

ADJUSTING THE PARADIGM: A ‘THEME-BASED APPROACH’ TO PRE-SESSIONAL EAP IN A BRITISH UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in Britain faces new challenges as the composition of students becomes more diverse in terms of cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds. In connection, a range of professional issues has arisen: the need to understand better the attitudes, motivations and learning needs of these students and consider their implications for pedagogical practice; and, secondly, the design and delivery of appropriate curricula.

This paper argues in favour of theme-based EAP in the context of a pre-sessional course for overseas students at a British university. It provides an outline of an integrated, semester-long programme designed for international students targeting undergraduate study; a summary of relevant contextual factors; and a rationale for the course, along with key aspects of its implementation.

We have devised a course that is content focused and holistic in design with an emphasis on preparing students for discipline specific learning and literacy challenges they will encounter in mainstream study. It is a non-EAP core around which we have moulded EAP pre-sessional support. The course has had positive results, in terms of staff and student response.

Keywords: Pre-sessional course design; Changing context of higher education; Content-based instruction; Theme-based paradigm; Learning theory; Contextual approach; Linking target-study and pre-sessional EAP

1. INTERNATIONALISATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UK

Higher education in the UK is undergoing unparalleled change as policy and practice emphasise expansion, widening access and internationalisation. This has implications for the role of learning and study support in meeting diverse student needs. Traditionally, international students entering higher

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education in Britain had high levels of secondary socialisation and largely comprised graduates, following post-graduate courses. The vast majority of our present pre-sessional (international) students are mainland Chinese with most of the rest coming from Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand and Libya among other countries (as is probably the case in similar institutions elsewhere in the UK). A contingent of these is aiming to enter undergraduate study.

It has been suggested that these students (like the ones we are increasingly admitting) are likely to be more academically diverse and motivated by utilitarian considerations in their choice of course and institution (Cortazzi and Jin 2004). They are more likely to be younger than in the past and targeting undergraduate study. They are less likely to have the high levels of secondary socialisation of their predecessors of, say, ten years ago and they may have no previous higher education experience. In addition, they are more likely to be privately funded and from the expanding middle-classes of their homelands. They are not necessarily the high achievers and carefully selected students of the past, supported by government sponsorship. They have greater choice in determining their own future although the influence of the family may be quite strong. They have a different attitude to education, one which is more pragmatically governed; and they are inclined to choose courses that are vocationally useful and which will give them opportunities to participate in the economic growth of their country. This will have differential implications for institutions. The artificial blurring of the old distinctions across the higher education sector in this country belies the fact that the so-called 'new' universities (former polytechnics) offer more of these kinds of vocational courses which tend to attract overseas students to them. This has been an influence on our philosophy and pragmatism in rethinking the pre-sessional courses we offer.

2. INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT: CHOICES AND CONCERNS

Most students arrive without an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score and are tested internally (by means of a University of Northumbria proficiency test, which is beyond the scope of this article), before being placed in an English language class suitable to their level of English language proficiency. The course under discussion provides for students with a level of English that can be equated with IELTS 5.5 (or intermediate, on a scale from 1-9); and the majority of these students are aiming at undergraduate study in Northumbria's Business School, with the remainder mostly seeking to study courses in other social science, interdisciplinary areas.

EAP in British higher education contexts is largely regarded in institutional terms as service provision with the primary function of improving

levels of language proficiency among non-first language speakers, sufficient for their entry to higher education study. In connection there are several issues of ongoing concern. One is the imbalance that exists in study skill approaches, in terms of delivery and pedagogical focus. An integrated approach to lesson planning where students engage in listening, speaking, reading and writing in the same lesson is a sound principle. However, study skills approaches are generally atomistic in design and there is little, if any, continuity in terms of content focus from lesson to lesson. Furthermore, there is a concern in the pre-sessional support context regarding the transferability of what is done to the target study context.

