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Developing Writing Skills for International Students:
Adopting a critical pragmatic approach

Abstract

The number of overseas finalists in the Business School of the University of NAME has increased recently particularly from the European Union, including the new accession states. While the level of functional English of students is acceptable, they are inadequately prepared for study in English, given that they are expected to complete a final year dissertation that requires the acquisition of new skills. Student time in the final year is restricted and the main challenge is to provide useful learning opportunities within a limited timescale. A critical pragmatic approach has been adopted in developing a programme of writing skills support which enables students to adapt quickly to the demands of study at final year undergraduate level. The approach follows a pragmatic tradition but recognises the importance of critical skills and the necessity to practice of such skills. Quantitative research into student attendance and achievement indicates that this approach has had a positive impact while findings indicate that this approach to academic writing might be beneficial in similar settings.

Keywords: academic, business, English, international, writing

> **Comment [AN1]:** Is this UG or PG? – please clarify throughout the paper

Introduction

One of the central debates in the area of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) concerns the underlying principles on which courses are designed. This debate has largely been presented as a choice between two competing paradigms: Pragmatic EAP, where students learn discourse they might be expected to use in higher education and Critical EAP, where learners gain an

insight into the same discourse but with the expectation that they will not accept this without first challenging the need to adapt to such norms as providing references for evidence, avoiding the use of the first person and using tentative language.

Critical pragmatism in academic writing is explained by both (Harwood & Hadley, 2004) and (Hyland, 2006, p.33) as a route which can draw on both of these paradigms. An EAP course which is founded on critical pragmatism is likely to guide students towards the desired conventions and discourse while at the same time encouraging students to think critically. However, this discussion cannot exclusively be constructed around a debate about pedagogic ideology due to other influences impinging upon EAP courses. As (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002) indicate, the degree to which teachers and lecturers are free to deliberate within this debate can be limited by the context in which courses take place. This paper will present one particular context in which a course in EAP has developed. It will present the circumstances in which the course has evolved and show how it attempts to account for the debate concerning critical and pragmatic EAP. It will present one session from an in-sessional EAP course with voluntary attendance. The session presented attempts to show that while pragmatic considerations underpin the content and design of the course, critical pedagogy is a major consideration.

EAP sessions in the Business School

The Business School at the University of NAME, has taken the view that not only are there pedagogical reasons why assistance should be offered to international students , but that they are obliged to provide assistance, given the difficulties and dilemmas faced by many overseas students. (Jones, 2000, p.39) Academic Skills Tutors in the Business School have been able to meet the demands of EU students by initiating the series of sessions discussed in this paper. In doing so, tutors have had to consider the approaches to, and format of, sessions which would be most effective in teaching and supporting

academic writing. The sessions are exclusively for students in the Business School and therefore concerns over variations in academic written discourse between disciplines are likely to be fewer when compared with courses for students studying across the disciplines. An EAP course underpinned by critical principles will thus aim to help students develop critical minds towards academic conventions and discourses.

The sessions are open to all final year students, all of whom attend voluntarily and receive no credits towards their degree for doing so. Students are looking for guidance with their writing and the sessions attempt to provide those who chose to attend with some conventions regarding reference lists and citation and plagiarism, while also offering advice on other aspects of writing such as paragraph construction and writing introductions and conclusions. It is within this pragmatic framework that critical pedagogy can be considered.

The support provided is most keenly sought by overseas students, particularly those from the European Union (EU); and increasingly from the new accession states of Eastern Europe, who enter directly on to the final year of undergraduate degree courses offered by the School. Students are required to complete a final year dissertation and, depending on degree options, a number of other written assignments. Students arrive at the University in September and are required to complete by May. During this time they are expected to agree a dissertation topic; research; write and evaluate it. These are onerous academic challenges for UK students, but for students whose first language is not English, and who have to quickly learn new academic skills with which they were previously unfamiliar, it represents a major challenge.

