general academic and specific academic purposes for particular groups of learners and teaching contexts. Some researchers believe that EGAP courses are more appropriate for developing general academic literacy skills in pre-degree programmes and for classes of students from different disciplines (Spack, 1988; Johns, 2005; Wette & Lessels, 2010). Others point out that differences between disciplines mean that students, particularly at more advanced levels of study, need to learn language and skills that are specific to their discipline (Huckin, 2003; Hyland, 2002; Robinson, 1980). The development of an ESP course can be seen as dependent on five main elements: the concept of specialized language, rhetorical or discourse analysis, target situation analysis, skills and strategies, and the learning centered approach (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Since the learning centered approach focuses on the learners' needs at the course design stage as well as throughout the course, assessing learners' needs and using authentic materials to meet their language needs are vital aspects of ESP courses.

Consequently, a significant body of literature claims that the greatest contributions of ESP to language teaching are authenticity and needs assessment (Bhatia 1986; Dudley-Evans & John 1998; Hutchinson & Waters 1987; Jordan 1997; Mackay & Mountford 1978; Munby 1978; Nunan 1988; Robinson 1991; West 1998). The concept of authenticity is related to the idea that the main consideration in an ESP course must be authenticity in terms of the texts and tasks used (West, 1998). Since authentic texts are directly related to the professional interests of ESP students, they will be more likely to motivate the students in order to perform effectively in their target situation. It is also recommended that authentic tasks that are the real life project-based studies related to learners' field of study should be used in ESP courses, as they are a good way of preparing students for actual professional applications (Spaulding, 1992).

2. **Rationale for the study**

Quaid-E-Awam University of Engineering, Science and Technology (QUEST), is a public sector university located in the Southern Pakistan where I have been working as a lecturer in English for the last four years. The medium of instruction at the university is essentially English, and students attending the courses are expected to have sufficient knowledge of English on entry to perform well in their professional academic life. The university offers students compulsory English courses to augment their English language knowledge and communication skills to meet their academic and professional needs. An English Language Centre (ELC) has been established as an independent section in the university with five lecturers and two English language laboratories for the purpose teaching practical lessons in English.

At QUEST, as with other universities in Pakistan, many students are of low-proficiency in English. As a result, the majority of students fail their major papers, and those who pass somehow do not get jobs related to their fields, since they lack communication skills essential for any public or private industry or organization (Mansoor, 2005 and Siddiqui, 1994). The English language course *Writing and Communication Skills* (WCS) taught at undergraduate level is perceived as more a course in English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) than a course in English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) that focuses on the particular academic literacy needs of engineering students. There is no prescribed textbook (set-text) for the English course, and a number of students have expressed dissatisfaction with their proficiency in English both during and after completing their engineering studies.

One factor that may contribute to students' English inadequate level of proficiency is the quality of the English language curriculum offered at the university as the syllabus for courses offered at the ELC have not been developed on the basis of an analysis of the English language needs of the undergraduate engineering students. Evaluating the current curriculum against the needs of students would therefore be a way of identifying more precisely where changes need to be made and, as a number of writers point out, should in fact be the first step in designing any ESP syllabus (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Nunan, 1988). Thus, the present study examines the syllabus used on the English course (WCS) currently offered at QUEST to evaluate the extent to which course meets the specific academic literacy and learning needs of the students.

3. **The Context and Participants**

The study was carried out at a public sector Quaid-E-Awam University of Engineering, Science and Technology, Sindh, Pakistan. The participants in the study were students and English lecturers at QUEST. The number of student participants was 60 final-year undergraduate engineering students and all four English lecturers from ELC of the university volunteered to participate in the research. The study used questionnaires for both teachers and student -

participants as a main research instrument. The students' questionnaire was based on 10 Likert-scale items and three open ended items. In 10 Likert scale items, students were given chance to self-assess on the language skills they needed, and the extent to which the WCS course they took in their first year met their needs as engineers. In the final part of the questionnaire, three open-ended items gave students a chance to comment in their own words about the WCS course, and suggest any changes in the course to make it compatible to the needs of engineering students. Teachers' questionnaire consisted of just three open-ended items about the WCS course, its content and methodology. Teachers were asked about their views on the present English course: if they were satisfied that the course was meeting the needs of undergraduate engineering students, and if they would like to see any changes implemented. The present study, thus, explored the extent to which the Writing and Communication skills (WCS) course taught by ELC teachers met the academic literacy and learning needs of undergraduate students of QUEST.