The notion of a 'common core' (Dudley-Evans & St John 1988) – generic study and language 'skills' which are thought to differ little across disciplines – permeates EAP teaching and course design at the pre-sessional level. Implicit here is a deficit model of learning and study support (Benesch 1988; and Lea & Street 1998). It is predicated on what students are deemed to lack, rather than focusing on experience they already have and developing this to enhance their capacity to deal with mainstream content study contexts. In the pre-sessional context for non-first language speaker students, the deficits are assumed to be language and effective 'study skills'. The emphasis on (assumed or perceived) remedial needs tends to take precedence over other needs. The focus tends to be at least one step removed from the specific context and content of target study. Furthermore, the idea of literacy as a set of discrete and combinable skills has been challenged by research into student learning and understanding among first language students (Ballard & Clanchy 1988; Lea & Street 1998). As the student body entering higher education in the UK is becoming more diverse there is a concern to facilitate their deeper engagement with university study; and, foster academic literacy by making explicit the epistemological and communicative practices in subject areas and build this into the first year curriculum (Warren 2003).

In adopting a theme-based approach in the pre-sessional context, the aim is to address the afore-mentioned concerns. The needs of our students are likely to be broader than a study skills and remediation paradigm admits. It is salient to note that many students who enter at this level have a long history of learning English, particularly in the form of language system teaching. It appears that language ability, as determined by formal testing, belies the capacity of students to benefit from the approach we have adopted. In fact, student needs are generally as much educational as they are language-based in character, thus the focal issue becomes how to prepare students for the demands of first year undergraduate study.

Our interest in devising this course is based on the hypothesis that theme-based EAP, with an emphasis on content and disciplinarity, promotes better all-round learning than skills-based EAP. We set out to develop a course that

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encapsulated this and which we outline in this paper, with clarification as to why we have made particular choices in terms of design and choice of content. Hyland (2006: 5) points out that "EAP courses still lack a theoretical or research rationale". We support our paradigm for theme-based pre-sessional EAP with reference to literature within a long-standing tradition in content-based instruction, taken largely from educational contexts outside British higher education (e.g. Brinton et al. 1989). We also provide examples of feedback, on the course, from teachers and students. While student feedback is, without doubt, a useful indicator of success of aspects of the course, we believe that teacher feedback is also an essential endorsement, since the degree of enthusiasm and professional satisfaction that teachers gain from their work is to a large degree imparted to students.

3. THEME-BASED EAP: AN IN-HOUSE ADJUSTMENT

A new set of challenges generally requires a change in perspective and approach. It is for this reason that we have chosen to follow a content-based approach as an alternative in the design and implementation of pre-sessional courses. We describe our course as 'theme-based' but this is an in-house designation rather than the adoption of an existing model of content-based language instruction (CBI).

There are generally considered to be three models, or prototypes, of content-based instruction appropriate to tertiary level EAP contexts: 'adjunct' (whereby students are taught language alongside a language course), 'sheltered' (such that content is taught by a specialist to a segregated group of second language learners) and 'theme-based' (in which students are taught the L2 through themes and topics which form the basis of the curriculum) (Brinton et al, 1989). In British higher education, EAP provision has tended to be bolt-on rather than embedded. It is rare to find courses which correspond to the contextualised adjunct or sheltered models (the authors do not know any). The notion of team-teaching is the nearest equivalent whereby the subject specialist and the EAP support specialist work together in varying degrees of cooperation and collaboration (Dudley-Evans & St John 1998). This provision is, as a consequence, referred to as English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). It is more typical of in-sessional provision (EAP support available to overseas students once engaged in university study) than the pre-sessional course context discussed in this paper. Furthermore, ESAP is not usually associated with the needs of ostensibly 'low-level' learners (as determined by language proficiency testing).

Although familiar with the literature on CBI, the approach referred to in this paper does not identify specifically with any of the above-mentioned models. We consider CBI as adaptable to context. The approach described

here is driven by the identification of a need to prepare students for the broad social science curriculum areas they intend to enter. We are therefore ‘adjusting the paradigm’ in response to the type of students increasingly entering our pre-sessional courses, our understanding of their mainstream study and broader learning needs. In ESP (of which EAP is deemed to be a sub-division), conventional wisdom distinguishes ‘carrier content’ from ‘real content’, the latter being the ‘language focus’ (e.g. form and function) and the former being a vehicle for language teaching and learning (cf. Dudley-Evans & St John 1998). Stoller (2004: 261) pithily encapsulates the nature of CBI as “a dual commitment to language and content-learning objectives”, but stresses that content is more than a mere shell for language teaching and learning (Stoller 2002). This is the point of view with which we wish to identify in this paper.

