ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES:
A TOOL FOR ACCESS TO INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper reiterates the need to reassess the teaching of English for Academic Purposes and to re-examine the needs of students and EAP programmes. The needs of students are defined and further redefined into sub-skills. The study emphasises that the various EAP sub-skills required differ according to the specific academic programme being followed by a student. It is also important for language teachers to liaise closely with subject specialists and try to quantify each need according to the particular programme. This is followed by a discussion on the theme-based integrated skills course and a description of typical theme-based work conducted at the University of Leeds.

Although most existing approaches to the teaching of EAP are firmly based on needs analyses of students studying subjects at the tertiary level in the medium of English, it is nevertheless constantly necessary to re-examine such needs, changing and modifying our EAP programmes. In this way, we can make sure our EAP programmes are based on an understanding of the real specific needs of students - rather than on a loose concept of their imagined needs.

The following list of the general EAP needs of students following a postgraduate course of study in English serves to provide the basis for the development of more detailed and specific lists of needs:-

> Understanding lectures
> Taking notes
> Asking questions
> Using reference skills
> Reading efficiently
> Reading and producing graphs and charts,
> Communicating effectively in seminars/tutorials
> Seeking information
> Performing successfully in practical classes
> Writing lab reports
> Writing dissertations and theses
> Answering exam questions

Such a list now requires breaking down into sub-skills or enabling skills. The skills required for understanding lectures, for example, can be divided into:

> Identifying salient points in a lecture
> Distinguishing between what is important and what is not
> Making correct predictions and anticipating information
> Recognising verbal and non-verbal cues signaling mood and attitude
> Coping with speed of delivery, and
> Coping with different lecturing styles

Reading efficiency can be further described in terms of:-

> Using appropriate reading strategies
> Identifying reasons for reading
> Maintaining adequate reading speeds and levels of comprehension
> Deducing word meanings through their context
> Making inferences and drawing conclusions
> Appreciating the extent of the required reading

Obviously this is just one way of describing general study skills (and their enabling skills) for use at the tertiary level. It is certainly not the only way, and such skills can be interpreted in numerous ways.

At this point it is appropriate to emphasise that various EAP sub-skills required will differ greatly according to the specific academic programme being followed by a student. For example, a student following a course in business economics will require different language skills from a student studying the social sciences - and even from a student studying medicine. However, this wide variety of needs does not stop here: it is quite conceivable that a student following a course in business economics in one institution may well require different language skills (or a different emphasis on those skills) than a student studying the same subject in another institution. Thus, there is no such thing as a general EAP programme suitable for all students studying at the tertiary level. It is important to liaise closely with subject specialists and try to quantify each need according to the particular programme being followed. The booklet *Language, Culture and Study* (English Language Unit, Leeds, 1989) was produced primarily with the subject specialist in mind.

In his paper on "The Specification, Realisation and Validation of an English Language Proficiency Test," Cyril Weir of Reading University provides a very useful observation checklist (to be completed preferably by direct observation of the student's learning environment or by discussion with the student's tutor). The detailed information which such a checklist produces, provides an excellent illustration of its potential usefulness for planning an EAP programme for a particular academic course - but NOT for general purposes. The sample extracts from the checklist which I am providing relate to lectures and to reference study.

Weir then uses his checklist/questionnaire to draw up a summary of the various course activities. For example, his summary relating to listening comprehension activities lists the extent of each of the following difficulties:-

- Understanding teachers and other students when they talk very fast
- Understanding when accents or pronunciation are different from what one is used to
- Writing down quickly and clearly all the notes one wants to

- Understanding when more than one person is speaking as in group discussion
- Understanding informal language
- Thinking of and using suitable abbreviations
- Understanding spoken description or narrative
- Recognising individual words in what is being said
- Understanding when people speak quietly
- Recognising what is important and worth noting
- Understanding completely what the speaker is saying and linking this to what he has said earlier
- Understanding spoken instructions
- Organising the notes one takes down so that one can understand them when one reads them later
- Understanding the subject matter of the talk
- Recognising where sentences end and begin
- Making notes

Similarly, the extent of reading difficulties is shown in relation to the following comprehension activities:

