7 EAP 4.0: Transforming the English for Academic Purposes Toolkit to meet the evolving needs and expectations of digital students

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Abstract

The English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Toolkit provides a wide range of online learning resources which are used in a mixture of self-study, blended, and classroom settings, primarily by students whose first language is not English. The Toolkit was developed by the eLanguages team at the University of Southampton and first licensed in 2004. This paper describes the most recent major refreshment project to improve both the functionality and appearance of the Toolkit. With the latest updates, we have aimed to increase the appeal of the resources to encourage greater autonomous usage by students, and to improve the ease with which staff can recommend and use Toolkit resources with their students. In this paper we introduce the key updates to the resources, including new functionalities and features, expanding the Toolkit with additional learning resources, a new visual approach, responsive feedback, accessibility upgrades, and strategies for increasing student usage.

Keywords: EAP, blended learning, self-study, English, TEL.

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1.   Introduction

The EAP Toolkit (eLanguages, 2020a) is a set of interactive online learning resources for students whose first language is not English. The Toolkit was first launched in 2004 and has been licensed by a range of institutions within the UK and internationally.

The Toolkit consists of materials in the form of Learning Objects (LOs), which may be used as standalone resources or as part of a structured course (Polsani, 2003). The LOs are suitable for students' self-study and for blended use within a classroom.

The purpose of the transformation project, the most ambitious refreshment since 2014, is to enhance the usefulness of the resources in the following five ways, each of which will be detailed in this article:

- expanding the range of resources available in the Toolkit;

- improving the accessibility of the resources within the Toolkit, including adding captions to audio and video materials;

- providing structured learning for students and tutors using the Toolkit;

- producing publicity materials to encourage students and tutors to use the Toolkit at licensing institutions; and

- improving the 'look and feel' of the Toolkit.

Since the Toolkit was first licensed in 2004, digital learning has become more widely used by institutions. Alongside this, students have come to expect more from their digital resources. As such, it was important to refresh the Toolkit in line with wider web design progression to ensure that the resource remains relevant and enjoyable for students to use.

2.   Expanding the range

The EAP Toolkit started with 86 LOs in 2004 and was expanded to 100 in 2007. A further expansion to 114 LOs took place in 2011. Since 2011, a number of institutions have taken out institutional licences to use the Toolkit with native speakers of English as well as those with a different first language. As a result, it was felt that broadening the range and depth of resources by integrating some from the Study Skills Toolkit (produced in the same format as the EAP Toolkit but aimed at native English speakers) would be a way to adapt the Toolkit to suit how it is being used. This has expanded the resource set to 130 LOs.

3.   Accessibility

To improve the accessibility of the Toolkit and bring all aspects in line with the Public Sector Accessibility Regulations, it was important to implement captions for all audio clips (Legislation.gov.uk, 2018). To achieve this, transcripts were created alongside audio timings. These were constructed into a video text track file for each clip.

To both improve the accessibility of the LOs and add variety to existing resources, it is planned that existing videos will be re-recorded alongside a provision of new videos. All videos will be recorded with clear visibility of speakers' mouths to enable users to lip-read, with captions provided alongside (see Figure 1). These provisions not only improve the accessibility of the Toolkit for users with hearing impairments, they also augment the overall usability of the resources provided.

Figure 1.   An example audio clip with accompanying captions

4.   Structured learning

The EAP Toolkit has traditionally had a simple, hierarchical structure. Each of the LOs was categorised into one of seven folders, depending on its core skill area. It was felt that, with the expansion of the resource set, this linear approach could be enhanced by providing additional routes and directions for students and tutors on how to make best use of the resources.

Prepare for Success (eLanguages, 2020b; Watson, 2009), an online pre-arrival course for international students, has a set of guided routes through the resources on the website called 'Study Pathways'. This course was developed using a similar learning object model, by the same team. It was felt that this model would be a good concept to adapt for the EAP Toolkit, allowing users to choose LOs according to which skill or topic they hope to improve. We implemented a 'tags and pathways' approach to organising LOs in the Toolkit, as this was felt to be an accessible means of organising resources. In order to implement this 'tags and pathways' approach, each LO was assigned a number of keywords, and the 15 most frequently occurring keywords became tags directing users to the corresponding LOs (see Figure 2). With this refreshed structure it is hoped that users will be able to optimise their learning by choosing to complete LOs which are specifically relevant to their own learning needs.

Figure 2. Icons for the new pathways and tags feature
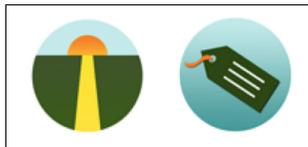
5.   Publicity

Several institutions have struggled to find ways to engage students in using the EAP Toolkit for self-study. As a consequence, it was decided that an internal

promotion pack would help institutions to be able to increase student usage. The pack consists of templates for posters and bookmarks which can be customised and used to direct students towards the Toolkit. There are also suggested study uses in the pack, to encourage tutors to use the resources for specific purposes in a blended context in the classroom (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Example of a customised internal publicity poster

6.   Look and feel

It was important to update the appearance of the EAP Toolkit to make it more modern-looking and improve the existing mobile experience for users. As

a result, the Toolkit's style was updated to present an up-to-date, sleek, and engaging style. As part of this, a cohesive colour scheme was implemented across the Toolkit to facilitate a joined-up user experience. The structure of LOs was also updated to improve their appearance and usability on mobile devices. To ensure these updates were appropriate for a wide range of devices, the Toolkit underwent thorough testing across a variety of devices and browsers, including Android and iOS phones and tablets, as well as Chrome, Safari, Opera, Firefox, and Edge. The style was further updated through the implementation of the aforementioned 'tags and pathways' system, which improves the organisation of LOs and enables users to select activities based on the skills and themes particularly relevant to each individual.

A significant element of the update was the redesigning of the Toolkit's icons. Key to this was the implementation of a cohesive colour scheme alongside simple yet modern icons. Following the rough outline and drafting of possible ideas, the icons were designed in Adobe Photoshop (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. The six updated icons representing weblinks, instructions, dictionaries, feedback, summaries and the glossary (left to right)

7.   Conclusions

Since the Toolkit's last major refreshment in 2014, approaches to web design have evolved significantly. As a result, these stylistic changes warranted updating the Toolkit's look and feel to make it more in keeping with these developments. Added to this, it was important to ensure the content remained current.

Although these updates are in the preliminary stages of implementation, it is felt that, with the completion of this refreshment project, the EAP Toolkit's usability

and appeal to both students and staff will be enhanced. With the increased number of resources provided, the refreshed style and structure of the Toolkit will enable students to navigate the range of resources with greater ease to address specific topics and skills requiring improvement. In turn, with the addition of captions for all audio and video clips, the Toolkit will become more appealing and accessible to users. Ultimately, these updates enhance users' experiences of the Toolkit, facilitating more targeted, effective, and enjoyable digital learning.

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Edited by Kate Borthwick and Alessia Plutino