The notions of content and theme involve implicit (rather than explicit) language development. In this case, it offers immersion in the English language through Sociology, a field of study which is interdisciplinary, as are many of the target study areas of the students taking our pre-sessional courses. Sociology provides a foundation and introduction to modes of thought and expression in the social sciences. We focus on the acquisition of a new knowledge base and skills, which are also a vehicle for language improvement, and the acquisition of academic vocabulary. It is suggested that a theme-based approach requires a new level of student participation in the class. Language form and function are linked to, and embedded within, content rather than systematically isolated as discrete teaching points (see Appendix 1). Students learn how to apply and adapt their use of language in subsequent contexts as they encounter new and similar content within the themes of the course. This is consistent with a view of the student as primarily a ‘user’, rather than strictly a ‘learner’ of language.

4. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS AND RATIONALE

Our contention is that there is insufficient account taken, within the traditional view (we have alluded to) of what constitutes EAP, of learning theory. The dominant perception and conception of the pre-sessional course is reductive: a remedial prerequisite for students who need language improvement; understanding of the most obvious and generic academic standards required in higher education; and study skills techniques for self-sufficiency and independent study. We propose an adjustment to the standard model with a shift in emphasis towards providing the learner with an experience that can foster appropriate behaviours and attitudes towards study content and adjustment to the specific learning and literacy requirements of disciplinary study. Integral to this adjustment is a shift towards what Biggs

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(1999: 124) refers to as “the universality of learning processes”. We also draw on the notion of a “contextual approach” (p. 137). By this, we mean a context where teaching, learning and content come together to focus on those practices and proficiencies in which students need an enhanced level of competence, and ways in which they can go about developing these.

In this context, we believe that language teaching should be integrated with content knowledge and cognitive skill development and that students (in particular, undergraduate students) need to develop, primarily, underlying competencies (Waters & Waters 1992, 2001) for successful study, making these explicit as a foundation on which ‘study skills’ techniques can, more naturally, be built upon. These ‘competencies’ include increased self-awareness, confidence, logical reasoning, critical questioning, independent thought and a positive self-sufficient attitude to study, leading to more control and autonomy in their own learning. Kinsella (1997) specifically addresses the underlying need to foster effective, self-directed learners in CBI approaches and make this explicit in the course rationale and teaching and learning activities. The goal is, to quote Waters and Waters (1992: 264), “to build up the cognitive-affective capacity of the learner for study”. Consistent with Waters and Waters, and writers in the CBI literature, such as Blanton (1992), Stoller and Grabe (1997), Stoller (2002) and Wesche and Skehan (2002), we consider a task-based approach to learning materials to be among the most effective methodological vehicles for achieving this goal, with an emphasis on group work and cooperative learning.

We eschew an atomistic conception of language knowledge and pedagogy (as is intrinsic to other approaches, skills-based and rhetorical-functional, for example). Intrinsic to content models of language instruction is the idea that language learning is more successful when not explicitly taught in compartmentalised ways, but where acquisition predominates (cf. Krashen 1982; Mohan 1986; and Wesche 1993). Snow (1998: 256) points out that content-based instruction provides a setting for innovative teaching and the use of those approaches more typically associated with first language classrooms. We espouse a holistic view of language development, one more traditionally associated with first language (than second language) learning pedagogy. As students actively engage with content they develop their abilities in reading fluency and vocabulary development, quality of expression and writing, speaking and listening, in a more authentic way. As Brinton et al. (1989) suggest, when content is foregrounded:

The focus for students is on acquiring information via the second language and, *in the process*, developing their academic language skills ... the goal is to enable students to transfer these skills to other

academic courses given in their second language. (Our italics for emphasis)

In a theme-based approach the continuous and connected nature of studying helps to raise and sustain awareness and pedagogical focus. Language improvement is a means rather than an end, and this more realistically reflects the main purpose students have for study beyond the EAP course. However, since students engaged both in learning language and content need meta-knowledge, there is a requirement for linguistic explanation and analysis, which we do not disregard. Published EAP materials – textbooks and reference materials – are used for further extension and practice in the classroom, but occupy a more appropriate position as supplementary to the core content. Blanton (1992: 291) encapsulates our thinking on this, as follows:

With the focus on content, linguistic skills take their rightful place as ways and means that students – and all, of us – communicate. This keeps language whole; and it keeps language real, not artificial. Students learn better and faster when surrounded by real language.