- Reading texts where the subject matter is very complicated
- Critical reading to establish and evaluate the author's position on a particular topic
- Reading quickly to find out how useful it would be to study a particular text more intensively
- Search reading to get information specifically required for assignments
- Reading carefully to understand all the information in a text
- Duplicated notes
- Questions done in class for homework
- Laboratory worksheets
- Examination questions
- Textbooks, whole or part
- Making notes from textbooks
- Reading to get the main information from a text

The assembling of all the information relating to skills and difficulties provides only part of the answer, however. It helps to show clearly which skills should be given priority but unfortunately it throws little light on what type of materials are most useful. It also does little to overcome the problem of the different levels of attainment which may be experienced among students in one group. Moreover, some students may be poor oral communicators but be fairly competent at handling a written text, particularly related to their own subject area. Others may communicate effectively, albeit inaccurately, in oral discussions but be unable to process or produce a written text with any confidence. While traditionally organized study skills classes are usually designed for students at a similar level of ability and while they usually focus on separate study skills or areas, a more satisfactory format in many ways is the theme-based integrated skills course.

Theme-based instruction refers to a programme or course in which the syllabus is structured around themes or topics. For example, a short course might be organised around a certain topic (e.g. conservation or nuclear energy). A longer course lasting for a term or a semester might be organised around several unrelated topics (e.g. transport planning, heart disease, overpopulation, food production). Depending on their own levels, students may be involved in various aspects of language processing: e.g. sequencing, comparing and contrasting information, separating fact from opinion, drawing inferences, etc.

In theme-based courses, the language and skills are structured around a certain topic or theme - not the topic around the skills. For example, the topic might be presented initially in terms of information gathering involving skimming and scanning a selection of material for reading. The topic and vocabulary might then be recycled in guided group discussions (i.e. speaking practice) before students listen to a lecture or watch a video (i.e. listening comprehension). Finally, a writing task taking the form of reports might conclude the theme-based activities. Thus, all four major language skills - speaking, listening, reading and writing, together with note-taking, analytical and interpretive skills - can be practised. Note, however, that it is also possible for a theme-based course to concentrate chiefly on one specific skill (e.g. listening or reading).

In addition, the problem of different proficiency levels is mitigated by emphasising group work as the operating strategy for theme-based work. By dividing students deliberately into mixed ability groups, their varying language skills are pooled while their academic and linguistic abilities are shared in performing the various tasks.

The organisational principles inherent in the theme or topic all dictate a rich array of language skills, items and activities. Moreover, the work involved is task-based: students find themselves using language in a real way for a definite purpose. Their efforts are not geared to practising language forms and study skills for the sake of it but to accomplishing a particular task or series of tasks relevant to their needs.

In a theme-based course, the content itself is used to give meaning and form to the teaching of the different skills. This contrasts with a more traditional approach in which each skill is given the maximum focus. For example, a course on note-taking will use a variety of contexts solely for the purpose of practising the different stages of note-taking. In classes which teach writing, the various enabling skills provide the focus of attention: the contexts in which they are used are of secondary importance. As a result, there is still something artificial about such classes - even though students are being taught the actual study skills appropriate for their academic courses. Thus, many students tend to lose motivation and interest; even those students who remain highly motivated frequently experience difficulty in applying the skills they have acquired to real-life study situations.

In cases with homogeneous groups of students (e.g. first-year medical students or final-year students of English Literature), such theme-based work can be closely related to the students' own field of study. Where this is possible, it can be especially useful and an interesting account of such work is given by Anne Collins in a paper on "Integrating Groupwork with Medics Materials," in which one theme is the treatment of patients with kidney failure. In certain other cases, however, the lack of homogeneity in student groups will prevent the choice of a theme which is directly related to a particular academic discipline. The theme chosen will often be sufficiently general to appeal to students of all disciplines but not so anodyne as to present little intellectual challenge.

Finally, however, it may be necessary to select a topic according to the materials and resources available for a particular level and set of interests. Selecting usable topics is consequently crucial to the success on theme-based courses.

Perhaps it is appropriate at this point to describe briefly typical theme-based work carried out at the University of Leeds. The example I shall cite is one or the earliest of our short intensive courses of this nature. The theme chosen revolved around the question of nuclear power. "Is nuclear power a viable source of energy?" - a topic of interest and importance to all countries.

INTEGRATED SKILLS PROGRAMME

Topic: Is Nuclear Power A Viable Energy Source?