Growing Involvement with International Students particularly from the European Union (EU)

Academic skills tutors have become increasingly involved in providing assistance to overseas students, including those from the EU against a

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Comment [AN3]: Again this needs to be nearer the front of the paper

background of what has been described as an "immature".... "market for international higher education" where both the scale of demand from overseas students and the country of origin of students is changing and remains unpredictable (Sastry, 2006). In these circumstances it should be noted that the Business School has one of the highest numbers of overseas students in the University. Overall, the proportion of overseas students excluding those from the EU in the Business School is approximately ten per cent of all students while the percentage of EU students in the School is around four per cent of all students. However, as seen in Figure 1 by far the most significant development of non-UK recruitment has been the growth in students from the new accession states of the EU in Eastern Europe.

Figure 1.   Growth in number of EU students in the Business School by country of domicile
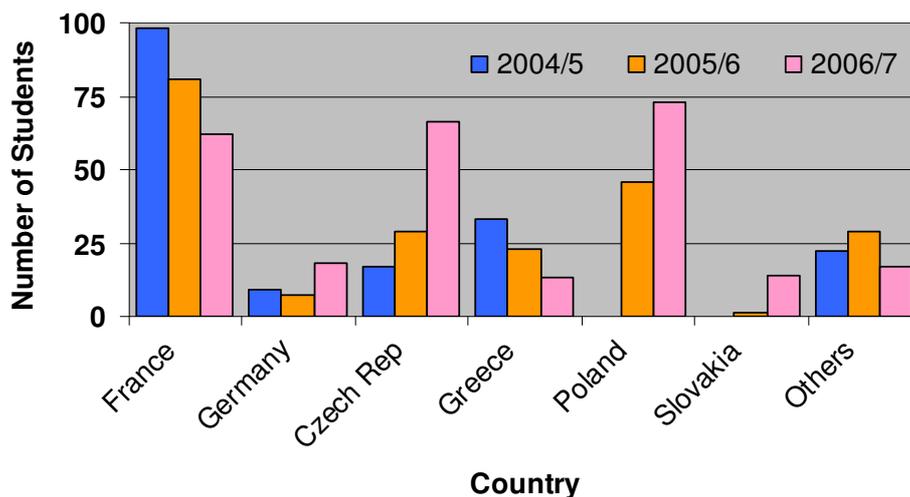
There is a strong desire, especially in Eastern Europe to study in a higher education environment where communication is in English and this aspiration is particularly evident amongst business students. (Aston, 2004, p.52) This expansion has been such that Czech and Polish students now have greater representation in the School than French students who have traditionally formed the largest cohort of EU students. The expectation is that student numbers from new accession states are likely to increase still further.

EU Students: The Challenge and the Opportunity

The students represent a pedagogical a challenge for the Business School. The subject knowledge of EU students is good while levels of functional English are satisfactory. However, students have limited experience of writing English at this level and at the length required. Coupled with this is limited prior involvement with associated tasks such as reading academic texts and journal articles; undertaking advanced research and academic referencing. Many students have familiarity with only traditional forms of assessment such as examinations. The challenge they bring has informed the way academic skills in the Business School has responded to enable these students to become effective learners in a UK higher education environment. Academic skills assistance helps these students not only acquire new skills, but also adjust to UK higher education by guiding students through "academic orientation" (Macrae, 1997, p.139) recognising that problems of 'adjustment' are most acute for overseas students. (Carroll, 2005, p.26). EU students who enter the School as final year undergraduate students are required to make this 'adjustment', learn new academic skills and complete a dissertation in English. Moreover, as Jones indicates, students not only face a tight time schedule, they are also confronted by "practical constraints" and "financial pressures" (Jones, 2000, p.39) including frequently having to work part-time while there are also political and institutional challenges to consider. Foremost is the fact that EU students, including those from new accession states have the same funding status as UK students. (Aston, 2004, p.3) with the results that there is no additional funding available to assist these students with extra study or writing skills support or English language instruction. The sessions have been developed with the aim of quickly enabling students to tackle some of the reading, writing and associated tasks they require to successfully complete their degree studies.

