

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back (and a Few to the Side): Embedding English Language Teaching in a Discipline Subject

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Abstract

At Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU), the compulsory English language provision consists of six credits of general and academic English in the first two years and two further credits of English, as part of the Discipline Specific Requirement (DSR), which focus on English for students' particular field of study, in Years 2-4. Most of these DSR language courses are stand-alone courses taught by the English Language Center (ELC) but in a few, the ELC teaching is embedded into a course run by the discipline department. In January 2015 the first of these embedded courses was rolled out, and six others were introduced by January 2018. Many are preparation courses for the students' Capstone (Final Year) Projects, which include input on research skills and expectations by the discipline department and language from the ELC. Embedded courses were new to the ELC, having been introduced as part of the university's response to the territory-wide education revamp, which reduced secondary schooling by one year and extended university study to four years. Course development involved learning the preconceptions, expectations and communication style of other disciplines. Often the approach to course design was very different and the value placed on English language training varied greatly between disciplines. The pattern of moves taken to achieve a workable course which aligned with the discipline department varied greatly between the different courses. This paper reflects on the practical implementation of embedding these English courses into the discipline subjects and the lessons learnt about this inter-departmental collaboration.

Keywords: adjunct courses, CBI, CLIL, embedded courses

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Introduction

In Hong Kong, the education system has been overhauled to reduce secondary education by one year, to six, and extend tertiary education from three to four years. The 2012-13 cohort was the first to begin university under the new system. Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) took the opportunity to broaden the students' education by using the extra year to include general education and language subjects as part of the General University Requirement (GUR) for graduation. This means essentially that the number of credits available for the 'Discipline Specific Requirement' (DSR), the subject of the students major, remained largely the same as previously in the new scheme of study.

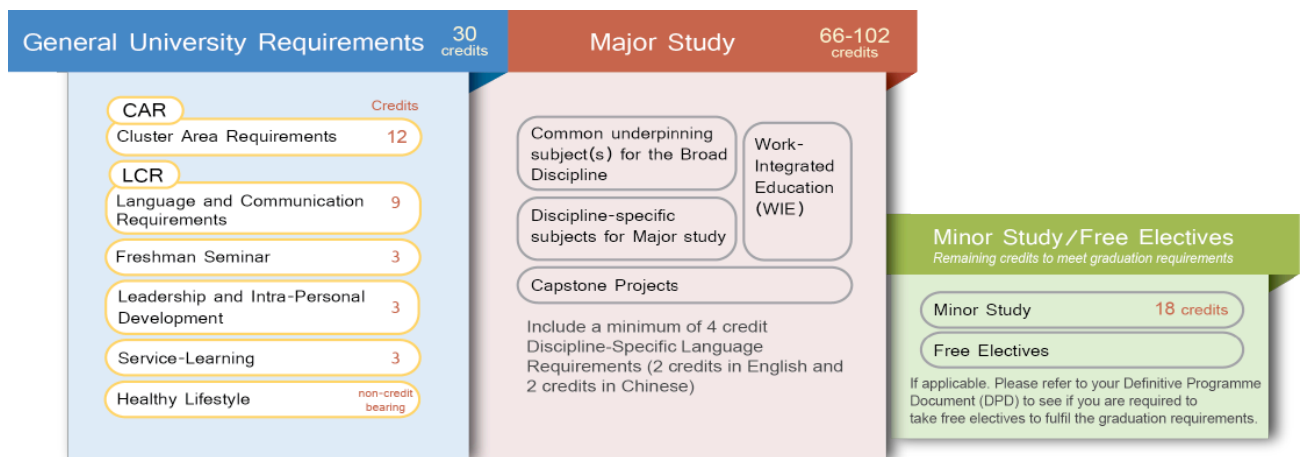


Figure 1: HKPU 4-year degree chart (HKPU, 2015)

As part of the GUR, students complete the Language and Communication Requirement (LCR), which consists of two 3-credit English language subjects and one 3-credit Chinese subject. Usually taken in the first year, the English subjects focus on Academic English (EAP) to support students as they begin their university studies.