Findings of the study

3.1. Student-participants' views about the WCS course

Students' views on course contents and instructional approaches

Table 1: Items on students' assessment of the WCS course

Item No	Assessment of WCS course	Responses to the First Two Levels of value (A and SA) (n=60)	
		Count	**Percent**
1	The WCS course was helpful for my engineering studies	13	21.6
2	The Writing and Communication Skills (WCS) course at the ELC should focus mainly on improving general academic skills (not just skills that are related to engineering).	19	31.6
5	The WCS course helped me to improve my knowledge of English in the field of engineering.	15	25
7	The Writing and Communication Skills (WCS) course at the ELC should focus mainly on language and skills related to engineering studies.	57	95
6	I prefer WCS teachers to just give us knowledge about English through formal lectures	9	15
8	I prefer participating actively in group and pair tasks in English classes.	53	88.3

Two Levels of value are "Agree" (A) and "Strongly Agree" (SA)

Table 1 show that most students were dissatisfied with both the content and instructional approaches of the WCS course. The majority of student-participants disagreed that the course helped them in their engineering studies; however, regarding course content, the students wanted their course to have focused on language skills specific to engineering; however, the course was more focused on general academic literacy skills. A large number of participants (57/95%) expected from WCS course to have contained topics on language related skills that could have helped them in their engineering studies. Regarding the instructional approaches, students saw little value in traditional approaches course followed in teaching language skills. On the other hand, a large number of participants (53/88.3%) showed a great desire for participating in group or pair tasks: a fundamental feature of the communicative approach to language teaching, which is the optimum approach for an ESP course.

Three open-ended items gave students opportunity to make more detailed answers. They commented about course content and instructional approaches of the WCS course. In item 1 students were asked to point out the parts of the course helped them in meeting their academic literacy and learning needs as engineers. Fifty-three (88.3%) of the students regarded the contents and methodology for the listening and speaking skills part of the course as the most helpful parts for them in their engineering studies, while reading and writing were seen as less helpful in terms of their content and instructional approach. In their comments on which parts (contents and methodology) students considered helpful in listening and speaking skills, one student wrote that:

> "…..listening for gist and detail comprehension was of great help……I liked listening to audio tapes in audio lab of ELC, practicing through listening to the conversations of native speakers helped me develop listening for my classes……for speaking skills we used to watch videos on VCR and CD players from the native English context … I liked the videos on presentation skills, and interviews……."

Many students liked the role-plays used by the teachers to practice interviewing and presentation skills. However, some thought that practicing interviewing skills in their first year of studies was not appropriate. One of the students was of the view that:

> "…..although it was quite hard for many students to come before audience and present, I enjoyed the part of lecture when teacher used to ask us to come forward for role-plays to practice interview and presentation skills…mock interview was quite helpful….but I think it was too early to learn interview skills in firs year… for me it is important to know

more about the interviews now as I am about to finish my studies after this semester..I have forgotten everything what we learnt in first year about interview…"

The small number of participants, who liked the reading and writing components of the course, commented favourably on the list of topics for both reading and writing. However, these students seem less happy about the instructional approaches used on the course. One student commented that:

"I liked the list of topics in syllabus on reading and writing for example on reading for details, skimming, scanning, surveying the text…on writing we had cv writing, letter writing, minutes of meeting..these were good for learning as professional engineers, but these were not taught the way they should be…for example I know the definition of skimming but I cannot skim the text…so it was all theory based not practical…."

The second item on the questionnaire asked the student-participants to comment on the parts of the WCS course they considered were not helpful in meeting their literacy and professional learning needs. At least 43(66.6%) of the students described aspects of the content of the course, and 49(81.6%) students commented on instructional approaches. Regarding the content of the WCS course, a majority of students commented negatively about the distribution of topics of the course. They point out that the course was more focused on future professional needs of undergraduate needs rather than meeting their immediate literacy needs in the first year studies. One student mentioned:

"I think the course included the topics that I need now in my final year not in my first year …to learn language skills to help me in future job hunting needs such as interviewing, cv writing, job application writing….as we don't have another course in English so we may face lot of difficulties in future for these skills…"

