

University of Salford
Teaching and Learning Quality Improvement Scheme

Project title

Innovation in the Assessment of English for Academic Purposes

Siân Etherington
School of Languages

Final report

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This report includes:

- introduction (background)
- rationale
- course/programme details
- original aims, objectives, outcomes and benefits
- description of project
- evaluation
- developments
- transferability
- less successful elements of the project
- reflection and conclusion

Introduction and background

This project focuses on the development of testing procedures for academic writing and reading within Salford's pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes programme (the Summer English Study Programme or SESP).

Rationale

There has long been a strongly perceived need within the EAP field for further research and development of testing instruments and procedures (Clapham and Wall 1990; Blue *et al* 2000; Alderson 2000). Alderson (2000) argues that, in particular, there is a widespread lack of adequately researched or validated achievement tests within academic English courses.

Within the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) section of the School of Languages there is a similar need to further develop the testing instruments which we currently employ. A present lack of harmonisation of testing on non-credit-bearing University courses across the section means that test results are often difficult to compare and evaluate with great confidence. A revised test would enhance the learning experience of students, allowing them to judge progress more clearly. Academic subject programme leaders would also see benefits in increased understanding of the EAP abilities of their students. As the numbers of international students in the university increase, these matters are of rising importance. Thus, this project, in the first instance, proposed to produce a revised test for use within the Summer English Study Programme (SESP), the university's pre-sessional EAP programme

The project focused on the assessment of Writing within SESP. This represented a change from the initial bid, which had proposed to consider the testing of both Writing and Reading. The narrowing of focus was decided upon due to considerations of time available for the project and Writing was chosen because of its central role for Academic English performance. Writing is the key skill for Academic English, where lack of proficiency can lead to serious student demotivation, lack of progress in academic studies and, in the worst cases, withdrawal from programmes. Therefore, it is the language skill where the benefits to teaching and learning which will ensue from this project are of greatest importance.

Furthermore, within the Academic Writing assessment field, there is a concern to increase the authenticity of testing instruments to reflect more closely the sorts of writing tasks students are expected to perform in their academic subject departments (Cushing Weigle 2002: 172ff.). In particular, it is suggested that attention needs to be paid to authentic preparation for academic writing tasks through, for example, greater emphasis on the processes of writing and the intertextual nature of academic writing (e.g. Cho 2003). The project aimed to address these issues within the context of pre-sessional academic English work. It was expected that a change in testing procedures would have a washback effect on teaching throughout the programme.

Original Project Objectives:

The project objectives were to:

- Collate information about the writing needs of international students across a range of academic departments
- Develop, validate and implement an effective assessment procedure for Writing within pre-sessional EAP programme (SESP).
- Evaluate the new procedures and amend practice in light of information gained.

- Create a model for test development which could be used within non-credit-bearing or non-standard programmes within the School of Languages
- Disseminate outcomes and experience further within the EAP/EFL teaching and research community.

Description of Project:

The project stages were:

1. Review of academic writing needs of the current international student cohort

This stage involved interviews with staff in academic departments in order to gather information on their writing needs.

An exploration of SESP student registrations indicated that the most likely destinations for students were programmes in ISI, AEMS, and the School of Management. A large number of students were also aiming to join the International Foundation Year (IFY). Data collection targeted academics in these schools and programmes.

The final data set comprised semi-structured interviews with staff in ISI, Art and Design, AEMS, IFY and DME (Diploma in Management and English) programmes. Copies of marking criteria for written work from each school were provided by interviewees. Additionally, examples of student text types from one school (ISI) were collected.

The interview questions focused on the type of written work which students were expected to undertake, the value placed on various aspects of language in the marking of assignments, the particular writing difficulties of students, and the support which the Summer English Study Programme could provide. Interviews typically lasted an hour and were recorded. The recordings were then transcribed and content -analysed.

Findings suggested that for staff the most important aspect of student writing was at the macro-level; the development of logical argument and the clarity of writing was highly valued. Many of the staff saw these issues as aligned to thinking or understanding of the subject, rather than as writing skills. E.g. *I would say that those that we've marked as important are to do with the actual content of the – of what trying – what we want them to do rather than how they are saying it'*. Given work on contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Kaplan 1966) which explores cultural differences in the presentation of argument, this point of view indicates a possible area of staff development, in addition to one where explicit work with students is important.