In the previous curriculum, students usually took one English course of one to three credits, so this was an increase in the university's language requirement. In the new curriculum, however, students are also required to complete two credits of English and two of Chinese related to their major as part of the DSR. Naturally, there was initially some resentment from various stakeholders about the number of credits occupied by language in the curriculum. Many departments felt they were losing credits rather than gaining the extra curriculum space they were expecting an extra year of study to afford them.

In the face of resistance from departments, HKPU relaxed the DSR language requirement slightly. An alternative to the two credits of DSR language was introduced whereby the DSR language requirement could be embedded into a discipline subject of more than two credits. Without a clear specification of how much of this course the language requirement should comprise, it was left to the Language Centres to negotiate the number of hours of language individually with each department.

Theoretical background

In *embedded* or *adjunct* courses, the language support forms part of the content course, with the language teacher emphasizing the language skills needed to achieve the intended outcomes of the content course (Crandall, 1994). These classes emphasise acquisition of specific vocabulary or structures needed to complete the content side of the course (Davies, 2003). Research into content-based instruction (CBI) or content and language integrated learning (CLIL) suggests that eliminating the separation between the study of specialist content and language study encourages students to acquire the target language in a natural way (Madrid & Garcia, 2001). Since the language component of an adjunct course has a direct link to the students' academic needs, the students' motivation is higher, as they perceive the immediate relevance of the language class (Duenas, 2004). This is significant for those students who leave school convinced they are 'no good' at English, but who have to then take further English subjects at university, and fear that this will lower their GPA.

In order to implement an adjunct or embedded English component, both the content and language teachers need to work very closely together in order to synchronise the content and delivery of the different components. (Duenas, 2004). Students can become disillusioned and start to lose motivation if the two parts of the course do not seem to fit together. Of course, this kind of collaboration depends on support from individuals within a discipline department, which means there is vulnerability if there is a change in personnel when those individuals move on (Hyland, 2017).

Practical Reality

When the first embedded course rolled out in 2015, it was after extensive negotiation and preparation by both the ELC and the discipline department. The reality, however, was not as positive as the research had suggested. As the course progressed teachers encountered problems that had been completely unforeseen by the developers in both the ELC and the discipline department, such as scheduling, workload conflicts and assumptions about the cohort's EAP experience.

Despite the close collaboration of the two departmental representatives, the ELC learned over the first run of the course that a single representative did not necessarily represent all the different views of a department. While the English component began in Week 4 of a 13-week semester with four weeks of language for proposals in the schedule, teachers were confronted by angry students who had just submitted or would imminently submit their proposals. It emerged that while the academic stream of the discipline department's representative did indeed expect the proposal in Week 8, other streams had different timelines.

The discipline department responded very quickly to this situation, recognizing the differences between the streams and internally negotiating between the different streams another 'final' proposal submission after the English portion of the course. Later runs of the course did not include this as an issue, as all the streams were clear about the course timeline.

The course, run in Year 3, included preparation of a literature review, as the discipline department was keen for students to begin their background reading in preparation for

their Capstone Project work in Year 4. Having submitted their proposal, students were assigned a supervisor, who they would meet to refine their project title and scope, ready to begin their background reading. Both the ELC and discipline department representatives expected this mini literature review would ultimately form part of the project background in the final Capstone Project report.

Unfortunately, meeting Year 3 students was not part of a Capstone Project supervisor's workload. A significant number of students were unable to meet their supervisor to refine their topic, as their supervisors told them to come back when they were in Year 4 and researching their Capstone Project. The students continued to produce the literature reviews required by the ELC component of the course, but a number were ultimately unable to use their research, for when they met their supervisors their topic changed significantly and the work was no longer relevant. The ELC, in particular, was concerned that this would decrease student motivation. Students in the first cohort were highly motivated as the background research carried out for the literature review task was directly relevant to their individual project. The concern was that, as word spread from one cohort of students to the next, that the literature review was just a practice language task and may not be relevant to the final project, motivation and student engagement would drop significantly.