Arbitrating between critical and pragmatic approaches to the teaching of academic writing

For a number of years the relative merits of pragmatic and critical approaches to the teaching of academic writing have been discussed. (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p.9) have considered whether it "is the EAP teacher's task to replicate and reproduce existing forms of discourse" (a pragmatic approach) or whether it is "to develop an understanding of them so that they can be challenged" (a critical approach).

Pragmatic approaches to the teaching of academic writing attempt to instruct students in how to adapt their writing to the norms required by university. (Hyland, 2006, p.31) explains that when guided by this approach "students … are judged by their control of the discourses of their disciplines". (Allison, 1996, p.87) also sees a pragmatic approach as taking "account of contextual possibilities and constraints". Therefore, an EAP course underpinned by pragmatic principles should help students write in ways which those who read their papers will find most accessible and acceptable.

By contrast, a critical approach requires an investigation of writing and encourages students to challenge the institutional norms. (Harwood & Hadley, 2004, p.357) note that "critical approach condemns Pragmatic EAP for making no attempt to question the desirability of reinforcing these predominant norms" (Harwood & Hadley, 2004, p.357).Furthermore, (Ivanic, 1998, p.337) advocates lessons in "Critical Approaches to Academic Discourse" explaining that this approach involves students "not just passively receiving knowledge and advice, but searching for understandings which will be of direct use to them, which will open up new fields of vision and new perspectives". Further support for a critical approach to the teaching of academic writing is provided by (Harwood & Hadley, 2004) and (Hyland, 2004) who explain that since there are considerable variations between disciplines, a single academic literacy does not exist. However, despite the fact that there are often considerable variations in the writing demands within disciplines, the academic writing that students might be expected to produce within a discipline may require a degree of consistency.

> **Comment [AN4]:** Again this is the focus of the paper and it is on p.7 – the introduction is too long please get to this a lot quicker.

Despite promoting a critical approach to writing instruction, (Clark, 1992, p.136) recommends four conventions which students should follow in academic writing. These conventions are:

- "you must substantiate your arguments"
- "your arguments must be relevant to your stated aims"
- "you must not plagiarise"
- "you should follow a recognised referencing convention and be consistent"

Beyond this, Clark sees other conventions as "open to legitimate challenge". (Clark, 1997, p.136). However, (Pennycook, 1997, p.264) argues that these conventions should also be challenged by adopting a comprehensive critical approach to academic writing. However, despite the arguments in favour of supporting an approach underpinned by critical pedagogy, (Lillis, 2006, p. 33) indicates that "as a design framework it has yet to be developed".

Promoting Critical Pragmatism

The concept of critical pragmatism is explained by (Harwood & Hadley, 2004) as an attempt to reconcile these two competing paradigms. Indeed, (Hyland,2006, p.33) explains that EAP is " plurality of practices and possibilities in different contexts" and goes on to explain critical pragmatism as recognising that there are many "locally effective ways to help students demystify the academic worlds in which they find themselves" (Hyland, 2006, p.34). The series of sessions which form the focus of the current paper fall into this category, since the context in which the sessions take place is a relatively new but growing one; large numbers of students from the new European accession states studying in the UK for one year in order to 'top up' their qualifications to honours degree level and at the same time improve their English.

This context presents little time for the students to spend considering their academic writing. Given this, Clark's four conventions, mentioned above, are

particularly appropriate to advance to the students. Indeed, those concerning plagiarism and referencing conventions are considered vital in the context of these sessions since failure on the part of students to account for these in their writing can have serious consequences. A further convention which is given a great deal of emphasis in the sessions is the need to be cautious in any claims that are made. Since all the students are studying a business subject then this seems to be an important convention to follow.

The approach, while rooted in pragmatic considerations, contains elements of critical pedagogy which influence the design. In accordance with the views of (Ivanic, 1998) some sessions attempt to encourage students to actively explore topics and encounter features of academic discourse rather than being presented with conventions. The motive for this is however more concerned with the critical approach that the students need to develop in their studies in general than it is with developing a critical approach to their academic writing. Furthermore, since the sessions are run in parallel with the students' degree course, they provide meaningful input that the students are able to use immediately in their writing.