Micro-level issues such as grammatical and lexical accuracy were also important for tutors, particularly when problems here made access to content difficult. Tutors admitted to being 'fussy' about grammar and spelling and specifically used marks schemes to allow for reduction in marks for inadequacies in these areas. More than one interviewee reported that they would not award a first class mark to students with poor grammar. However, there was variation in the weighting attached to grammatical problems; one tutor suggested that students should find out who their marker was and how accurate they needed to be.

Avoidance of plagiarism through the correct use of sources was another important concern for staff. However, it was clear that this was not only an issue for international students. Staff recognised that there was a certain 'vagueness' about the term; it covers many different cases and different levels of intent. Students' lack of understanding of

appropriate use of sources was often a cause. One tutor expressed the wish to help students see that '*engaging with the literature was a sort of learning journey that they have to come on rather than it being a cliff, cliff of plagiarism*'.

Less important elements of writing for staff appear to be grammatical and lexical variety and the use of academic style, particularly at lower levels of study. Tutors felt that these were aspects of writing which could be developed throughout the students' time in the university. More regularisation of marking is taking place across schools with the implementation of marking criteria for all written work and staff feel that these help to provide students with clearer feedback on their writing. However, one of the main issues remains that students do not get enough practice in writing in English.

2. Development of Test Construct:

Following data collection and analysis, the next stage was the development of the test construct using the data gained from interviews as a base. Issues concerning the test purpose, characteristics of the test takers, the real-world needs of the test takers, the resources available and test usefulness criteria were taken into account at this stage.

Additionally, models of writing and communication were considered; the most influential of these was the Process model which sees writing as an iterative process and includes notions of purpose and audience, and intertextuality. A view of writing as knowledge transformation and creation (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987) rather than reproduction was also an important part of the construct.

Using these starting points, portfolio and workshop approaches to testing were considered, but eventually rejected due to resource and time constraints. Instead a test which focused on the appropriate use of sources in the construction of an argument was proposed and to this end, a combined Reading and Writing test was produced. This combination brings increased authenticity to the test since students are asked to use and reference suitable aspects of the source texts as they do in other academic writing (Cushing Weigle 2004; Grabe 2003). It was felt that this test would provide an authentic examination of writing skills within an academic environment.

3. Operationalisation and Administration stages:

These two stages did not proceed as envisaged in the initial action plan for the project. Since the nature of a test of writing is different in nature to that of other types of exam, it was felt inappropriate to develop a bank of items for use. However, a similar type of exam to be taken by all students was developed for use in the second block of the Summer programme and rating scales were also trialled at this stage. Consideration of the administration of this exam, the marking process and the range of final marks informed the further development of the end of programme test.

Rater training in use of the criteria-based scales was carried out using a pack developed by the project co-ordinator. The training was based on the recommendations in Cushing Weigle 2002. Raters first discussed a set of student texts in relation to the new marking criteria, then marked and compared marks for a second set of student scripts. This process allowed markers to see how the criteria should work and to adjust their marking to a common level.

The final version of the test was administered in the penultimate week of the Summer English Study Programme. Reports from test takers and teaching staff involved with the

test have been favourable. It seems that students found the results of the test easier to interpret than in previous years, enabling them to see their achievement in relation to others in the programme. Teachers felt that the use of one test across groups and standardised marking provided more reliable results than previous testing procedures.

4. Post SESP: tracking of students:

The second phase of the project continued into Semester 1 2004-05 through the tracking of Summer English Study Programme students into study in their academic departments. This further stage was conceived in order to fulfil two purposes: to evaluate the accuracy of the test result as an indication of the students' ability to cope with authentic academic writing demands, and to allow for further collection of data concerning students' writing needs and their experience of learning to write within an academic community. However, as explained below, due to limitations relating to the sample of the (volunteer) participants in this stage, the first of these aims could not be fully realised.

Seven students volunteered for this phase. All were Masters students from a range of postgraduate programme (IT Management in Construction, Human Resources Management, Purchasing and Logistics, and TEFL). They were from different levels within the pre-session programme. All but one student were Chinese or Taiwanese; the exception was Russian.

The limited information collected concerning students' subsequent marks on academic programmes is shown in the table below. The small number of students involved, the narrow range of SESP test marks and, crucially, lack of knowledge about marking practices across subject departments do not allow for meaningful comparisons.

Student	Student marks on SESP test:	Mean coursework marks reported by students in interviews
A	48%	67%
B	46%	No marks given at time of interview
C	44%	No information on marks at time of interview (passed all M level modules with mean of 57% and proceeded to dissertation)
D	40%	62%
E (DME student)	39%	72
F	38%	61%
G	38%	61%

Student perceptions of academic writing in SESP and beyond:

The qualitative data collected in this phase provided more useful and interesting information about the test and students' views of writing. Structured interviews at the beginning and end of students' first semester were used to evaluate how well the pre-session programme had prepared them for the writing tasks they faced. In addition, the interviews investigated if and how student understandings of academic writing had changed over this time. The schedules used for the interviews are appended to this report.