While this caused some significant discussion and negotiation between the supervisors and the Program Leader within the discipline department, by the second run of the course, this problem had largely been addressed and most supervisors accepted a brief meeting with their future cohort of Capstone Projects during Semester 2 of Year 3.

A final issue that emerged concerned Senior Year Admitted (SYA) students, of which HKPU has a significant number. These are students who have completed a Higher Diploma (HD) or Associate Degree (AD) at another tertiary institution and come to HKPU in the final two years of the degree program to top up their qualification to a Bachelor's Degree. While they, too, must complete the LCR that other students have taken in Years 1 and 2, most are exempted the ELC courses, because they have taken a similar University English course as part of their previous studies. Students coming from vocational training institutions, however, have often focused on Workplace English previously and do not have the EAP training of students from other institutions. They have to add the EAP subject into their full curriculum to meet the university's graduation requirements, but there is no timeframe specified and many defer it to the summer, when there is more curriculum space to make up missed courses.

The program that these Capstone Project students were taking included a large number of SYA students, who found themselves having to write a literature review with no prior background in EAP. Clearly, this was unsatisfactory for everyone. The SYA students were overwhelmed by the language expectations of the course; the ELC teachers struggled with issues of balancing course content and follow up support for classes composed of both SYA and 4-year curriculum students; and the students who had been studying at HKPU for three years, were dissatisfied at repeating material they had studied in Year 1. The student feedback at the end of the run of the course included comments such as "the course repeated what I learnt from the ELC in Years 1 & 2."

In this case, the discipline teachers had simply not realised what the LCR courses included, and the disadvantage the SYA students faced. They had thought advising SYA students to make up the course in the Summer was helping them by relieving the pressure of work during the semester time. Once they understood the situation, they advised later cohorts of SYA students to take the LCR subject in their first semester, or if that was impossible to timetable, concurrently with the Capstone Project preparation course in Semester 2.

Having learnt some lessons from this first run, other embedded DSR English courses were rolled out with a greater degree of success. Each time, however, there were some issues and a learning curve. One course squeezed the language component down to just over 0.5 credits. The English component is popular among students as it is so short (“We like the English part because it is short and focused”), but they perceive it as a stand-alone English course, as it bears little relevance to the course it is embedded into: “The present arrangement is no different to having two subjects. There’s not much integration in terms of contents between the (two) components.”

In negotiations with another discipline department, it became clear that the department’s representative was unsure what they wanted of the language component. The ELC produced a syllabus gleaned from numerous discussions about the students’ use of English in the discipline. Mid-way through the course, however, it became clear that what the students actually needed was somewhat different, and the language Subject Leader had to supplement the embedded course, with separate workshops for the students on specific language and grammar that was not included in the course. The workshop material became an integral part of later runs of the course.

Main Issues

The issues encountered in preparing the embedded courses can be distilled into four main areas: the reason that English is embedded in HKPU courses; the timing of the embedded courses; communication gaps; and the attitude of some departments to English as part of the DSR.

Reason for embedding English

The adjunct or embedded model of CLIL supposes that it is introduced to enhance the language acquisition and motivation of students towards language learning. In reality, at HKPU it was adopted in order to squeeze the number of credits allocated to language in a full curriculum. The departments that adopted it did so in order to reduce the two language credits required in the DSR. Where it has been reduced to 0.5 credits, the language component has become a negligible part of the curriculum, and where it is not integrated into the discipline subject, it becomes merely a stand-alone DSR English subject that circumvents the minimum language credit requirement. Given this background to the adoption of embedded subjects, the ELC will struggle to produce embedded English components that mirror the ideal adjunct course, offering language support that fits the needs of the students exactly.

Timing

The ELC is wholly dependent on the discipline departments for the timetabling of English subjects. Where this is done well, the embedded course works as it is intended. A different Capstone Project course for another discipline is offered at exactly the right time, while students are preparing their project report. The course involves students having content input from the discipline department, language input, time to write, consultations with both the language and content teachers, time for revision and further consultations before final submission. In this way students are supported as they write their Capstone Project Reports by both the content and language teachers throughout the process and they appreciate both components and how they complement each other. Students feedback shows that the course, “was useful because it included those details or small things that students often neglect.”

