

# Authenticity in ESAP Course Design: Managing Departmental & Student Expectations

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**Abstract:** Designing English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) programmes which could help practitioners to deliver an authentic experience to students preparing for degree courses is undeniably challenging. However, with careful planning, close cooperation with academics and feedback from students both before and after they embark on their departmental studies, it is a challenge that can be successfully met.

The Business Management English (BME) Programme at the University of Birmingham is one of the UK's leading discipline-specific ESAP courses for postgraduate students. This article illustrates the three-pronged approach to course design which was taken to develop an authentic preessional English course for business students.

The key to the approach lies in attempting to design a curriculum which mirrors departmental studies in terms of the pedagogical methods employed, the materials and assessment techniques used, and the seminar tasks set. It is also about understanding and managing both departmental and student expectations to create a rewarding learning experience. **Note:** the approach herein can be used to design an ESAP course for any discipline.

**Key words:** course design, ESAP, preessional, authenticity, expectations

**Abstrakt:** Vytváření programů angličtiny pro specifické akademické účely (ESAP), které by pomohly učitelům jednotlivých oborů předávat studentům připravujícím se na diplomové studium autentické zkušenosti, je bezpochyby náročné. Avšak s pomocí pečlivého plánování, úzké spolupráce s akademickými pracovníky a zpětné vazby od studentů jak před, tak i po zahájení jejich katedrového studia, je úkol, který může být úspěšně splněn.

Program Business Management English (BME) na Univerzitě v Birminghamu je jedním z britských předních oborově specifických kurzů ESAP pro postgraduální studenty. Tento článek ilustruje přístup, který byl použit k vytvoření autentického kurzu angličtiny pro studenty před zahájením podnikatelského studia.

Klíčem k tomuto přístupu je návrh kurikula, které odráží katedrové studium, pokud jde o použité pedagogické metody, materiály a techniky hodnocení a zadávané seminární práce.

**Poznámka:** tento přístup může být použit k vytvoření kurzu ESAP pro jakýkoli obor.

## EAP across the Disciplines

In the mid-1970s, the British Council commissioned a number of studies to investigate English for Academic Purposes (EAP) across disciplines; that is, the aim was to take a closer look at English for *Specific* Purposes (ESP). In the early 1980s at the University of Birmingham (UK), Tony Dudley-Evans and Tim Johns produced a series of papers, some of which were co-authored, examining the importance of collaboration and team-teaching in creating materials for overseas students of EAP/ESP. Two

decades later, Swales and Feak (2001) continued to reinforce the need for collaborative synergies that would benefit the stakeholders in ESP.

In their book entitled, *ESP: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) highlight the importance of using authentic *carrier content* to teach *real content* when looking at specificity in ESP; for example: the statistics in an annual report could constitute carrier content in a lesson, while the real content might be to teach students the language of trends and comparisons.

The motivational aspect of creating course materials which meet the needs and expectations of international students has been explored by many authors (see, for example, Robinson, 1980; Kennedy & Bolitho, 1984; Jordan 1984, 1993 & 1996; Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998; Ushioda, 1998; Dörnyei, 2001). Commonly, studies have revealed that where students feel the course they have opted to study meets their needs and expectations, they are more likely to be motivated to achieve success (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991).

## **The Challenges of Creating Authentic E(S)AP Course Design**

There are a number of obstacles that can hinder authentic course design in respect of a preparatory English or preessional<sup>1</sup> course for future degree students. Often, there is limited access to academics in the receiving departments who would be willing to give up their time to share thoughts and/or course materials, or indeed authenticate the validity of subject-specific content created in the English course. This is, in part, attributable to the somewhat low status that English courses generally have in many Higher Education institutions today as they tend to be perceived merely as offering remedial English to non-native speakers of the language, rather than crucially equipping them with the academic skills and language needed to enhance their chances of success when studying a degree in a second or third language.

Jordan (2002:74) highlights that there are several forms of co-operation between ESAP course developers and subject specialists that could prove valuable where the latter are willing to cooperate, for instance, '...the provision of text specimens and reading lists, recording short talks for...language practice, giving guest lectures, and even co-operating in the writing of practice material.' However, such collaborations usually only occur after effective communication and considerable efforts to network have resulted in securing the trust and respect of individuals in receiving departments: the departure of one or more of these personnel with a collegial attitude means having to start afresh in attempting to build meaningful relationships which may then lead to new, useful partnerships.

Irrespective of any fruitful dialogues that may have taken place with receiving departments and/or students, and the creative ideas which may also have been generated

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<sup>1</sup> an intensive English course which runs immediately prior to departmental studies

within the materials-writing teams, the time and number of staff required to design a high quality course which mirrors the needs of its learners often restricts what can be feasibly produced in the time available or accorded. Another difficulty is identifying both departmental and student expectations of what the preessional course will deliver, as often, neither of these stakeholders have a broader understanding of external constraints (for example, governmental stipulations) which may impinge on course design.