In the first interview students were asked to talk about what 'Academic writing' meant for them and to comment on the most important aspects of academic writing from a list of

elements. They were also asked to discuss what made a successful piece of writing, what they felt their subject tutors valued in academic writing and, finally, about their impressions of the teaching and learning of writing on the summer EAP programme. The second interview, which took place at the end of Semester 1 and, importantly, after the first assignments and examinations for these students, revisited several of these questions. Students were also asked how their recent experience of writing differed from writing in the pre-session course, and how the pre-session could have prepared them better for this writing. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. The transcription of interviews was completed by a research assistant funded from the project grant.

Findings:

Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data collected through the interviews indicates several changes in student perception of academic writing taking place over the semester. This change is seen most clearly perhaps in a comparison of the elements of academic writing which students rated as 'very important' at each point in time. In interview 1 responses indicate that students prioritised 'use of quotations and references' and vocabulary accuracy. By the time of the second interview, however, their views have changed so that 'clarity of argument and writing' and 'logical development of argument' along with 'avoidance of plagiarism' have become more important.

	Interview #1	Interview #2
<i>Aspect of academic writing</i>	<i>Number of students choosing as 'very important'</i>	<i>Number of students choosing as 'very important'</i>
Clarity of argument and writing	1	5
Logical development of argument	2	5
Grammatical accuracy	2	1
Grammatical variety	1	1
Vocabulary accuracy	3	1
Vocabulary variety	1	0
Use of suitable style	1	2
Use of graphics	0	0
Use of quotations /references	5	4
Avoidance of plagiarism	3	6

The data indicate a move from a view of writing which foregrounds the micro-level to one which reflects the students' engagement with writing about a particular content and their encounters with marking criteria which value clarity of content and ideas. This is confirmed by a comparison of the qualitative data in both sets of interviews. In the first interviews students tend to view successful academic writing as grammatically accurate, using the right kinds of academic phrases and a 'good number' of references. For example, comments include

- 'I try to improve my writing by write down email to my uncle... he will correct my mistakes' (Student 4)
- 'Most of the pieces of work I write is going to be corrected by teachers and it will affect my marks so it would be more important to me to have no grammar mistakes or spelling mistakes (Student 1)

- 'I know a lot of language about academic writing and can use this to be successful writer'(Student 5)
- 'You should make the teacher think that you are working hard by giving lots of references'

By the end of Semester 1, however, students are turning their attention to other aspects of academic writing. Comments include

- 'Accuracy is still important, but just a small point' to be successful as a writer needs 'writing with my mind' (Student 3).
- 'High mark in grammar and language is not our business, because we always have grammar and language problems!' (Student 6)
- 'I can produce better writing by paying more attention to conclusions and adding my own ideas and evaluation' (Student 4)
- 'Success in writing comes because of 'good point of view, good arguments in assignment' (Student 5)

The change from a concern for using references and quotations to anxiety about plagiarism also suggests a move from a mechanical level (the details of referencing) to an understanding that plagiarism is a bigger issue. By the time of the second interview, referencing was reported as 'easy to resolve', whereas several students indicated that they still did not know how to avoid plagiarism. Indeed, for two students significant problems with plagiarism had affected their marks on Semester 1 assignments. One student voiced her confusion about the use of others' writing as a model for her own; this was something she felt was good practice, but was unsure whether to reference the phrases and words she had 'borrowed'. The issue of what constituted plagiarism had become even more complex with the move into full academic study.

The views expressed by students about the teaching and testing of academic writing during SESP complements the ideas outlined above. Students felt that more and longer pieces of writing were needed to allow them to explore more fully the links between reading and writing. The individual study project completed in Block 3 of the programme was not seen as sufficient practice in this kind of academic writing. Students' voicing of this sort of concern indicates an awareness of the 'intertextuality' of academic writing discussed earlier.

Another area of discussion in the interviews shows a similar understanding of what might be seen as a more sophisticated aspect of language use. Several students talked of their disquiet that their study projects would not be marked by tutors with specialist subject area knowledge. This suggests some awareness of the nature of 'discourse communities' within subject areas and an idea that writing within the university is not simply a case of writing correctly, but that learning academic writing means in part learning to build an argument which is ideally linked to a content area.