Critical Pragmatism: constraints on learning and on lesson planning

An important factor in advancing the notion of critical pragmatism in planning these sessions is their location in the overall curriculum and the time available for learning to take place. The sessions have to compete within the curriculum under time constraints. These include a lack of space in the timetable for students to attend the sessions, the rising number of students who are in part-time employment and the short duration of the degree programme. This has resulted in sessions which are as much concerned with raising awareness of relevant writing conventions as practising writing.

The Design of a Session

This section provides details of one of the sessions used in the EAP series, providing a rationale for its design. Whereas as many of the sessions are entirely concerned with writing, this session is noteworthy in that it has learning outcomes which also relate to reading. The main aim of the session is to familiarise the students with the use of journal articles and is currently the fourth week in the series. However, since session topics introduced during previous weeks are revisited then the learning outcomes develop this aim in a broad sense. Therefore, the general objectives to which this session contributes are:

- to develop a framework for reading and taking notes from a journal article
- to develop a critical approach to reading
- to know how to use citation conventions (citation introduced in the third week)
- to understand why reference lists should not contain errors (reference lists introduced in the second week)

Evidence from the session has shown that for many it is the first occasion on which they will have read a journal article and that those with experience of reading such articles will probably not have thought about a framework before.

The Choice of Articles

The session begins by asking the students to note the names of the sections in two journal articles concerned with the accuracy of reference lists, namely (Spivey & Wilks, 2004) and (Oermann & Ziolkowski, 2002). Neither article is from the area of business since after an extensive search of the literature no articles on the topic were found in business journals. (Oermann & Ziolkowski, 2002), as with the majority of published research on the subject of reference lists and citations, is from the field of health science while (Spivey & Wilks, 2004), from social work, claim that it is "an unexplored issue" in discipline. The

preponderance of research into reference lists and citation in health sciences compared with other disciplines does not seem to relate to any particular feature of health sciences. Arguments in support of reference list or citation accuracy provided by (Lee & Lee, 1999), (Oermann & Ziolkowski, 2002), (Amen *et al*, 2005) and (Lok *et al*, 2001) apply equally to other academic fields. Indeed the only evidence found in the literature in support of why research into reference lists and citation is so prevalent in the heath sciences relates to the frequency with which such errors occur in medical journals with (Lucić *et al*, 2004) reporting a surprising level of inaccuracy in medical journals and (O'Connor, 2002, p.141) concluding poor reference accuracy to be "a common problem in medical literature".

The use of (Spivey & Wilks, 2004) and (Oermann & Ziolkowski, 2002) as the source material in this session is further justified by the layout of the sections (similar to those read by students in their studies) and their brevity (six pages each). The overall layout and sections of the two articles being compared are not identical to each other but are similar to articles students might read in their own subject. Furthermore since the students are already thinking about their final year dissertation there is an opportunity to note the similarities that may exist between the layouts of each article and their dissertation.

Using the Articles

Following this initial activity, the students begin answering a series of questions, including 'Why are reference lists important?' and 'Why are errors in reference lists so serious?' Table 1 shows a list of possible answers to these questions noted from each article. The list shows that while similar answers can be found in each article, some differences are identified.

Table 1.   Possible answers to questions set in lesson

(Oermann & Ziolkowski, 2002)	(Spivey & Wilks, 2004)
Why are reference lists important?	
• Resource for readers	• Find background information

• Help readers to expand understanding, learn what has been published, note gaps, see different viewpoints. • Reader can trace the work of an author • Show the currency of the literature	in an area • Construct citation indexes • Workout faculty production • Develop rankings
Why are errors in reference lists so serious?	
• Prevent retrieval of references • Authors my not be recognised • Waste reader time • Impede computer searches	• Prevent retrieval of references • Cast doubt on the care taken by the author • Compromise the author's credibility • Annoy future researchers

This is an important stage as it may be the first time that some students have considered differences in texts on the same subject and therefore may constitute their first steps towards critical reading. Students often comment that in their home universities they are not encouraged to question or consider different stances taken in the literature.

