

# Solving the problems of designing and teaching a packed English for Specific Purposes course

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## Abstract

*Background:* In an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course offered to a department in a university in Hong Kong preparing the students for their internship, students were expected to learn to write and engage in spoken activities related to a number of documents over a period of 13 weeks. Having to achieve so many learning outcomes within so short a period of time, course designers and teachers encountered problems.

*Aims and methods:* This paper describes an attempt to solve the problems arising from such a packed course in several ways through action research. These ways include (1) gradually moving from a consciousness-raising genre-based teaching method to an approach with less reliance on samples in teaching, (2) contextualizing all the tasks, and (3) working out group drafts from several individual drafts. The students' reactions to these three implemented solutions were investigated through questionnaires. How they felt about the course design and the teaching methods, the reasons for their preference, the problems that they faced when each method was applied and possible solutions to their problems were reported.

*Conclusion:* Results show that the students were positive towards all the solutions implemented indicating that these were workable solutions to the problems arising from the packed course. Suggestions on how the solutions could be further improved were made.

**Keywords:** action research, English for Specific Purposes course, genre-based teaching

## 解決一個濃縮的專用英語課程的課程設計及教學問題

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## 摘要

**背景：**在香港一個預備大學生在工場實習的專用英語課程裏，學生需要在十三週之內學習如何就多類文體從事寫作及講述的活動。要在這樣短時間內達成這麼多學習目標，課程設計者及老師都遇到困難。

**目的及方法：**本文嘗試透過行動研究，用三種方法去解決一個濃縮的課程所引發的問題：

- 1) 由一種提高學生對體裁為本的教學方法，漸漸轉移至一種較少倚賴文體樣本的教學方法；
- 2) 將所有課程活動配上來龍去脈；
- 3) 由幾份個別的初稿結合成一個集體的作品。

這研究透過問卷，探討學生對這三個解決方法的反應。報告他們對這些方法的意見，他們取向的原因，實行這些方法時可能遇到的問題及解決問題的建議。

**結論：**研究結果顯示學生對三種方法的回應都很正面，表示三種方法都是解決從一個濃縮的課程引發出來的問題的可行出路。本文會提出進一步改善這三種方法的建議。

**關鍵詞：**行動研究、濃縮的專用英語課程、體裁為本教學

## **INTRODUCTION**

Discipline-specific English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses are often offered to different departments in the universities in Hong Kong to develop students' English communication skills needed in the workplace and/or in an academic setting. For example, in the university in which this study was carried out, a number of ESP courses are offered to different departments each year.

In the course of this study, upon the request of the parent department, a Communication Skills course in Computing whereby students were expected to learn to write and engage in spoken activities related to a number of documents in one ESP course was provided to help them with their communication skills during their internship. Based on the recommendations of an accreditation body, the parent department requested that their students should learn how to conduct a meeting, write an agenda, minutes, a memorandum report, a letter and a technical proposal, and give an oral presentation, each of these constituting a course objective or course intended learning outcome (CILO), over a 13 week course. Thus, there were 7 CILOs in this course. The course had to be so packed because students were expected to be prepared through this single course for the communicative tasks needed for their placement in the sandwich year of their programme.

Having to achieve so many learning outcomes within such a short period of time, course designers and teachers encountered problems related to the design of the course, the tasks, assignments and the teaching methods. The problems were intensified due to the fact that the university required the course to be taught in an outcomes-based teaching and learning (OBTL) setting. In this setting, the teaching and learning activities (TLAs) and assessment tasks

(ATs) had to align with the course intended learning outcomes (CILOs)(Biggs and Tang 2007). In turn, the teaching and learning activities were expected to be student-centered (with students engaged in group tasks most of the time playing simulated roles of Computer Consultants and Clients with the teacher being a facilitator) and each intended learning outcome having to be assessed through an assessment task.

This paper attempts to take the readers through the action research process of solving the above-mentioned problems and through feedback from the students on the implemented solutions to evaluate the appropriateness of the solutions and explore how the solutions could be further improved.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR SOLVING THE PROBLEMS**

To solve the problems arising from the packed ESP course in this study, a procedural framework was developed by the teacher-researcher based on concepts related to Action Research. Action Research is a self-reflective, critical and systematic approach to explore a teacher's own teaching context (Burns 2010). In this kind of research, a problematic situation which is worth investigating is identified and certain actions are taken to "intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes, and even better, improvements in practice" (Burns 2010:2).

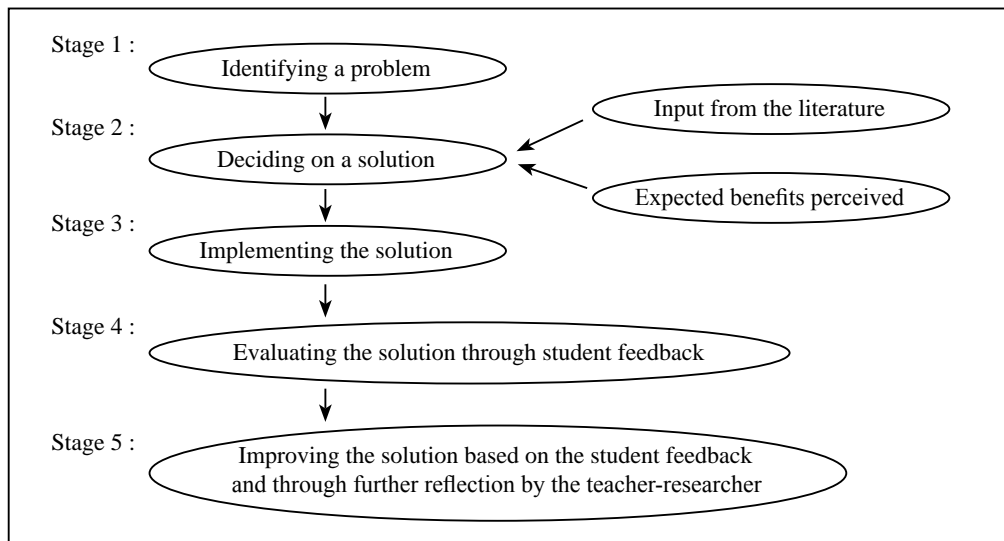
Kemmis and McTarggart (1988:14) list the procedure of action research as: to reflect on action, plan, act, observe and revise the plan. Bailey (2001) summarizes the procedure as "systematic, iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflection", which are the basic steps to follow in carrying out action research. Cohen and Manion (1994) on the