Day One

9.30 - 9.50	I	Introduction (Programme and Overview)
9.50 - 12.30	II	Information Gathering (Groups A, B, C, D)
1.30 - 3.00	III	Exchange of Information between groups (30 minutes each group)

Day Two

9.30 - 10.30	IV	Lecture on Nuclear Energy, followed by questions (Physics Department)
11.00 - 12.30	V	Taped Lectures: For and Against (Groups A and B: 'For') (Groups C and D: 'Against')
1.30 - 3.00	VI	Group Preparation: (a) Written Report (later typed and returned to students on Day Three) (b) Discussion Contributions

Day Three

9.30 -10.45	VII	Panel Discussion: For and Against (Groups A and C videotaped) (Groups C and D as voting audience) Panel Discussion: For and Against (Groups C and D videotaped) (Groups A and B as voting audience)
11.00 - 12.30	VIII	Playback and Analysis of Video Questionnaire distributed
1.30 - 4.30	IX	Film: 'The China Syndrome'

The programme for this 3-day course will indicate the different stages and activities which took place.

During the introductory session, an overview of the programme was given with a brief outline of the controversial issues surrounding the nuclear energy debate. This stage allowed time for lists of four mixed ability groups of between 6 and 8 members to be drawn up.

The second stage, the information gathering stage, was critical in two ways: first in terms of the students' reaction to the materials, which were for many linguistically demanding and unfamiliar in context. This source material was selected largely from the Longman resource pack on Energy (1978), consisting of newspaper articles, extracts from government reports, but was supplemented by more recent papers and newspaper articles. These materials were colour-coded into four main topic areas, each with accompanying question sheets. The second critical factor was in terms of the students' unfamiliarity with the actual methodology, for few of them were accustomed to working in mixed language ability groups or indeed co-operating in language activities.

Study skills such as reading strategies, note-taking and discussion strategies which were being deployed in this information gathering stage had already been rehearsed in isolation in previous course work, and the amount of interaction taking place during this session was encouraging.

The third stage involved making sure that each group became familiar with the key information extracted by the other groups. This activity was very much a jig-saw operation, with the available information gradually being pieced together through oral exchange.

The morning of the second day of the course focused on the listening skills and began with a lecture on the nuclear energy question. The written texts which students had processed the day before had sufficiently armed them with the arguments and the vocabulary necessary to follow the lecture without too much difficulty.

The fourth stage was a further listening exercise. The groups had now been divided in such a way that two groups were in support of nuclear power and two groups opposed its use. Each group with their own cassette recorder and appropriate tape listened to a summary of the arguments either for or against and took notes. The groups were able to control the pace and interact with the recording by replaying the tape as often as was required. This proved very popular with the students as the recordings were unscripted and delivered at a fairly slow pace, consolidating previous information and providing additional arguments to support each side of the debate.

The afternoon session was a writing activity involving each group in organising all the gathered information into an exposition of the case for or against nuclear power. Different strategies were observed: sometimes one member acted as the scribe while other members of the group dictated their points to him or her. In another group, a sheet of paper was passed round, on which members wrote down their points individually.

The last activity of the afternoon was to prepare for the videotaped panel discussion the following morning with main speakers and arguments allocated among each group and two neutral chairpersons selected to orchestrate the two discussions.

The two videotaped panel discussions on Day Three tended to be slow and self-conscious at first, warming up into a genuine discussion as the time limit was reached.

The feedback session, in spite of fears that the repetition would prove boring, was useful in monitoring the more blatant errors, students being required to correct themselves - and obviously valuing the opportunity. The students were also clearly interested in comparing the performance of the other group as well as seeing their own contribution to the discussion.

The final stage was the showing of the American film *The China Syndrome*. Because of the many outs between scenes and the fast pace of this complex film, it was necessary to give the students an overview of the main themes and characters at the beginning and to stop the video midway to check understanding. Nevertheless, the film served as a dramatic, if not an unbiased, climax to an intensive three days.

In order to obtain feedback in the form of the students' evaluation of the course, a questionnaire was given out and later analysed.

The comments and ratings for each component closely corresponded with the tutors' observations. For example, when commenting on the 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th stages, some students complained of a

lack of time. Certainly, the writing task (6th stage) lacked the opportunity for feedback, where the typed-up unedited version could be examined in a group correction session. It was strongly felt that such a session should be built into any subsequent programme.