When the students have spent twenty minutes answering these and other questions they then begin to draft a response to the task: 'Reference lists are essential in academic writing and must be produced accurately. Discuss.' They use the answers and quotes provided from other articles on the topic to help them draft relevant paragraphs. After a short time the tutor then circulates and makes individual suggestions focussing on evidence and use of citation.

This session, as with all sessions in the series, is driven by pragmatic considerations; the students need to be able to extract the information they require from journal articles and ensure they observe the required referencing standards when using the information in their writing. However, it attempts to encourage students to begin adopting a critical approach to their studies by encouraging them to recognise that writers in the same field may

not adopt the same position on a topic. This contributes to an overarching aim of helping students to show critical awareness in their writing.

The Student Response to the Sessions

The response to the sessions has been positive. The first indication of the value of the sessions concerns attendance.

Table 2.   Attendance Data for the EAP sessions

Year	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8
Attendance/week (average) [1]	26.0	43.3	80.5	96.9
Cohort size [2]	48	89	130	158
Attendances [3]	260	433	805	969
'Take up' [4]	54%	49%	62%	61%

[1] Average weekly attendance for the first 10 sessions.

[2] The number of students on the main degree courses to which the sessions are targeted

[3] Student attendances from the main degree courses to which the sessions are targeted.

[4] The percentage attendance at the sessions by students from the main degree courses to which the sessions are targeted.

The attendance data presented in Table 2 shows attendance at the first ten sessions for each year and excludes the remaining sessions which students are encouraged not to attend if the topic is not directly relevant to their dissertation research. Attendance at the classes is voluntary but has grown roughly in line with the growth in recruitment of EU students. Table 2 shows that attendance has grown over the four years that the sessions have been offered to students. However, the growth in the number of students and reduction in opportunities to attend each week has resulted in average classes becoming considerably larger. Table 2 also shows the 'Take up', the proportion of students attending from the cohort, to be slightly increased as the cohort has increased over the four year period. This may be partially

explained by the fact that from 2006/7 two sessions per week appeared on the official timetable at times when large numbers might be expected to be able to attend.

Student Evaluation of the Session

Table 3.   Mean scores of student evaluations by year (scale 1 to 5)

YEAR	1) How relevant was the content?	2) How would you rate your learning?	3) How would you rate the quality of the materials used?	4) How would you rate the quality of the workshop?
scale	1= Not at all relevant 5= Completely relevant	1= very poor 5= very good	1= very poor 5= very good	1= very poor 5= very good
2004/5	4.31	4.19	4.31	4.38
2005/6	4.44	4.31	4.28	4.51
2006/7	4.53	4.33	4.17	4.50
2007/8	4.52	4.15	4.05	4.37

Towards the end of the first term the students complete a brief evaluation of the sessions which includes some questions which require responses on a scale of one to five. The mean of responses for the four years from 2004/5 to 2007/8 are produced in Table 3 above. The use of such scale questions can be controversial, particularly if means are derived from the scale (Boslaugh and Watters, 2008) as is the case here. However, the means of the responses are useful in providing a general indication as to student feelings about the classes.   Table 3 supports the generally positive view that students have towards the sessions with the mean responses to the questions averaging 4 or above in all four years. The most positive response concerns the relevance of the session content which has seen a general increase in its average over the four years. The series was conceived based upon student demand for academic writing topics and the topics included alterations based on the student feedback. Therefore, the small increase in

perceived relevance might be expected. The perceived quality of the material used has seen a small decline over the four year period which may indicate that some materials require updating and that whereas some approaches were appropriate when the group sizes were small, the same approach is less successful in lecture size groups; the session described here is one such example as the lecturer is unable to provide feedback individually to students in large groups.