The findings illustrate these students' development of more sophisticated, authentic understandings of academic writing during their first semester. Indeed, over this time their priorities within academic writing converged with those reported by academic subject tutors. To find that students can adapt to their new contexts with some success is encouraging. However, it is also disconcerting that these students appear to have left the pre-session programme with a great deal of progress in understanding of academic writing still to be made. Despite developments in teaching and testing, it seems that the pre-session academic writing did not provide adequate preparation for

the students' writing futures. Something more is needed in order to help students to move towards these realisations earlier.

However, one could ask how important it is for a pre-sessional programme to fulfil these needs. It could be argued that it is the basics of grammar and vocabulary which are the main business of pre-sessional work; once these are in place then students will be able to learn about other aspects of writing within their own departments. However, the findings here suggest that such an approach will not allow students to move beyond a view of writing for linguistic practice. Without an understanding of the purpose and nature of academic writing they are unlikely to succeed. (It should be noted that the participants in this research were well-motivated Masters level students. Students at lower levels and with less interest in their writing are likely to undergo a longer and more problematic process of change.)

Alternatively, the research can be interpreted as supporting a move towards a Content-Based Instruction syllabus (Brinton, Snow and Wesche 1989). This would allow closer integration of reading and writing in an academic sense and a level of writing for purpose as yet not achieved within the pre-sessional programme. It seems that we need to treat our students as future academic *writers*, not simply as test takers or language learners. Students will not survive within academic life without the ability to write in the ways in which the academy expects. This appears to involve a change in perception, which we need to foster through the academic writing we encourage.

Evaluation of the project:

The project has succeeded in being a strong impetus for change in the ways in which Academic writing (and reading) is tested on the Summer English Study Programme. It is the opinion of teaching and academic staff connected with the programme that the new procedures provide a more authentic and reliable test of academic writing abilities of students. Additionally, there is evidence of positive washback to the teaching of academic writing in that staff were conscious of the need to prepare students for certain aspects of the test, particularly the use of sources in their writing. The concern to ensure that students actively engage with issues of plagiarism is met to some extent here. There also appears to have been greater emphasis on the process of writing in this block. Results from the new test provide a clearer indication of student abilities to engage in university level academic writing. Furthermore, participation in the project has raised consciousness of EFL staff about issues connected with the teaching and testing of academic writing.

The institution of a rater training session within the programme has been another positive outcome of the project. The development of a pack of materials for use within the EFL section has been equally valuable.

It is hoped that the involvement of university staff in the first stages of the project will have helped raise staff consciousness of academic writing and what it means within their disciplines. The beginnings of such a dialogue is of great benefit to the EFL section in the development of EAP teaching and it is hoped that contacts made during the project will continue with further consultation about discourse communities within different subject areas.

The project has been successful in dissemination of findings to the wider EAP community. A paper was given at the 2005 conference of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP) held in Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh. The paper was well-received and a full version accepted for inclusion in the (peer-reviewed) conference proceedings. A paper on the project has also been accepted for the University of Salford's Education in a Changing Environment conference in January 2006.

Finally, questions arising which concern comparisons of home and international student conceptions of Academic Writing and the ways in which more successful conceptions might be fostered within a pre-sessional programme give scope for further research.

Developments and changes from the original bid:

There were inevitable developments and changes in the project over its course and these were mainly in response to difficulties related to the sample of student participants in the evaluation phase. It had been planned to track students with a range of test scores into their subject departments in order to evaluate how far the test acted as a predictor of ability to cope with University level academic writing. However, since the project was reliant on volunteer participants for this stage, it proved impossible to sample a sufficient number of students at a wide range of scores for this to be a realistic goal. Students who volunteered tended to be those who were more highly achieving and more interested in developing their language and writing abilities. Similarly, the use of volunteer participants meant that it was not possible to consider a wide range of receiving departments.

Transferability

Several aspects of the project have transferable value:

- The project resulted in a model for test development which can be used for other EFL programmes. Involvement in the project increased the knowledge and understanding of the testing and teaching of academic writing within the section.
- The initiation of dialogue with academic staff concerning language needs of their students is of great value to the EFL section and the university as a whole and it is hoped that this will continue and develop.
- The standardisation training pack produced in the course of the project has been used again with staff on the 05 pre-sessional programme. The training was favourably received by all. The materials are available for use across the EFL section.
- Following the presentation at the BALEAP conference, one other university has begun a similar project. It appears that these issues are of interest to the wider EAP community. One possible outcome of the project is for Salford to host a BALEAP professional interest meeting concerning testing within EAP. This would help to establish Salford's national presence within the EAP community.