There is also a concern to foreground the broad intellectual skills required for university study: extrapolating, synthesising, transferring, critical analysis, supporting with evidence, etc. (cf. Collier 1987). In addition, our theme-based approach provides an epistemological basis for studying a new discipline in the form of a social science subject, in terms of the characteristic modes of thought, expression and the methodological principles and modalities typically involved.

Also relevant here is that we are not teaching towards external examinations or trying to cram learners with transmitted knowledge. The emphasis is on a constructivist approach to learning (cf. Vygotsky 1962; and Bruner 1975); and we take account of students' own life experiences, and the development of their critical faculties, which are so essential to successful learning (cf. Kramsch 1993). Constructivist theory stresses that, among other things, learning is active, not passive; it involves and develops in accordance with meaningful use of language; learning is a social activity; it is contextual and developmental and increases in accordance with pre-existing knowledge.

The choice of Sociology, as the overarching theme, is directly linked to an emphasis on broad educational considerations in the course rationale. The theme introduces learners to the way of life, cultural background and even contemporary issues of modern Britain. This potentially enriches their understanding of the host culture and society, with the aim of fostering understanding and integration (cf. Noels et al. 1996). Learners are encouraged

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to develop the facility to question and problematise accepted knowledge in this context (and more universally), as well as the capacity to express this in speech and writing. In addition, the competence to question is transferred to norms, values and tacit understanding of their own societies. In this respect we are attempting to address, in our concept of a theme-based approach, the issues raised by Kinsella (1997) regarding the tendency with much CBI type provision to be too teacher and curriculum driven. Students are encouraged to draw on their knowledge and understanding in the context of their own societies and to challenge their existing perspectives. This constitutes an integral part of the learning experience as, in theory, this influences the capacity for self-awareness, understanding and critical reflection. These are important elements of preparation for higher education with regard to undergraduate level entrants.

5. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COURSE

We use a standard 'A' level (i.e. upper high school) Sociology text, Browne, K. (1998). *An Introduction to Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press (2nd edition), not for the primary purpose for which it was written, but for the following main reasons:

- the appropriacy of its language level, with a readability level of around 13, according to the Gunning-Fog index (a readability measure which combines sentence length and word complexity to indicate the number of years needed in formal education to be able to comprehend a given text, which is appropriate for this level of study, at approximately 18 years of age) and the level of our international students;
- the amount of generic academic content and function vocabulary contained in the book. In connection, it allows students to engage with academic language and content in an authentic way; and familiarises students with the academic register of English, in a meaningful way;
- the broad sweep of its subject matter (e.g. the family, the media, population, ethnicity and race, and education, to name but a few topics) which can easily be related to the life experiences of students. This is a key affective ingredient (cf. Stoller 2004); and
- the enquiring nature of Sociology encourages students to question both assumptions about the UK and stereotypical views of their own countries.

Delivery is organised around skills areas for pedagogical focus and timetabling purposes, on a weekly basis, but classes are not skills based, rather they are skills integrated, thus retaining an EAP character in terms of course organisation, which maintains a bridge, both procedurally and conceptually, between general EAP and our theme-based concept. The teaching and learning materials have been developed in conjunction with sociological themes included in the syllabus, to develop students' comprehension of content knowledge.

The main constituents of the course, on a week-to-week basis, include the following: preparation, by students for the beginning of a given week, of a chapter from the course book, via a series of guided questions that aim to elicit relevant ideas in each chapter. This sets the scene for the bi-monthly lecture, on a given theme, which is immediately preceded by a preparatory session on new vocabulary that is used in the lecture. Lectures recycle vocabulary from the course book and from previous lectures, as well as representing ideas from previous weeks, so there is both a coherent and cumulative link between themes and lexis. There are also follow-up seminars on listening to lectures which, among other things, involve listening to parts of a recorded version of the lecture; and dictation to focus on intensive aspects of listening skills. In conjunction, there is a specific EAP skills focus on preparing students to deliver a short presentation at the end of the semester (involving a defence of their major piece of written work). More generic listening and speaking activities revolve around tasks adapted to our purposes, found in the core text.