As Hamp-Lyons (2000) states, before designing a course, it is essential that the EAP course convenor or practitioner establishes the needs of the students. But one of the greatest challenges in striving for authentic EAP course design where preessional programmes are concerned, is that it is virtually impossible for a multi-disciplinary preessional to cater to the needs of all (or even most) of its students: consider trying to meet the subject-specific needs and expectations of engineering, law, education, computing, business, medicine – and other students, all studying English together, before they proceed to different departments upon successful completion of the pre-essional. On the other hand, a discipline-specific preessional offers significantly more opportunities to build an entire ESAP course around the future discipline of its students. Nevertheless, this also has its challenges.

## **The BME: A Discipline-Specific Preessional**

The Business Management English (BME) Programme is a discipline-specific preessional course which was founded at the University of Birmingham (UoB) in 2001. Initially, it accepted undergraduates (UG) and postgraduates (PG) with conditional and unconditional offers to study at any UK-based university. However, as the popularity of the programme grew and numbers increased (11 students and 2 staff in 2001, to 300 students and 45 personnel in 2014), this preessional was limited to students with offers to study at the Birmingham Business School (BBS) only. Additionally, as it became clear that the needs of the UG learner differed significantly from that of the PG student, a separate English course was created for these two levels of students.

The BME Programme is offered in four course lengths: 20-, 15-, 10- and 6-weeks, depending on the level of English of the incoming student, as evidenced by their score in a government-approved Secure English Language Test (SELT). Naturally, the higher their English score, the shorter the course students can be accepted onto (see UoB website for entry scores and SELTs accepted).

What follows, is the three-pronged approach to course design that was implemented on the BME during the period November 2008 to November 2014. This was done

with the support of the then Management Team<sup>2</sup> who, amongst other areas, were responsible for curriculum and materials design.

## 1 Collaboration with Subject Specialists

Understanding the needs and expectations of the key stakeholders is a crucial step when striving to create an authentic course. Thus, it is prudent to consult receiving departments early in the course design process. Course convenors may well discover that Programme Leads (i.e.: the subject specialists) know very little, if anything, about the aims and objectives of the E(S)AP course which has been/is being designed specifically to act as a preparatory programme for students holding conditional offers. This was the case with the BME in relation to the BBS. A starting point, therefore, may be to deliver a short presentation to personnel in the receiving department to share the [proposed] overview of the ESAP curriculum and assessments, and the academic/linguistic skills taught to students prior to their departmental studies. It is worth stating here that approaching the Leads without specific ideas or a provisional plan may be counter-productive as the subject specialists are likely to feel pressured to contribute a considerable amount at the initial course-writing stage, thus resulting in them being unwilling to enter into collaborations.

It can be reasonably assumed that even a 15–20-minute presentation designed to encourage maximum possible attendance will not be attended by all subject specialists, and so soon after, one-to-one meetings should be arranged with Programme Leads who are responsible for the most popular post-ESAP courses. In the case of the BME, these were: the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) programmes, and MSc courses in Marketing, International Business, Accounting & Finance, Investments, and Human Resource Management (HRM). These meetings, which were a crucial step in networking and fostering mutually-beneficial long-term professional relationships and on-going dialogue, not only enabled the communication of information about the BME, but also helped to establish the expectations of BBS staff. Additionally, the Leads were asked for any information that they would be willing to share to help inform BME course design, for instance: reading lists, examples of assessment questions and sample case study tasks.

It is entirely possible that in addition to being unable to attend a presentation, some subject specialists will also be unavailable for – or even uninterested in – a one-to-one meeting. In such cases, the Faculty could be asked to give up 10 minutes to complete a questionnaire aimed to elicit information which would help inform course design. Such a questionnaire was issued to BBS staff. This covered a range of areas including: the writing genres with which students are expected to demonstrate familiarity when on their degree course; the tools/models/theories widely referred to during their

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<sup>2</sup> Senior Coordinators, Jennifer Metcalfe & Mike Loughlin; the iVLE/IT & Team Coordinator, Hasan Shikoh; and the BME Director (myself)

departmental studies; common academic weaknesses displayed by students during their degree programme; and requests/suggestions about items which could be woven into ESAP course design. For all-round convenience, including the data-mining which follows data collection, this questionnaire should be rendered into e-form (in the case of the BME, this was using Google Docs, which conveniently collates responses into a spreadsheet).

