A Preliminary Analysis of the EAW Programme: Looking from the Teachers' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore the lecturers' perception of the English for Academic Writing programme by taking into account the aspects of course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration. English for academic writing is not only a prerequisite for graduation requirement but it also helps to prepare the students in completing every assignment and task within their study period. While an academic review is important for every course offered at the higher institutions, opinions and voice from all stakeholders including the instructors must be considered. The need to evaluate the curriculum is necessary to determine the effectiveness of the syllabus and its content. This quantitative study explored the opinions' of teachers who were responsible in delivering the syllabus for the undergraduates at an international university where English is the main medium of instruction. Questionnaires were distributed to 41 instructors at the university's main campus. Their responses were crucial indicators to elicit information on the effectiveness of the course conducted. Although teachers might evince interest in teaching, some may not be experts in academic writing based on their own academic qualification and their

tenure as lecturers. The results showed that the lecturers were positive in terms of course outline, materials and readiness. However, the lecturers' general perception for course duration was considered as moderate and there is no significant difference of perception across different personal background. The analysis and discussions from the study provided a platform for curriculum designers to polish and further improve the English for academic writing course.

Keywords*: English for academic writing, course evaluation, teacher perception, curriculum review*

INTRODUCTION

While universities constantly and continuously revise their English language course to embrace the current and relevant needs of their students, it is also imperative not to overlook the needs and the preparedness of the instructors and the teachers. Eraut, Goad and Smith (1975) originally referred curriculum evaluation as 'the collection and provision of evidence on the basis of which decision can be taken about the feasibility, effectiveness and educational value of the curricula' p. 11. Thus, the crucial factor in ensuring the success of any language programmes do not lie solely on the course content and outline but equally important are the readiness and the effectiveness of the teachers in delivering the lessons. When a new English for academic writing programme is introduced, feedback from all quarters including teachers and students are vital for the improvements of the curriculum and teaching pedagogy. Continuous improvement to any language course has to be carried out to ensure the quality of the English programme as it is vital in achieving the course objectives for the students.

Long (2005) cautioned that language teaching programmes should not be designed without a systematic needs analysis. Needs analysis has been regarded as the most appropriate method as it 'can tell us a lot about the nature and content of the learners' target language needs' (Hutchinson, 1988, p. 71). The demand for academic writing courses is increasing globally due to the fact that such courses are necessary not only for educational purposes in countries where English is the mother tongue, but also in countries where English is spoken widely as a second language or even as the medium of

instruction in universities (Eslami, 2010). There has always been an issue that English for academic purposes programmes have been developed without conducting a systematic needs analysis both from the students' and instructors' perspectives (Eslami, 2010). Hoseini and Shahriari (2010) reminded that needs analysis are considered to have diverse categories and are not observed as a unitary term anymore. Components of a language course are determined by a needs analysis that plays a pragmatic role in leading the language classes (Momtazur, 2012). Through needs analysis procedure, information about learners' needs is collected (Richards, 2001). The importance of a need analysis is stressed through ESP and EAP, as well as general language courses, task-based curricula, and performance assessment (Afzali & Fakharzadeh, 2009).

The findings from this study will be beneficial for practitioners who are deeply concerned with preparing English for academic writing courses because needs analysis is a very fundamental first step prior to designing and developing a language course, producing materials for teaching and learning, and developing language tests (Gholami, Noordin & Mustapha, 2013). English for academic writing, henceforth referred to as EAW, can be considered as an approach to language learning that is based on the learners' needs; related in content to a particular discipline, occupation or activities; centred on language appropriate to these activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics and involves an analysis of the discourse (Hutchison & Waters, 1987; Strevens, 1988). The learning skills that are taught may be restricted, for example, only to writing. EAW has often been touted as the most significant development in the field of English language teaching. Thus, any issues pertaining to EAW including programme evaluation cannot be dismissed without being given any proper attention.