One of the continuing disadvantages with the first Capstone Project preparation course, described previously, is that it is taken during the semester before students begin their project, so the language component cannot support them as they write the report. The course, therefore, supports writing a project proposal and a brief literature review. It is probable that a more timely language component would be perceived more positively by both students and supervisors as it could address the issues that come up while students are writing the project report.

Communication gaps

It became clear to the ELC’s representatives, as the first few embedded courses rolled out, that although there were at times communication gaps between the ELC and the discipline departments that needed addressing, there were also significant communication gaps within the discipline departments. Each department nominated a representative to negotiate the syllabus with the ELC, and the ELC attempted to carry out a detailed needs analysis for each of the embedded courses, discussing the syllabus and materials with the discipline department representative at each stage. However, the English component that emerged from these discussions, while suiting the section or stream most closely associated with the representative, often did not fit with the other streams or programs in the discipline department.

One of the most important lessons that the ELC learnt from this process was to ask the representative to talk to other people in their department. This was not something that was initially considered, as there was an assumption that the representative represented the department as a whole. It became clear that most departments operated differently to the ELC expectation. In the ELC, teachers can be expected to teach any of the courses offered, and so everyone has some understanding of all the courses. Content teachers, by contrast, often teach their own area of expertise autonomously and do not necessarily know what happens on other programs or other streams. They have to be reminded to communicate, to ensure they are in a position to represent the department as a whole, not just their own area.

Attitude to English

As discussed previously, embedded subjects were introduced to placate departments that felt language was taking too many credits in the curriculum. This reflects the

attitude towards English in some discipline departments. The issue of SYA students is an important one for HKPU as it seeks to increase the number of these students, and it has created something of a dilemma. Students coming from these backgrounds often have entered tertiary education with a level of English lower than the minimum requirement for entry into HKPU. Most take English courses as part of their HD or AD, but their language proficiency is still lower than that of their counterparts who have been studying on the degree program since Year 1.

Those that enter without having taken EAP courses find themselves at a disadvantage. They should take the ELC EAP subjects, but previously were frequently told, 'It's only English. You can make it up in the summer.' As a student commented in the Staff-Student Consultative Meeting at the end of the semester, "The course isn't of much help to my studies because my discipline teachers are not really focused on English. It is acceptable if the ideas can be understood even if your English skill is not good."

In the case described above, the discipline subject reacted positively when it was indicated that these students were disadvantaged in the preparation of their literature reviews, and it took steps to position EAP in earlier in the curriculum. However, the 'it's only English' attitude is a common one, and while it prevails, embedded language courses will be unable to reach the full potential of the ideal adjunct course.

Conclusion

By beginning the discussions about the new courses several years in advance of the new curriculum, the HKPU ELC hoped to ensure that the courses would be successful in meeting the needs of the students in the new system. In some cases, it was the ELC that drove the discipline departments to anticipate the needs of their students ahead of the disciplines' own consideration of the new courses.

Embedded courses were new to all the stakeholders, and the learning curve was a steep one. It was perhaps, therefore, inevitable that the first course would raise a number of unforeseen issues on roll out, as no one had previous practical experience of an embedded or adjunct course. Unfortunately, the experience of that first embedded course had an impact on the staff of the ELC and there remain a number of ELC teachers who are reluctant to teach embedded courses, despite the greater success of later runs of both that course and other subsequent courses.

From this experience, it seems that for an embedded course to be truly successful, it needs to come from a desire truly to "equip students with the communicative skills to participate in (their) particular academic cultures" (Hyland, 2017). The ideal symbiotic course is one where the language enhances the students' ability to communicate as members of their discipline community, and the focus on the discipline increases the students' motivation to learn the language. When the embedded course is an expedient way to prevent language from claiming discipline credits, or is seen as "only English" to be inserted wherever there is a timeslot in the curriculum, this ideal can never be fully achieved.

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