Many students criticized the course methodology. Forty nine (81%) students were of the opinion that handouts for reading and writing skills were neither helpful nor interesting. They were critical of the lack of any textbook for the course. Many of students were not happy with having a traditional paper-based exam, which they believed did not truly assess their abilities in language skills. Regarding the class activities, the majority of students showed a great deal of dissatisfaction with the instructor's formal lectures, and stated that they would have preferred to have group discussions. In his comments one student wrote:

"….I don't feel happy about handouts given to us, these used to be either borrowed from other universities or downloaded from internet,…also in handouts there were no examples only theory was given which did not help me in understanding many topics… I think we needed a textbook which includes lot of topics in it…I believe for university students a three hour paper base exam is waste of time and energies of students in

cramming the topics covered throughout the semester..I prefer MCQs instead of lengthy paper…I don't like at all teacher formally delivering a lecture for one hour and students get less chance to participate in discussion….I like a class where students have maximum chance to participate in groups or pairs its good for learning I think…."

All in all, the great majority of students disagreed that the WCS course that they took in their first year helped them in their engineering studies or prepared them to get jobs after graduation.

The third and last open-ended item on the questionnaire asked students to suggest improvements they would like to see implemented in the WCS course. A large number of students 56 (93.3%) suggested improvements to both the content and instructional approach of the WCS course. For example, students suggested increasing the instruction time for the English language course, or dividing the current course into two language courses by equally distributing its contents for academic literacy and professional learning skills. They also recommended for adopting a reputable textbook. They would have preferred their instructors to teach interactively, rather than through traditional lecture-based approaches.

With regard to the assessment criteria of the WCS course, students recommended a new approach which could truly assess their language skills rather than using traditional paper-based exam. Regarding the classroom activities, students suggested providing more authentic examples to illustrate theories to make language learning more efficient and durable. One student was of the view that:

"…I think one course in English in four years of study is not sufficient for an engineer, I therefore suggest for more English courses or at least one English course may be included in the final year of our study with one at first year, so that final year student can get refreshing ideas about communication skills which are required after completion of degree…."

Another student suggested an alternative to loose handouts and changes in the assessment criteria:

 "I believe if handouts are replaced with text book containing all the topics for the course, it will help students and also teachers…..my next suggestion is to kindly change the exam pattern, for me a three hour theory exam was very stressful…I like multiple option based exam…"

Another student suggested on instructional approach in these words:

"for me it is difficult to understand a topic which is told in theory only, I understand the concept better if I am given some examples which can explain me what the topic is really about…I therefore would suggest to my English lecturers to kindly use more examples and less theory in teaching the difficult concepts of communication skills"

Overall, a large number of student-participant suggested some very helpful suggestions for the improvement of the currently taught WCS course from the point of view its contents and instructional approach it used.

Students' self-assessment of their current level of English

Table 2: Items on students' self assessment of their current level of English against WCS course

Item No	Students' self assessment of their level of English	Responses to the First Two Levels of value (A and SA) (n=60)	
		Count	Percent
3	Looking at my achievement in engineering studies at QUEST, I think I have very good English language knowledge and skills.	19	31.6
4	English language skills are **not** very important for success in engineering studies at QUEST.	3	5
9	English is very important for getting a job as an engineer.	58	96.6
10	If my English was better, I would find my engineering studies easier.	56	93.3

Two Levels of value are "Agree" (A) and "Strongly Agree" (SA)

The results show that a large number of students were not satisfied with their current level of English, and that they regarded English as essential for success in engineering studies at QUEST and for getting a job in the future. They believed that if their skills in English had been better, they would have been more successful in their engineering studies.

3.2.   Teacher-participants views about the WCS course

The second source of data for answering the second research question on WCS course evaluation was the views of teachers collected through open-ended questionnaire items. The responses to teacher were analysed qualitatively due to the small number of respondents.

Item No 4 on their questionnaire asked teacher-participants to respond to what extent they believed the WCS course offered through ELC was meeting the academic literacy and learning needs of their students. In their comments, all four teachers pointed out that the staffing

allocation for the WCS course was inadequate. It was perhaps the reason these teacher believed that too many topics on professional learning skills had been included in the communication skills course and not enough on academic literacy skills, based on the assumption that students already had good background knowledge of language structures. Insaf was of opinion that:

> "Keeping in view the varying needs of these undergraduate engineering students it is difficult to predict that WCS course is meeting their needs…As it is the only English course in four year program that these students are offered, we therefore focus more on the future needs than the current needs, it is the reason the topics included in the course are more inclined towards the future professional needs rather than their current needs…we expect from our students to have sufficient knowledge about English language…our target is to enable these students to have sufficient skills to get jobs in future.."