Evaluation of any language courses can be approached from the learners' perspective, from the teacher's perspective and from the perspective of the outside language-teaching experts (Lynch, 1996; Richard, 2001). The scope of coverage also varies from one research to another. Coverage of evaluation studies can include curriculum design, the syllabus and programme content, classroom processes, instructional materials, the teachers, the students, monitoring of pupil progress, learner motivation, the institution, learning environment, staff development and decision making (Sanders, 1992). Genesse (2001) reported that evaluation can be categorised

into three types; formative, developmental or summative. Depending on the objectives of the evaluation, useful information can be gathered about the classroom and more effective teaching pedagogy can be proposed as a result of strategically well executed and conducted evaluation (Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1992).

Evaluation is a systematic attempt to gather information in order to make judgements or decisions. Programme and /or course evaluation is a process in which different types of data are collected systematically in order to study the virtues and weaknesses of a language instruction programme (Zahrobi, 2012). Although course evaluation can be seen as a positive step in trying to improve and revise the present curriculum, there are others who are hesitant about taking the first step. Fear of negative results, concerns about the potential impact the course has on their students and the adverse remarks received are just a few excuses for not wanting to have the course evaluation done. If treated with professionalism and carried out with noble intentions, course evaluation can bring nothing else but success to the whole course in general. And it goes without saying that the benefits are aplenty for both teachers and students alike. Van de Poel and Gasierok (2006) emphasized that in the process of designing a new curriculum, decisions have to be made by taking into account information from different sources. Al-Jardani (2012) wrote in his article on Oman's curriculum review, internal and external sources are necessary in renewing and revising language courses. However, when the programme has been designed, the development process is not over as the outcome must be assessed, evaluated, revised and update into a course update. These views are parallel with Brown's study when he concludes that 'the heart of systematic approach to language curriculum designs is the evaluation: the part of the model that includes, connects, and gives meaning to all the other elements' (1995, p. 217). Laverie (2002) proposed the idea of differentiating formative and summative evaluations to improve teaching. According to her, the differentiation is critical and the two come together in a comprehensive approach to improving teaching. An example of a formative evaluation is one conducted at mid-semester, when it is still possible to improve, and in contrast the more badly focused summative evaluation happens at the end of or even after the course is completed (Laverie, 2002). Fisher and Miller (2008) also support the idea that findings from formative and summative evaluations should feed into subsequent offerings of the same course.

Struyven, Doccy and Stressen (2005) suggested that educators have an opportunity to provide an important influence on student approaches to learning when their voices are taken into account in programme evaluation. In terms of evaluation where textbooks are concerned, Kayapinar (2009) discovered that teachers strongly feel that textbooks should only be useful in a creative and flexible manner and that they should not be dominating the teaching and learning process. As mentioned by Dunkin (1995) in his article on higher education 'the depth and breadth of the teachers' cognitive repertoire empowers teachers to make good decisions and judgements at the planning, implementation, evaluation, and follow-up stages of the teaching-learning process'. As mentioned by Ajelayemi (2012), the teacher factor has always been identified as one of the most crucial factors in any English language programmes. In other words, teachers' voices are as equally important as other aspects of a programme evaluation and any available information regarding teachers' perception should not be treated with any less respect.

In the Malaysian context, several researchers have voiced their concern over programme evaluation. Stapa and Mohd Jais (2002) revealed in their article, the English courses should be evaluated from time to time in order to improve the language proficiency that is needed for the industry. Sarudin, Zubairi and Ali (2009) emphasized the need to evaluate language courses at tertiary level in Malaysia to meet the current demands of the job market. Further steps that can be taken will be detecting and evaluating the effectiveness or the results from the intended course. In conclusion, evaluation for any language programme is an essential element in ensuring the quality and success of the course. The Malaysian Ministry of Education views evaluation and the effectiveness of a training programme or a course as an effort which aimed to assess the achievement and the objectives of the programme.

The point of departure for the current study is that it proposes an early formative evaluation of the EAW course. This is simply because the study was undertaken in the middle of the semester where the teachers already had an idea of what the course is all about and yet have not quite reached the concluding stage of the course.