The remaining questions in the evaluation asked for comments and these have also generally been positive. Many students commented on the usefulness of the content with a few feeling that the classes should be compulsory. One student even went as far as to say "This is one of the lectures that I am looking forward to every Friday", while another stated, "I couldn't find a better way to make students involved". Not all views expressed were positive, however, with the main areas of concern coming from those who were expecting the sessions to address issues relating to general English and those who either felt the sessions were rushed and should be longer. Furthermore, in the 2007/8 evaluation a few noted that the group sizes should be smaller.Figure 2. Degree Classifications and Attendance (2004/5 –
2006/7)
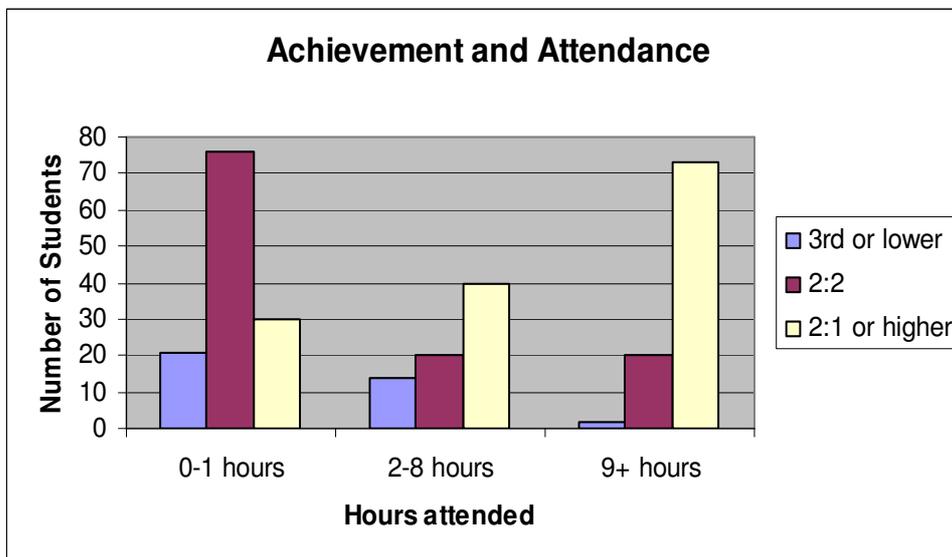
Finally, the degree classifications which are achieved by students studying on the course suggest that the sessions may have a positive impact. Figure 3 above shows degree classifications against sessions attended and indicates that students who regularly attend sessions tend to gain higher grades than peers who attend sporadically or not at all. The impact of the sessions on student performance is, however, difficult to determine since there are a large number of variables that could not only influence the grades achieved by students but also their ability to attend the classes. The classes are offered at times when large numbers of students are able to attend, however, there are always some who have clashes with all sessions. Another factor may be the rise of part-time working by full-time students. This results in non-compulsory sessions, such as these, being a low priority for students. A further factor influencing the relationship between student attendance at the sessions and student performance on their degree is likely to be that many of those who attend are among the keenest students, while some of those who would most benefit from the sessions never attend.

Conclusion

Academic skills tutors in the Business School of the University of NAME have responded to the challenge of quickly equipping overseas students with the required writing and associated skills in order to complete the final 'year' of their degree course through the pursuit of a critical pragmatic approach. This support has made it possible to meet the learning requirements of these students in a meaningful and effective way which student evaluation has clearly shown to be valuable. It is believed that adopting a critical pragmatic method has allowed students to acquire new skills in a short space of time and through it help them develop the "challenging and inquiring attitude to their studies and fields of practice" mentioned by (Hyland, 2006, p.34). While the position outlined here might be perceived as a singular response to a certain set of rather challenging, but not entirely unique range of circumstances within the ambit of teaching EAP it should be noted that the principles are being adopted in an expanded fashion in several other learning

environments within the Business School, for example in work with students making the transition from foundation to honours degree. Moreover, concern expressed by some staff regarding issues relating to writing conventions and unease over the unwillingness of students to adopt a critical stance in their writing, has lead to the approach discussed in this paper being incorporated into a core year one Accountancy module with expansion into core modules in other business subjects likely to follow. Consequently, it is felt that the critical pragmatic approach has much wider applicability to a variety of learning situations in which students have to acquire writing skills where time and other practical constraints might intrude.

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