Reading classes focus on main themes; and students are given guided tasks on these, including summaries of readings, and the interpretation of non-lexical text such as tables, charts and graphs. Working together, to complete tasks in English, learners construct knowledge socially that evolves as a building block for further second language development (Edstrom 2004). Tasks comprise a variety of activities that students complete usually in pairs or groups and include: producing explanations of key words and concepts; completion exercises based on recall (using various modalities in the text); guided note-taking from parts of the main text on key sub-topics; reading and speaking in groups as a fluency task based on topical issues, describing sociological issues from home contexts, or comparing British-based topics (such as the composition and role of the family, and gender socialisation) with those from their own countries; and paraphrasing segments of a chapter, with an underlying focus on synthesising and reformulation.

There is an emphasis on developing micro or pre-writing skills through class-work as a preliminary for the extended writing assignment (see Bailey 2003, for more detail). Students need to have sufficiently developed reading skills and abilities to employ a repertoire of effective approaches in order to

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work with texts in first year undergraduate study. The symbiotic nature of reading and writing is emphasised in class work and directed learning. In academic writing, students need to be familiar with grammatical forms and the importance of accuracy as well as specific features of particular discourse patterns and conventions, the micro and macro levels of texts. This involves an understanding of how texts are formed at the level of discourse, and socio-cultural awareness of the relationship between readers and writers in terms of culturally specific forms of organisation and textual patterning. Students need meta-textual and meta-cognitive knowledge for these activities. This is consistent with the notion of the 'socio-literate classroom' (Johns 1997), and the requirement for the principle of authenticity inherent in a content approach to second language instruction (Brinton et al. 1989).

We feel that the organic nature of adjusting to studying in the disciplines is encapsulated in what we do more than in the artificial and atomised nature of a study skills approach. Under the theme of 'wealth, income and poverty', for example, classroom tasks on language knowledge include: writing sentences of definition in conjunction with new concepts for practice in writing accuracy; a dictation exercise follows involving more elaborate definitions for extended practice; a pre-reading classification exercise (with examples of 'absolute' and 'relative' poverty) to reinforce content and conceptual understanding; a guided note-taking exercise based on a section of the text and a précis writing exercise (writing from sources); a cooperative speaking fluency exercise based on a text book activity in which students have to select a limited number of items as 'necessities' for a basic standard of living; and an integrated activity based on the text involving reading, note-taking and writing text responsible prose. Another task focuses on discourse elements in written text, such as positioning cohesive markers, elliptical features, substitution and synonymy. Other tasks involve reading a text and mapping it for summary and paraphrase in terms of rhetorical structure and discourse organising words and phrases, for example. This enhances reading ability, in general and academically, and confidence with authentic source material typical of first year undergraduate study. Text-responsible writing exercises are an integral part of foregrounding content in the EAP course (see Leki and Carson 1997 for more detail on the importance of text-responsible writing in the EAP context). Teaching materials are developed in conjunction with the core text and supplementary materials are developed in accordance with the sociological themes that constitute the course. (See Appendix 1 for a specific example of teaching material in connection with this theme).

There is also specific input on academic essay writing (as this is a core part of students' final assessment, both in this course and students' intended target programmes). The essay is the predominant genre in student writing in humanities and social science areas and the 'default genre' (Womack 1993) in

student writing in higher education. From the third week of the course, students begin preparing a 2000-word essay, on a Sociology topic, and each fortnight parallels the part of the essay that students are working on (e.g. the overall plan, sourcing and acknowledging material, the introduction, setting out sub-topics and expanding the main body, as well as linking paragraphs and ideas). Draft copies of essays are submitted at pre-specified points in the semester for written and oral feedback from writing tutors, on the basis of which students are expected to review and revise their work. Shih (1985) points out the strength of teaching writing within a theme-based paradigm whereby students are engaged in extended and related study of a topic before writing. There is time and scope available for developing pre-writing skills and abilities around related themes with an emphasis on sorting, synthesising and recasting information from sources which can be integrated into, and assessed through, a more extended and autonomously managed writing task, i.e., a scaffolded approach (Bruner 1975). Tutorial support is provided on a one-to-one basis, at regular intervals to reflect on project progress, in preparation for final assessments and for the subsequent mainstream study experience.