In this present study, the former English for academic purposes (EAP) programme was experiencing a transitional stage of emerging as the new English for academic writing programme. However, little is known about the lecturers' view of the new curriculum. Amongst other issues, there were reservations about how equipped the lecturers' are in teaching the course. As highlighted by Alexander (2012), the teaching of EAP alone requires the lecturers' abilities, experience and teaching skills and these attributes should not to be overlooked. The Critical EAP theory as advocated by Benesch (2001) strongly questions the tenet of EAP analysis when EAP educators are simply consenting to changes in developing EAP courses to suit the learners' discipline content. Carkin (2005) concurs by questioning the unequal power relationship between educators and the practicality of the pedagogical activities conducted as outlined in the curriculum. Hence, the critical EAP theory supports the idea of teachers becoming more augmented and proactive in changes that are taking place in the curriculum. The insufficient empirical studies concerning the teachers who are also non-native speakers have exerted numerous questions on the instructors' knowledge and skills. Several existing studies are disposed towards learners' feelings and perceptions (Atef & Munif, 2009; Indera Devi & Teh Zahariah, 2010), but little is known from the educators' point of view. Very often, courses are designed without taking into account the teachers' opinion on the programme, besides neglecting their readiness to teach. Apart from that, there were questions about the allocation of time for the whole course. Matters pertaining to teaching materials were also apparent. Hence, these concerns are some of the challenges that must be addressed by the policy makers at the higher learning institutions.

The interest of this research stems from the need to find out what the teachers feel about the teaching practices involved in English for academic writing. The survey intended to explore the lecturers' perception of the EAW course. This was done by taking into account the aspects of the course outline, the instructors' readiness, the course materials as well as the course duration. This study sought to find out the answers to the following questions: (i) what are the lecturers' general perceptions of the English for academic writing in terms of the course outlines, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration? (ii) are there any significant differences among the lecturers from different academic qualification in relation to their perceptions of the course outline, instructors' readiness,

course materials and course duration? and (iii) are there any significant differences among lecturers with different number of years in teaching experience in relation to their perceptions of the course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration?

METHOD

This study is an attempt to obtain feedback from the instructors on the newly-introduced EAW for its effectiveness. It was conducted within a framework of a bigger study that is focusing on the effectiveness of the newly introduced course, English for academic writing. This research employs a survey research design and it is primarily quantitative in nature. A set of questionnaire was constructed and later distributed to all EAW instructors. Survey method is chosen as it was the best technique in identifying their perception towards the EAW in their classes.

The data used for this study of professional development were collected from 41 EAW lecturers. The instructors were all lecturers at the English Language Division, Centre for Languages who were directly teaching the students for the EAW programme. All the instructors were requested to complete the questionnaire via on-line.

An online survey questionnaire was utilised for the purpose of this study. Dillman and Bowker (2000) emphasized the quality of questionnaire design as important for self-administered instruments. The questionnaire comprised of 20 items which were subdivided into four different sections; course outline, instructors readiness, course materials, course duration.

The questionnaire also collected the necessary demographic information of each instructor such as age, gender, academic qualification and number of years in their teaching experience. Ultimately, these findings will be useful to substantiate the quantitative findings.

Table 1 : Demographic Information of the Respondents

Category	n	%
Gender		
Male	7	17.1
Female	34	82.9
Qualification		
Postgraduate	31	75.6
Undergraduate	10	24.4
Teaching experience		
Less than five years	9	22
Six to ten years	9	22
11-15 years	9	22
More than 15 years	14	34

Firstly, the composite score was used to analyse the lecturers' general perception toward the course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration. The mean scores for the lecturers' perception were categorised as either 'high' (3.33-5.0), 'moderate' (1.67-3.33), or 'low' (1.0-1.67). Next, the independent t-test was employed to analyse if there are any significant statistical differences between lecturers from different academic background in relation to their perception towards the four themes. The final set of computation involved the use of one-way between groups ANOVA with post-hoc comparisons to answer Research Question 3; analysing the differences (if any) between lecturers from different number of teaching experiences with regards to course outline, instructors readiness, course materials and course duration. Subjects were divided into four groups according to their number of years in teaching experience (Group 1 : 0-5

years, Group 2 : 6-10 years, Group 3 : 11-15 years, Group 4 : More than 15 years).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings for this study are presented based on the three research questions. The first research question is (i) what are the lecturers' general perceptions of the English for academic writing in terms of the course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration?