Comments about the working strategies were sometimes conflicting. To Question 4: *Do you think this method of working provided you with a valuable opportunity to practise your English?*, 20 of the replies were positive, and 3 were unsure. Comments on Question 5: *Do you think you were able to learn from your fellow students?* suggested a much larger degree of uncertainty, with 16 positive replies and 8 unsure. More specifically, the information gathering and exchange stages, together with the writing activity, produced some comments among a few of the students about a lack of organisation - although one student admitted: 'Can't cooperate with other students'.

This criticism raised the question concerning the extent to which the tutor/facilitator should actually intercede and direct the students' strategies. Should a group leader be chosen by the facilitator to coordinate activities or should each group be left to work within its own group dynamics? The temptation to intervene can be very powerful. To the 6th question: *Did you enjoy the course?*, a gratifying 20 replied positively with 4 remaining uncertain. However, to the final question: Would you be interested in attending a similar course next term on the subject of Food?, the 9 who ticked the 'Not sure' box were enough to make one consider ways of improving this approach. Although it may have been the choice of topic which caused the hesitation, it must still be remembered that learners of a language have different learning styles. Integrated theme-based activities cannot fulfill all the students' expectations of both their view of the teacher's role and what a course should provide. Certain students feel uneasy at first in a learning environment which is very different from their previous language learning experience. This unease is also compounded by what they feel are bad models of English around them. 'Where is the teacher control?' 'Where is the grammar input?' How can I learn from someone whose English is weaker than mine and whose accent I cannot understand?' were some of their queries. However naive and ill-based such questions, we must remember that learning must not only take place: it must also be seen to take place by the students themselves.

In several subsequent theme-based courses, grammatical input has now been provided and there has been an attempt at tighter structuring in terms of functions and specific study strategies. In each case the focus on instruction is determined not only by students' needs (with regard to study strategies and language areas) but also by the nature of the theme itself and the content matter. This is important even for short, intensive theme-based courses. A carefully-planned syllabus taking into account specific study strategies being taught, functions, and grammatical area is crucial for longer theme-based courses incorporating perhaps several unrelated themes. Such a syllabus would ensure that the study strategies, enabling skills, functions and grammatical points selected for practice are recycled - thus resulting in a more useful, spiral syllabus instead of the traditional linear syllabus, which assumes that students master each stage as they progress but provides little opportunity for regular practice beyond the normal revision units.

The following information might provide a starting-point for the syllabus of a theme-based course.

THEME 1	NUCLEAR ENERGY
Text types	Scientific articles, lecture, group discussion (and video), oral presentation, written report
Activities intensive	Search-reading, skimming, reading, listening to a lecture,

	note-taking, reconstituting notes discussing, giving short oral presentations, writing reports (individual and group writing)
Functions/Notions	Defining, classifying, showing cause and effect, giving reasons, agreeing and disagreeing, persuading
Grammar participle,	Uncountable nouns, adverb clauses of reason and result, by + relative clauses

THEME 2	POPULATION GROWTH
Text types	Graphs and tables, newspaper articles, letters, TV programme, radio talk, group discussion, oral presentation, written report
Activities	Interpreting graphs, etc., skimming, intensive reading, listening to TV programme and radio talk, note-taking, discussing, giving short oral presentations, writing reports (individual writing)
Functions/Notions	Comparing, predicting, drawing inferences, showing cause and effect, giving reasons, making recommendations
Grammar	Degrees of comparison, quantifiers, numerical expressions, adverb clauses of reason, future tense

To sum up, the following are some of the advantages of integrated theme-based courses over more traditional study skills courses in which each skill is taught separately and the content is dictated almost solely by the skills and areas of grammar being taught. First, theme-based courses have the potential to tie together different skill areas by means of a contextual theme. Secondly, they offer a large degree of flexibility and can provide for different proficiency levels. Thirdly, theme-based courses are interesting, providing a variety of activities. Moreover, such courses are learner centred, which means that students can actually control the speed at which they learn. Next, the large amount of group work involved results in spontaneous conversation and, above all, the language of people talking to learn - not the repetition of drills, however much disguised, or the meaningless practice of forms of language. Finally, such theme-based work is essentially task-based, enabling students to put to real use the study skills they are practising - giving students a real purpose and showing a direct application of the skills being acquired.

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