Course assessment involves the following: a set of notes, from the last lecture of the semester; a 2000-word essay project; an oral summary and defence of the essay (including rationale, main arguments and details of sources used). There is also a 2-hour exam that involves a summative reading task based on a pre-prepared Sociology text that students bring to the exam.

6. FEEDBACK ON THE COURSE

As stated earlier, our focus has been on a theme-based approach: organising the curriculum around sociological topics, the development and adaptation of teaching materials, and maintaining the holistic design of the programme. This provides a level of cohesion, in terms of content knowledge and language use that we aim for. Nonetheless, this has required a considerable commitment to producing new teaching and learning materials, and revising, modifying and replenishing existing ones. This has been a major preoccupation in setting up our theme-based model and a labour intensive factor in its implementation. As Brinton et al. (1989), Snow (1998) and Stoller (2004) all observe, this is a major responsibility in CBI-type programmes. Brinton et al. (1989: 213) also point out the following:

as with many educational innovations, the practice of second language teaching is ahead of the research which examines such change. Issues such as materials development and programme organization receive

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more attention than efforts to document the efficacy of new approaches.

There is a relative lack of empirical research reported in the literature on CBI. Stoller (2004: 272) notes that much professional literature which supports content-based approaches relies on non-empirical support. Wesche and Skehan (cited in Stoller 2004: 276) and Snow (2001) claim that the interface of language and content is the most important pedagogical issue for CBI. Stoller (2004) and Snow (2001) point to the difficulty in separating language learning issues from content learning issues in the assessment process and this is a perennial concern in setting up a theme-based paradigm. We have attempted to demonstrate our own response to this in the previous section.

We have attempted to investigate the extent of the course's effectiveness. We initially used an attitude scale to elicit data regarding student responses to the course. However, on closer examination, this data did not really provide adequate evidence on which to judge the efficacy of the programme. Of greater validity, in our opinion, has been our qualitative feedback. This has focused on how students and teachers conceptualise the experience of the course. We undertook this in order to try and obtain as rich a reflection as possible (not just a standard or fixed set of responses) and move outside a concern with, in the case of teachers, the practicalities of adapting to the course; and, in the case of students, self-reports on progress and managing course requirements. The feedback we obtained has been revealing. Overall the course appears to have run successfully, from both teachers' and students' perspectives, although there remains scope for course development.

Staff has been positive about their experience of engaging with and teaching a theme-based course, enjoying the stimulation of dealing with academic content. One comment was that 'from a teacher's point of view it is fun and challenging, innovative, and creates more opportunity to reflect on teaching styles.' Another commented on the course in the following way: 'It is integrated and real. It feels more important. The identity of the teacher is reinforced and this is reassuring for Chinese learners. The focus is taken away from artificial examples to language with real academic use.'

One teacher felt the course is 'student-centred' and 'promotes learner autonomy' (which is particularly true of the student essay which is self-generated in terms of topic, title and background research). And, as mentioned, an underlying aim includes drawing on students' experience to compare with the experiences of others, from a sociological perspective. No doubt, however, the extent to which the course is, in fact, student-centred depends on how topics are presented and the extent to which teachers stimulate students to draw on their backgrounds and experience.

In addition, another teacher perceived the course as ‘providing input of a scientific and academic nature’. Another teacher corroborated: ‘This particular content is very suitable. It teaches both research methods and academic writing: the tools they need for their academic career’. As mentioned earlier, we believe exposure to a coherent body of content is an ideal way to familiarise students with the academic register of English.

One teacher noted that the course exposes students to ‘issues they have not considered, specifically: looking at a topic from a sociological perspective’, as the students tend to lack ‘cultural knowledge’ and ‘are extremely interested in our culture’, in connection with which the discipline of Sociology ‘provides for intercultural exchange’.

An initial drawback of the course was the quantity of preparation required by staff; the workload has been heavy with a requirement to organise a considerable body of materials for each (skills) area, since there are otherwise no custom-made courses of this nature available. In particular, one teacher mentioned: ‘preparing lectures and creating appropriate listening and speaking resources has been the most difficult area for preparation.’