The general perceptions of the English for academic writing among the 41 lecturers can be considered as highly positive in terms of the elements of course outline (M = 4.18), instructors' readiness (M = 3.72) and course materials (M = 3.78). But, the lecturers' general perceptions for course duration consiwdered as moderately positive (M = 3.04). For the purpose of measuring the level of general perceptions among lecturers, the researcher used the interpretation to classify the level of high (M = 3.67 – 5.00), moderate (M = 2.34 – 3.66) and low (M = 1.00 – 2.33) based on the study by Kamarulzaman Kamaruddin *et al.* (2016).

Table 2: General Perceptions among Lecturers towards English for Academic Writing

Aspects	Mean	Category
Course outline	4.18	High - positive
Instructors' readiness	3.78	High - positive
Course materials	3.72	High- positive
Course duration	3.05	Moderate - positive

What can be concluded from the table above is that the lecturers are generally positive towards the whole EAW programme. Everyone appears to have a clear idea of what the course is all about. This includes having the understanding of how the course is different from other courses, what needs to be achieved at the end of the semester and more importantly, lecturers

are fully aware of how the new EAW is more specific and more relevant to the students as compared to the former course English for academic purposes (EAP).

The next research question focuses on the different academic background of the teachers. The second research question is (ii) is there any significant differences among the lecturers with different academic background towards in relation to their perceptions on the following aspects of course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration for the English on academic writing?

An independent-sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the perceptions of the lecturers with postgraduate and undergraduate academic background on the following aspects of course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration for the English on academic writing.

Table 3: Comparisons of the Lecturers' Perceptions Based on Academic Background for Course Outline

Aspects	Academic qualifications	N	M	SD
Course outline	Postgraduate	31	4.23	0.63
	Undergraduate	10	4.02	0.24
	Total	41		

Table 4: Comparisons of the Lecturers' Perceptions Based on Academic Background for Instructor Readiness

Aspects	Academic qualifications	N	M	SD
Instructor readiness	Postgraduate	31	3.88	0.62
	Undergraduate	10	3.44	0.99
	Total	41		

Table 5: Comparisons of the Lecturers' Perceptions Based on Academic Background for Course Materials

Aspects	Academic qualifications	N	M	SD
Course materials	Postgraduate	31	3.66	0.56
	Undergraduate	10	3.90	0.68
	Total	41		

Table 6: Comparisons of the Lecturers' Perceptions Based on Academic Background for Course Duration

Aspects	Academic qualifications	N	M	SD
Course duration	Postgraduate	31	3.00	0.71
	Undergraduate	10	3.18	1.12
	Total	41		

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variance		t – Test for Equality of Means			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2 – tailed)	Mean Difference
Course outline	0.11	0.75	0.86	39	0.39	0.21
Instructor readiness	7.84	0.01	1.33	11.34	0.21	0.44
Course materials	0.41	0.53	-1.10	39	0.28	-0.24
Course duration	5.48	0.02	-0.46	11.4	0.65	-0.17

There was no significant difference in the scores for the lecturers perceptions towards course outline between postgraduate of academic background (M=4.23, SD=0.63) and undergraduate of academic background (M=4.02, SD=0.24) conditions; t (39) = 0.86, p = 0.39.

There was no significant difference in the scores for the lecturers perceptions towards instructor readiness between postgraduate academic background (M=3.88, SD=0.62) and undergraduate academic background (M=3.44, SD=0.99) conditions; t (11.34) = 1.33, p = 0.21.

For course materials, there was no significant difference in the scores for the lecturers perceptions between postgraduate academic background (M=3.66, SD=0.56) and undergraduate academic background (M=3.90, SD=0.68) conditions; t (39) = -1.10, p = 0.28.

The results also mentioned that there was no significant difference in the scores for the lecturers perceptions towards course duration between postgraduate academic background (M=3.01, SD=0.71) and undergraduate academic background (M=3.18, SD=1.12) conditions; t (11.4) = -0.46, p = 0.65

Generally, these results suggest that there are no significant differences among the lecturers to their perceptions on the following aspects of course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration for the English for academic writing from the different kind of their academic background (postgraduate and undergraduate).