Following the presentation, one-to-one meetings and the issuing of a questionnaire, Planning Meetings should then ensue before work can begin on any necessary revisions to the course design. Once the assessments have been modified and reviewed, it would be beneficial to arrange brief follow-up meetings with subject-specific teams in the receiving departments where the specialists can be asked to comment on the authenticity of the content of the proposed curriculum and its assessment tasks. Where necessary, further revisions can then be made. The next step is to gain first-hand experience of term-time interactions between the subject specialists and former preessional students, together with their direct entrant counterparts, during their degree studies.

## 2 Observations of In-Sessional Classes

Step one of the three-pronged approach referred to above can lead to the formation of strong professional relationships with Programme Leads in post-ESAP course departments. As such, in step two, they are likely to become more receptive towards requests to observe a series of their lessons: ideally, the observations should be conducted in term one of the degree programme (particularly if this is a one-year Master's course), as this is when most students undertake intensive study on core modules.

In this second step, the aim is to ascertain the following: the types of tasks set in class and their pace and level of difficulty; the background reading/knowledge expected of PG/UG students; the nature, quantity and frequency of homework assigned and any feedback given on the same in subsequent lessons; the complexity of the assignments set for formal assessment; the nature of interaction between staff and students, and among students in class; and, the level of independence and autonomy expected of the learners. This step will enable the creation of *more* authentic course content which would resemble Preessional/ESAP students' future departmental studies.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most observations are likely to reveal that there is not a standard blueprint for each of the above-listed areas. In fact, in some cases, they may vary considerably from one degree programme to another. Also, the personal style of individual lecturers will affect what happens in the lessons. However, as a general rule, it could be fair to assume that staff who are responsible for courses in which students are required to have a higher level of English at the point of entry high appear to have higher expectations of their students: on the BME, these courses were

the MBA programmes, the MSc in HRM and two of the four MSc degrees in Marketing, namely Strategic Marketing & Consulting, and Marketing Communications. The quantity and length of assessed essays for these degrees was noticeably higher than those in the Accounting & Finance group. However, those studying the latter were expected to demonstrate greater expertise in statistics and written genres pertaining to this area, for instance: reports; feasibility studies and financial analyses. It quickly became clear that that these were areas that required attention on the BME.

The importance given to linguistic accuracy and knowledge of the relevant referencing system may be emphasized more in non-finance subjects which have lengthier assignments, although all students are required to reference their work appropriately. In the case of the BME, students in each of the observed modules were expected to engage in regular seminar discussions and deliver presentations on the same. The average length of assignments in the Accounting & Finance group was 2,000 words, compared with 4,000 words (with the longest essay being 5,000 words) for the MBA, HRM and two aforementioned Marketing courses. This reinforced existing course design on the BME where students were expected to produce oral presentations and fully referenced assignments – the longest being 3,000 words.

Based on the assumption that the classes observed during in-session term time are representative of the general standard and expectations of staff across the degree programmes, the course designer is likely to be in a advantageous position to assess whether or not the curriculum is largely aligned with the future needs of their students and the expectations of the receiving staff. Where necessary, adjustments can be made to achieve a greater degree of authenticity.

### **3 The Arrival Questionnaire, Student Reunion & Talking Heads**

The final step in the three-pronged approach to authentic course design is to communicate with the main stakeholders – the students. This is when an arrival questionnaire designed to elicit what students are expecting to learn on their English course can be administered to them, and modifications can be made for future students enrolling onto the course.

On the BME, this was done using an e-questionnaire, in a computer cluster, on the second or third day of the course, that is, before the students could be influenced by fellow classmates and/or other stimuli. This questionnaire asked the learners to identify their provenance; whether they came from families where others had studied overseas; who, if anyone, had influenced them to study abroad; what they were expecting of the host community; what expectations they had of cultural and academic integration; and most importantly, what they were expecting their ESAP course to cover. Over a three year period, a total of 816 students responded to this questionnaire (Rees, Butt & Shikoh, 2012).

What was established through responses to the arrival questionnaire on the BME was that the overwhelming majority of students had opted to study on the preessional course because this was one of two options presented to them by their Admissions Officer when they were made a conditional offer to study for a PG degree. Their other option was to retake a SELT and secure the necessary result for direct entrance. Very few students had any real expectations in terms of preessional course design, though many had expected to gain entrance to their degree course once they had finished – as opposed to successfully completed – the preessional. A large proportion of BME students revealed that they anticipated being taught or exposed to subject-specific vocabulary, for instance, lexis related to marketing, or investments, or international business.

Students who have undertaken a preparatory ESAP course and have subsequently embarked on departmental studies are a rich source of information which could be very useful for the ratification of authenticity (or otherwise) in course design. With this in mind, an annual pre-Christmas Reunion was held for preessional students who had passed the BME and completed the first term of their Master's degree course: the invitation, which was emailed to students, included a link to a questionnaire with three simple questions designed to aid incremental changes on the BME Programme. These questions were:

1. Which skills acquired on the BME Preessional have you already had to use/demonstrate in the first term of your degree programme?
2. Which tasks have you been set in term 1 at the Business School that you feel the BME did not [fully] prepare you for?
3. Do you have any suggestions on how we can improve the BME course for future students?