Ease of implementation:

The central change undertaken by the project (the writing test) was not difficult to implement, due to the nature of the administration of the pre-sessional programme. Teaching staff were consulted on the new test and changes made in reaction to their views. The new test was visibly more authentic and more reliable, allowing for better comparison of students across groups, and so no opposition was expected or met. Additionally, the removal of responsibility for test design from the teachers was never likely to be resisted.

The 2005 pre-sessional programme used a similar approach to testing of reading and writing throughout the programme and it was felt that this was beneficial.

Less successful aspects: what was learned from these?

The least successful aspect of the project was the failure to compare student marks on the test to later academic achievement in any meaningful way. A rethinking of the design of the second phase of the project to include larger numbers and a separate mechanism for collecting student grades may have worked better. Future work may need to consider more fully the implications of using volunteer student participants.

Reflection/ conclusions

It is felt that the project has been of value to the section, school and university as a whole. The interest and knowledge base it has generated about the testing and teaching of academic writing will form a useful platform for further developments in this area.

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APPENDIX: STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULES

STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE #1

SECTION 1: GENERAL QUESTIONS ON ACADEMIC WRITING

What does 'Academic Writing' mean to you? What does it involve? (give a definition or description)

What is the most important part of Academic Writing for you?

	Not important			Very	
Clarity of argument and writing	1	2	3	4	5
Logical development of argument	1	2	3	4	5
Grammatical accuracy	1	2	3	4	5
Grammatical variety	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary accuracy	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary variety	1	2	3	4	5
Use of suitable style	1	2	3	4	5
Use of graphics/illustrations	1	2	3	4	5
Use of references / use of quotations	1	2	3	4	5
Standard of word processing	1	2	3	4	5
Avoidance of plagiarism	1	2	3	4	5

SECTION 2: EXPERIENCE ON SESP

Warm-up: Describe the way in which you were taught writing on SESP

What did you think was the most important element of writing for teachers on SESP? What was the main focus of Academic Writing classes in SESP?

How did you feel about the way writing was taught?

What was missing? What did you need more of? What could have been done in another way?

Did you feel on SESP that you were a successful writer in English?

Did SESP prepare you well for the writing you have to do on your academic course?

End of programme test on SESP:

What was it testing in terms of academic writing?

How did you feel about it as a test? Do you think it was a fair test?

SECTION 3: EXPERIENCE ON PRESENT COURSE

Where are you now in your academic course? (Week?)

What writing have you done so far? (Type of writing; type of texts)

What writing do you expect to have to do in this semester?

What sort of writing skills do you expect to use in your writing this semester?

Do you think you will be a successful writer on this course? (what would it mean to be a successful writer on this course?)

What would make you *more* successful as a writer on this course?

Have your ideas about academic writing changed because of anything you have experienced on your academic subject course so far?

STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE #2

What does 'Academic Writing' mean to you? What does it involve?

What is the most important part of Academic Writing for you?

	Not important			Very	
	1	2	3	4	5
Clarity of argument and writing	1	2	3	4	5
Logical development of argument	1	2	3	4	5
Grammatical accuracy	1	2	3	4	5
Grammatical variety	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary accuracy	1	2	3	4	5
Vocabulary variety	1	2	3	4	5
Use of suitable style	1	2	3	4	5
Use of graphics/illustrations	1	2	3	4	5
Use of references / use of quotations	1	2	3	4	5
Standard of word processing	1	2	3	4	5
Avoidance of plagiarism	1	2	3	4	5

SECTION 2: EXPERIENCE ON PRESENT COURSE

Where are you now in your academic course? (week?)

What writing have you done so far? (Type of writing; length; text type)

What sort of writing skills did you have to use in your writing so far?
(e.g. – argumentative writing; referencing; planning)

How successful was this writing?

- For you?
- For your tutors?

What writing do you expect to have to do this semester? (Anything new to last semester in types of writing or length?)

How do you go about writing now?
(Describe how you write an assignment)

Do you think that you will be successful as a writer on this course?
(What does it mean to be successful at writing on this course?)

What do you think your tutors are looking for when they mark your writing?

What would make you *more* successful as a writer on this course?

Have your ideas about academic writing changed because of anything you have experienced on your academic subject course so far? (what incidents have changed the way you think?)

How could SESP have prepared you better for the writing on your course?

How did writing you practised in SESP *differ to* writing asked for on your present course?

Do you get a sense that you are developing writing skill within this particular area? (General Academic Writing now moving into more specific skills for one academic subject area)