

An Exploration into Learner Perceptions of Speaking Skills in English for Academic Purposes

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Summary of Dissertation

The focus of this dissertation was to explore international learner perceptions into speaking skills in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The research was conducted during the summer months of 2012 and was submitted as coursework for the MEd TESOL programme at Exeter University. The participants were taken from the MBA course at the same institution. It should be noted that this research project was defined by a number of parameters. It set out to only investigate perceptions insofar as they were deemed to influence classroom performance. Thus, the importance of speaking in social contexts was largely ignored. Additionally, the remit did not include the measurement of any value-judgements made by the participants regarding their performance, such as the use of external measurements, for example, exam results or observations.

The dissertation began with a literature review of around fifty different sources from which a number of pertinent themes emerged. These included the exponential rise in the number of international students studying at university in native-English speaking countries, the considerable amount of variable factors which influenced the amount of speaking required of learners and the debate around the extent to which cultural differences or language use issues impede performance.

Furthermore the literature review also identified gaps in current research, most tellingly the historical emphasis on qualitative research into EAP speaking skills, at the expense of a more detailed quantitative approach. Therefore it was decided to counter-act this via the use of in-depth, one-to-one participant interviews. The findings revealed a complex picture of a variety of factors which potentially influence learner perceptions of speaking and the performance of tasks. The findings suggested consistency with previous researchers in two key areas. Firstly, this project concurred with hypotheses regarding the detrimental effect of language use issues on performance. Secondly, it also identified the positive impact of exposure to speaking opportunities on confidence. In contrast, it was considered that the importance of cultural differences may have been over-emphasised in prior studies.

Potential for impact

My initial interest in this topic stems from experiences and perceptions formed as a teacher within the field of EAP. As a practitioner I consider that oral communication is important because learners need fluent and accurate speaking skills to perform tasks such as presentations, exchange and discuss ideas with contemporaries and receive effective feedback from tutors. However, it is also my contention that speaking skills are often not afforded the prominence they deserve on EAP courses. This is often because there is a tendency for them to become marginalised by an emphasis on written work. Therefore, it is asserted that this project impacts upon several under-exploited aspects of research. The literature review for this dissertation suggested not only that there is a generic lack of research conducted into EAP speaking skills, but especially in a UK setting, utilising the type of qualitative methods employed here.

This area of research is also very pertinent to the current climate, given the exponential increase in the number of international students whom are currently choosing to study in native-English speaking countries. Despite the advent of the internet, with the plethora of online materials and opportunities for distance learning, it is clear that there remains huge demand for face-to-face tuition. This context permits learners to clarify understanding and share ideas, and, as this dissertation suggests, oral communication is the primary medium through which this occurs. Thus, EAP course providers and, more generally, universities should recognise speaking skills as a key component in making face-to-face learning as productive and fulfilling as possible. This becomes particularly pertinent for the ever-increasing volume of courses, (such as the one used in this research), which incorporate students were from a variety of countries and cultural backgrounds.

Although the format of this dissertation only permitted a concise discussion of recommendations it is nevertheless suggested that these incorporated an informative range of contexts. These include suggestions based on learner perceptions, best practice for EAP courses and effective approaches for lecturers teaching on programmes with a high proportion of international students. In addition, several aspects of the findings highlight general agreement with previous research. These included the types of speaking tasks required of learners, and the types of issues identified in relation to language use and acclimatisation issues. Alternatively, this project may also signpost new avenues for future research. These include how perceptions are affected by technological developments and increasing numbers of international classmates. Therefore, it is suggested that this research strikes an interesting balance between the old and the new with a mixture of consolidation of existing findings and the discovery of new information. The latter category may demonstrate the value of conducting up-to-date research which is able to reflect important changes in UK universities.