The last research question focuses on their perceptions towards EAW with regards to the different numbers of years in teaching experience. The third research question is (iii) is there any significant difference among the lecturers with different number of years in teaching experience towards their perceptions on the following aspects of course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration the English on academic writing?

A one way ANOVA was conducted to compare the lecturers' perception by teaching experiences which were categorised into four conditions (less than five years, six to ten years, 11 to 15 years and more than 15 years) towards the following aspects of course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration the English on academic writing.

Table 7: Comparisons of the Lecturers' Perceptions Based on Teaching Experiences for Course Outline, Instructors' Readiness, Course Materials and Course Duration

Aspects		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Course outline	Between groups	0.116	3	0.04	0.08	0.97
	Within groups	17.18	37	0.46		
	Total	17.30	40			
Instructors' readiness	Between groups	3.932	3	1.31	2.68	0.06
	Within groups	18.08	37	0.49		
	Total	22.02	40			
Course materials	Between groups	0.39	3	0.13	0.36	0.79
	Within groups	13.68	37	0.37		
	Total	14.07	40			
Course duration	Between groups	3.18	3	1.06	1.68	0.19

The results show that it has no significant difference at the $p<.05$ for course outline level for the four conditions [F (3, 37) = 0.083, p = 0.969], for instructor readiness [F (3, 37) = 2.682, p = 0.061], course materials [F (3, 37) = 0.355, p = 0.786] and course durations [F (3, 37) = 0.355, p = 0.786]. Specifically, the results emphasize that there is no significant difference of the lecturers' perception by teaching experiences for all the aspects of course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration for the English on academic writing.

CONCLUSION

The overall results of the study indicated that lecturers teaching the EAW have a positive perception towards the course although there was some scepticism on the length of time given to complete the course. They have shown positive attitudes towards the course outline, course materials and

their readiness to teach. Looking at the overwhelming materials provided by the course designers, first time lecturers may feel that the 14-week semester may not allocate enough time for them to teach. This can be overcome if the lecturers are experienced enough to select the materials according to the needs of their students. An experienced teacher is one who is capable of sorting and selecting only the suitable materials for his or her class. A clear understanding of the overall objective of the EAW course also helps in guiding the teachers in their lesson delivery though many have expressed concern over the inadequacy of the training. Ongoing in-house trainings would be a good solution to the grievances expressed by the teachers. In the face of such challenges, it is paramount that teachers are given the right support and assistance towards the success of the second language learning.

In terms of their qualification, it appears that possessing a master degree or a PhD did not reflect any statistically significant differences in their opinion of the course outline, instructors' readiness, course materials and course duration. Despite the fact that the EAW course is very much research-based in nature, the lecturers with only first degree or undergraduate qualification did not show any differences in their perception towards the course as compared to their colleagues who have postgraduate qualification. They appear to be as ready, as positive and as clear as the lecturers who are higher in terms of qualification.

Although the lecturers have different number of teaching years in experiences, the survey has proven that this is not a significant factor in determining their readiness to teach, their perception towards the course materials, course outline and course duration. The survey has grouped them according to four groups; less than five years, between six and ten years, between 11 and 15 years and also those with more than 15 years of teaching experience. The grouping did not reflect any differences in their opinions towards the EAW programme. They all showed no significant dissimilarity in their view of the course. Whether they are in highly experienced or they have less than five years in the teaching career, the data did not show any distinction between them. We can safely say that any young lecturers who joined the teaching line can teach the course as they are no different from the senior lecturers although the latter is superior in terms of number of years in teaching career.

This study has served as an initial analysis for the newly introduced EAW course in IIUM. The data analysed in this study may indicate to the policy makers and curriculum designers that there is still a lot of work to be done in order to improve the course. Another set of survey can be carried out to analyse the lecturers' perceptions of other aspects of the course such as assessment or teachers overall satisfaction. The present study had only limited the qualitative data collection based on the feedback received via the 'other comments' provided in the survey, hence, a more vigorous and in-depth study can also be done qualitatively, taking into account the teachers' point of view. A survey on the students' perception may also well be the next study that should be undertaken to complement the existing data. Studies of the same manner are highly important if the language programmes are to be effective for both the students and teachers.

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