It is also fair to say that the feedback from students has been positive. Students have enjoyed being exposed to new ideas and new ways of looking at familiar aspects of human social life, although there have also been suggestions about how the course might be improved. Below, we include unedited qualitative feedback. In this extract, the student highlights the difference of the classroom experience, but appears to be positive about this difference:

Student 1

The way of teaching is different from China; it is a different learning experience. There is a lot of learning outside class. I know how to make myself fit the course and work outside class. It is not to teach you English but how to learn by yourself. Here it is independent learning. It is not only for study but to improve yourself.

In the two sets of comments below, the relevance of the discipline, through which the student is studying, is foregrounded:

Student 2

I want to integrate into the UK; this is very motivating. When I live in Newcastle Sociology is very interesting for this. Learning English depends on individuals and not on teacher.

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Student 3

If you don't know about the culture you can't communicate or contact. The content of the course helps in this way and how the society works and how it thinks; this especially helps to understand.

In the following comment, the student appears to have gained a new perspective on his intended degree subject, as a result of the course, besides acquiring greater autonomy:

Student 4

You learn some new knowledge and different thinking and see some differences. You have a new learning experience and you improve your ability for learning by yourself. Sociology is very interesting; it has taught me that when you do Business it is not only Business.

In the response below, the student mentioned becoming more cognizant of academic demands in a UK context:

Student 5

It has made us more aware of what we need to do in preparing for a seminar.

An interesting general feature of the above statements concerns the level of awareness raising that has emerged. Students appear not only to have improved their levels of English but also appear to have learned more about life. The emphasis on content, inherent in a theme based paradigm, and the relevance of that content and its generalisability to target study, are important when considering this feedback.

There were also some mixed responses to this theme-based pre-sessional course. A few students did not find the theme or some aspects of the course intrinsically interesting and this seemed to permeate their view of the course generally. A few responses indicated that the theme was not perceived as relevant or especially interesting but expressed satisfaction that the course had been a useful and appropriate learning experience (cf. Mohan, cited in Blanton 1992). Interestingly, among those students whose target study was not in a broad social science area (such as Engineering or Chemistry) there was positive feedback implying a personal response to the learning experience of following a theme-based course. In some instances the feedback echoed a concern with needing more English and a preoccupation with language form and system knowledge, an inevitable tension with any form of CBI approach and one frequently found throughout the research into CBI in general (Brinton & Holten 2001). One student pointed out his problems of pronunciation and

grammar and that more input is needed regarding these (an issue we deal with as it arises since we have found that this has proved far more fruitful than teaching language in isolation). Another suggestion was that even more writing tutorial time is needed (a not unsurprising suggestion given that students are well aware of the significance of their written work with reference to assessment in their target courses). In these cases of misunderstanding, it was noticeable that students were less aware of the aims of the course and the connection with real study requirements in a target discipline context, such that “people learn language and content simultaneously” (Crandall 1998: 2; see also Blanton 1992).

In particular, it has been also suggested, by staff, that more work might be done to enhance vocabulary development more systematically, and this should be built into course planning in an even more tightly scripted manner. By and large, however, and with respect to the comments and general feedback discussed above, we feel there has been an endorsement by learners of the approach we have taken. Interestingly, and significantly, comments have been more positive and enthusiastic, to date, than for traditional EAP courses conducted in the past, at this institution.

7. CONCLUSIONS: JUSTIFICATIONS FOR ADJUSTING THE PARADIGM

We have put forward arguments in favour of a theme-based approach to EAP. We have also outlined an EAP programme that reflects our theoretical rationale and the on-going demands of setting up a programme of this kind. We have drawn on research into CBI, albeit from outside the teaching and research context of British higher education, in support of our paradigm shift. Thus far, the idea of using Sociology material as a vehicle for language development and relevant content understanding seems to have worked well and supports our initial hypothesis. We consider that our approach constitutes an attempt to deal with the changing context of higher education and provides innovation in an area where traditional approaches to EAP have proved less than ideal for the needs of students on our own pre-sessional courses. Specific contextual and institutional factors have influenced our reorientation and facilitated this innovation. Intrinsic to our rationale for a theme-based paradigm is the need to prepare students at this level for the exigencies of undergraduate study and thus link EAP more directly to real study requirements and contexts.