The response rate for these questionnaires on the BME was approximately 35% each year, which equated to between 90 and 120 students. This number of responses provided the Management Team with enough insight into what was successful about the BME from the perspective of the students in terms of authenticity and meeting expectations, and where there was room for improvement. What was most encouraging was that students often responded to question 1 with a long list of answers (where many of the items were repeated by different students), while there were few answers other than *'All ok!'* or *'Nothing – thank you!'* for questions 2 and 3.

Where students did reply to questions 2 and 3 in the first and second year of the reunion, however, a pattern emerged – and this is what was valuable for course design/modification purposes: in response to question 2, some students felt under-prepared when having to produce a financial report, and when asked to create a professional CV. The suggestions made in response to question 3 centred largely around requests for classes on British Culture. As a result of this feedback, a Finance

Coordinator was recruited on the BME to develop the finance-related materials and tasks, and to provide both staff and students with optional workshops on this area of business. Where CV writing and lessons on culture were concerned, both were offered to students as Optional Classes.

Finally, another way to manage the expectations of future students and to give them access to authentic feedback is to ask former students to provide tips to new or prospective students on what to expect on the ESAP course and how to succeed. Thus, fourteen former BME students who had attended different course lengths (20-, 15-, 10- & 6-weeks), and were from a range of cultural backgrounds, studying a number of different sub-disciplines within business were invited to attend a meeting if they were interested in being part of a project where they could provide information on the BME to future students.

During the meeting, the students were asked to choose an area related to the BME which they felt they could talk on for up to one minute. The importance of honesty was stressed, and they were given less than 24 hours to prepare. The first time I heard what the students had to say was in the recording studio. The result was a 10-minute *Talking Heads* video, which was later uploaded to the BME website (accessible here: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/International/eisu/presessional/bme.aspx>). This video provides valuable information on the discipline-specific nature of the BME Presessional to potential students, their parents, agents and others who are interested in learning about the course. Since the information comes directly from former students, wherein along with praise for the programme, several students also comment on the intensity and challenges of the course, there is a certain amount of credibility that can be associated with the *Talking Heads*.

## Concluding Comments

To conclude, many authors have suggested that EAP materials should reflect disciplinary variation and discourse specificity (see, for example, Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). Basturkmen (2010) argues that the three key considerations in developing any ESP course involve analysing needs, investigating specialist discourse and determining the curriculum. While it would be very difficult for a multi-disciplinary presessional to cater to the English needs of all its students, the creation of an authentic ESAP course which meets the expectations of its key stakeholders *is* possible where discipline-specific English courses are concerned. An important part of this goal is to ensure that information on the course is available and easily accessible to those who need it. Distributing literature to and organising specially convened talks and/or meetings with the relevant university teams is a worthwhile, indeed crucial, activity in this respect.

It is also important to ensure that supporting systems and documentation are in place: for instance, website content; brochures; Director's Reports; and additional



information for direct applicants (i.e.: the students) and overseas recruiting agents. These will guarantee that stakeholders have access to documentation which reveals not only the course content, but also the pre-requisites of the programme, thereby reducing any misconceptions or mismatches in expectations.

Fostering good relationships with Programme Leads in students' future department(s) through regular communication – preferably face-to-face – is essential. This tends to take time to nurture, but once mutual trust has been established, it heightens the prospect of collaborative work and fruitful synergies: where there is evidence of this (e.g.: team-teaching between preessional practitioners and subject-specialists (see Adams-Smith, 1980); and/or Guest Lectures delivered by the latter), it instils confidence in both preessional staff and students about the authenticity of the ESAP programme, as the involvement of departmental lecturers in the preessional acts as a form of endorsement.

Finally, those responsible for course design can learn a considerable amount and make worthy incremental changes to the curriculum and course content by obtaining feedback from their main stakeholders and acting on any feasible suggestions made. In the case of ESAP programmes, this feedback could take the form of materials (e.g.: assessments) being shared with subject specialists and inviting their comments on the same. It may also involve meeting the Admissions and Marketing Teams to glean the nature of the enquiries put to them by prospective students in order to ascertain where there may be a lack of clarity in the course literature/website. Asking students to share their expectations through an arrival questionnaire can help the Course Director to address any misconceptions early in the preessional. And, one of the final steps which could lead to the production of an authentic ESAP course, is where preessional alumni are asked to re-evaluate the programme and how well, or otherwise, it had prepared them for their main studies.

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## Bionote

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