Item 5 asked respondents to comment on the instructional approaches they used in teaching the WCS course, including the resources, materials, activities and tasks. In their responses, teachers pointed out that although the format of teaching they used was predominately lecture-based, they made their lectures communicative by using role-plays, mock meetings, and other similar types of tasks. Inayat responded to the question in these words:

> "Although the objective of the course is to make the students communicatively competent both in oral and written forms, the course is more focused on theoretical rather than practical aspect of language. The teachers here, however, make utmost efforts to make the course as much interactive as possible. For instance, the teachers conduct dummy meetings where students are asked to take minutes; they are made to visit another department and asked to come up with a report based on personal observations, mock interviews are conducted to practice interviews etc.**"**

Regarding resources and materials Tariq wrote:

> "No specific textbook is used for teaching the students. Instead, we normally use supplementary material and design our own material, with help from multifarious resources like internet, newspapers, different books on language, etc. These materials are used as handouts and lectures are delivered via multimedia"

The sixth and last item on questionnaire asked respondents to give their suggestions improvements in the WCS course. Three teachers suggested increasing the number of English courses from one to at least two, in order to create a balance in topics between literacy and learning skills. However, one teacher was of the view that before any significant changes were proposed, a comprehensive needs analysis needed to be carried out in all nine engineering

departments, involving all fourth year students and their instructors. With regard to the instructional approach including resources and activities/tasks, all four teachers suggested that the course WCS would be more effectively taught if the theoretical lectures were made as more interactive by using a communicative language teaching approach. Mansoor was of the view that the WCS course could be improved if it followed a communicative/ESP approach and if course content took account of the needs of the industries:

> "Being predominantly theoretical, the course needs to be made a little practical. For example, in addition to teaching students about the components of a report or kinds of letters, they should be made to actually write such reports and letters to give them practical expertise. Moreover, students should be introduced with current and contemporary types of communication through letters / reports. There should be liaison between course designers and Industry so that courses can be updated as per needs of the Engineering Industry".

In his suggestions, Inayat pointed out that the assessment criteria for WCS course also needed to be changed as they are not an appropriate way to assess the skills of engineering students on 3-hour paper based exam. In his words:

> "Although, the course needs a lot of changes keeping view the needs and requirements of the students and their varying needs my first suggestion would be for the improving on the paper based exam which is the cause of de-motivation among students"

4. Discussions

Regarding the content of the WCS course, student-participants stated that they would have preferred their course to have focused on language skills specific to engineering; however, the course was more focused on general academic literacy skills such as teaching of grammar and tenses through traditional methods. They expected the WCS course to have included topics on language related skills that could have helped them in their engineering studies. However, the course was more focused on the professional learning needs in the beginning year of studies when it had to have focused on literacy skills because of students' limited academic literacy skills to facilitate them in their studies. Teachers agreed with the students concern that the WCS course should emphasise professional learning needs more. They went on to state that as it was the only academic literacy course in the four year engineering programme they wanted students to have more knowledge of professional skills, which could facilitate them in their future endeavours as professionals. Student participants reported a series of problems with the course contents and organisation that were similar to the ones reported in the study by Artemeva et al (1999). In both courses apparently poor organisation, lack of any clear focus, and an absence of a coordinated structure for the ongoing development of professional students were reported.

Regarding the instructional approaches, students saw little value in a traditional course that taught language skills in a traditional way. A large number of participants showed a great desire for participating in group or pair tasks which is the fundamental feature of the communicative approach to language teaching, a proposed approach for ESP course (Strevens, 1977). Teachers too in their responses agreed with students on instructional approaches to language learning, and were of the opinion that this was because a suitable textbook was not being used. However, the teachers believed that they had tried their best in applying a communicative approach through role-plays, group discussion, mock interviews, and by using the overhead projector, audio-visual aids and by extracting handouts from different sources such as internet, newspapers, and magazines to make the learning more interactive. The findings of the present study to an extent show similarity with the earlier studies on applicability of CLT in the context of Pakistan and elsewhere by (Hawkey, 2006; Karim, 2004; Mangubai et al., 1998; Pham, 2007).These studies all suggest that, in general, EFL teachers look favourably at the use of communicative approach in teaching a second language.