We see this on-going experiment as a preliminary stage in a larger project, an evolving work in progress (with a similar kind of course offered to pre-sessional students targeting postgraduate study). The remit goes beyond a preoccupation with a generic common core, remedial language needs and

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coaching in study skills techniques largely characteristic of traditional conceptualisations and practices in EAP in British universities. Overall we have tried to introduce greater authenticity and validity in the pre-sessional EAP context, attempting to address students' intellectual, educational, as well as cultural and social needs.

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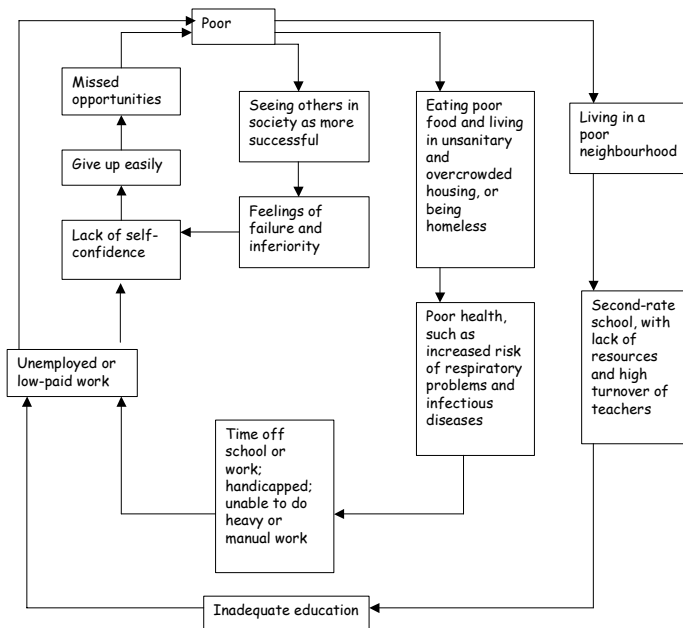
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APPENDIX 1

The example below encapsulates our approach to content and language in our theme-based paradigm. The material below is from the core text. This relates to the theme of ‘wealth, income and poverty’.

THE CYCLE OF DEPRIVATION

An explanation for poverty is what has been called the cycle of deprivation. This suggests that **poverty is cumulative**, in the sense that one aspect of poverty can lead to further poverty. This builds up into a **vicious circle** which the poor find hard to escape from, and then carries on with their children. The figure below illustrates examples of possible cycles of deprivation. The **problem with this explanation is that, while it explains why poverty continues, it does not explain how it begins in the first place**. The final type of explanation tries to do this (Browne 2005: 75).



Browne, K. (2005) *An Introduction to Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press (3rd edition), p.75. [Figure 4.9 Cycles of Deprivation]

The above is an example of task work used in a theme-based classroom. The diagram is an example of a modal form in which information may

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typically be represented in social science textbooks and in first year undergraduate reading texts. The focus is on understanding authentic content. Language practice and learning develop around this activity. Language is kept authentic and whole.

Students infer the meanings of the highlighted words in the linear text and relate this to the non-linear text. Intrinsic are the concept of cumulative effects and causes and the metaphor of a circle/cycle that is difficult to break.

This leads to a cooperative speaking exercise. A series of questions accompany the text to help students turn it into linear text and make it grammatical, for example:

- *What can be the result of living in a poor neighbourhood?*
- *How might this effect the standard of education received?*
- *What happens if a person does not get a good standard of education?*
- *How do the poor see others in society who are not in the same position as them?*
- *What can cause poor health?*

Students extrapolate what other factors might contribute to the 'cycle' to compound the 'vicious circle' of poverty. They are asked if they agree with the possible explanations presented. What options do people have? How can the cycle be broken? Can it also explain poverty in students' societies? If so, to what extent? How does British society differ from theirs? What aspects of life in students' societies would change the explanation given here? How does poverty begin?

The exercise is exploited to focus on the notion of cause and effect explanation. This may entail a review of functional forms (such as, 'leads to', 'causes', 'results in'). Also, cohesive devices for ordering points in writing are presented (including: 'for example', 'firstly', 'in addition', etc.). Students are engaged in a comprehension, fluency and writing accuracy activity, under the teacher's guidance, in other words: learners begin to grammaticize the text with support, so that they move from successive approximations (i.e., scaffolded learning) towards a grammatically accurate prose rendition of the figure. This leads into an individual or cooperative text-responsible writing activity which then culminates in peer review of individuals' written work.