Another significant aspect of WCS course methodology which was criticized by student and teacher-participants was the assessment criteria used on the WCS. They were of the opinion that the criteria used to assess students' performance on a three-hour paper-based exam were not true a representative strategy for assessing students' language abilities. They believed it was de-motivating for students, as they had to memorise the whole syllabus used on WCS course, which was tedious and frustrating. According to Hughes (1989) if the content and technique of a test are at variance with the objectives of the course, this has a negative effect or backwash. This is an important consideration in contexts where examinations play a dominant role (Prodromou, 1995). Both student and teacher-participants in the present study suggested alternatives that included as multiple choice exams and exams which could apply analytical strategies in assessing skills. ESP tests, according to Basturkmen & Elder (2004), should serve a more homogeneous population (e.g., a group of students, doctors, engineers or business managers), more often than not performance-based, in the sense that they involve test-takers in actively using the language to achieve particular communicative functions rather than simply displaying their linguistic knowledge. They tend also to be more narrowly focused with tasks designed to simulate the demands of particular real-world situations (ibid). Findings of the present study with regard to assessment criteria echo the study by Khan (2007) in the Needs Analysis context of Pakistan where he calls for examination reforms so that they measuring students' language skills rather than cause frustration for them.

Students were asked to self-evaluate their proficiency level in English against the WCS course they took in their first year; to identify at what extent the course met their literacy and learning needs. The results revealed that students strongly agreed on the necessity of the English course for success in their engineering studies and professional lives. These participants also

believed that the content of the vocational English course and its course material should reflect the content of the core courses in their engineering studies. The overall picture of participants' perceptions of the WCS course made the researcher sure of the course's value for the participants. In addition, there is a general tendency of the participants to believe that the course should reflect the content-courses from engineering. Further, students needed English for their studies and professional purposes. This aspect of the study findings at large shows similarity with the study in engineering context by (Hulst & Jensen, 2002), which found that type of study activities, instruction and examination characteristics all affected the progress of engineering students. This implies that institutes in higher education in engineering may improve their student's progress to some extent by means of efficient curriculum organisation (ibid).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Keeping in view the suggestion of Hutchison and Waters (1987) that it is important to consider professional/occupational needs of learners while designing a specific course, it is suggested that results of this study should be utilized for guiding inclusion of such material in the curricula which may help learners meet both their learning (academic, current) and target (occupational, future) needs.

Regarding the equal distribution of content of the WCS course on academic literacy and professional learning skills, the WCS course, which focuses predominantly on professional learning skills and is taught in the first-year of four-year undergraduate programme, could be divided into two separate course: one in the first year of the study based on academic literacy skills and the other on the professional learning needs of students in the final-year of students' engineering programme. Kaewpet (2009) in the context of Thai civil engineering is also of the view that it is crucial to add more professional English courses to engineering programmes and to conduct further research to predict learners' needs as specifically as possible. Those needs can then be more efficiently satisfied in the ESP courses (ibid).

A further implication relates to one aspect of the methodology used on the WCS course vis-à-vis assessment criteria (i.e. the way the exam is assessed – the marking guide, tasks used for assessment). Current assessment criteria at QUEST for assessing the language skills of the students do not resemble those used for ESP tests recommended in the ESP literature, and both students and their teachers expressed their concern over the current theoretical exam based on a three-hour paper. Therefore, changing the assessment criteria used on the WCS course keeping in view the suggested principles of ESP tests mentioned in the (section 2.1 in chapter II) of this study is necessary in order to bring the relevance and specificity needed for an ESP course.

The WCS course should also use the teaching materials, resources and instructional approaches according to the prescribed features for a standard ESP course in literature.

According to the general view on language teaching and learning, the content of a syllabus deals with the subject matter to be taught in a course. Markee (1984) defines ESP as an approach to organizing English language programmes in such a way that the content of the courses offered is relevant to the specific needs of specific groups of learners. In this sense, teaching materials have to portray the students' specific subject-matter and their needs. This will help them with defined eventualities in the future. The materials intended for a particular group of learners has to be demanding and challenging to sustain and maintain motivation and interest among the learners.

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