other hand, elaborate the procedure to meet more needs. They (1994:198-199) suggest that when a problem is diagnosed in a specific context, an attempt should be made to solve the problem within that context. They list 8 stages and 8 steps that may be followed when carrying out action research:

- Stage one - Identification, evaluation and formulation of the problem
- Stage two - Preliminary discussion and negotiations among the interested parties
- Stage three - A review of the research literature
- Stage four - A modification or redefinition of the initial statement of the problem at stage One
- Stage five - Selection of research procedures
- Stage six - The choice of the evaluation procedures to be used
- Stage seven - Implementation of the project
- Stage eight - Overall evaluation of the project.

These are very practical steps. However, as suggested by Cohen and Manion (1994:198), the above framework is only a review of procedures in general terms. An appropriate model may need to be selected to meet the needs of the situation in question. In this study, as only one teacher-researcher was involved and the duration of the course was only 13 weeks, based on the framework suggested by Cohen and Manion (1994), the teacher-researcher re-developed a set of simplified procedures to fit the scope of the present study. The procedures as shown in Figure 1 were followed when an attempt was made to solve the problems encountered in relation to the design and teaching of the packed ESP course in this study.

Figure. 1: The procedural framework for solving the problem



First, the problems were identified, and the solutions to the problems were decided on based on the input from the literature and the expected benefits

to the students as perceived by the teacher-researcher. The solutions were then implemented and evaluated through student feedback. The teacher-researcher

had taught the course to the first year students in the Computer Science Department for many years and had carried out different research projects with different batches of students. Thus, she was familiar with the students' learning situation and understood the way they reacted to interventions. Based on the suggestions given by the students and through further reflection by the teacher-researcher, the solutions will be improved when the course is taught in the next round.

How this study was carried out in each stage is described below.

### **STAGE 1 : IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN THE PACKED ESP COURSE IN THIS STUDY**

In the Communication Skills course taught in an OBTL setting in this study, three main problems were encountered by the teacher-researcher when teaching the course.

Firstly, there was insufficient time to cover all the 7 course intended learning outcomes thoroughly over a period of 13 weeks. Time became a problem when both the student-centred OBTL approach and the genre approach had to be used to teach resulting in more time spent by the students when carrying out various kinds of activities.

Secondly, as revealed in the students' assignments, students were sometimes confused about the genres taught in the course. Because the students were given so many different unrelated genres to handle in such a short span of time, they could not easily distinguish without confusion between the linguistic, pragmatic and rhetorical characteristics of each type of genre. Also, the students could not easily put into real practice the communication theories, such as those related to "audience" and "purpose", when performing each communicative task.

Thirdly, there was a heavy work load on students and a heavy marking load on teachers. Because the course had to be taught in an OBTL (outcomes-based teaching and learning) setting in which the teaching and learning activities (TLAs) and assessment tasks (ATs) had to align with the course intended learning outcomes (CILOs), there were 7 CILOs in this 13-week course. That also meant there were at least 7 teaching and learning activities and 7 assessment tasks because the teachers could not teach the students how to write a document without assessing it. This inevitably resulted in a large number of assignments for the students to work on and submit within a short period of time. The work load of the students and the marking load of the teachers became extremely heavy especially when some of these assignments had to be designed as individual work.

### **STAGES 2 & 3: DECIDING ON AND IMPLEMENTING THE SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS**

To work out the solutions to the problems, the literature was reviewed. Decisions on the solutions to the problems were made based on the insights from the literature and the expected benefits to the students as perceived by the teacher-researcher.

Three solutions to these problems were tried out in this study, namely, (1) gradually moving from the discovery approach based on samples to the provision of guidelines and examples, (2) contextualization, and (3) setting some assignments which went from individual work to group work. Under each solution described below, the inspirations drawn from the literature, the method of implementation and the expected benefits for the students as perceived by the teacher-researcher were reported.

## **A Gradual Progression from a Discovery Approach Based on Samples to a Mere Provision of Guidelines and Examples**

### *Inspirations / Ideas drawn from the literature*

Recently, using genre-based approaches to teach writing has become the main trend of methodology particularly related to the teaching of ESP courses. ESP genre-based researchers and teachers have also been consistently attempting to generate genre-based teaching materials through designing tasks that are based on discipline-specific genre exemplars (e.g. Bhatia 1993; Flowerdew, 1993, 2002; Jacoby, Leech & Holten, 1995; Johns, 1997, 1999, 2002; Parkinson, 2000; Swales 1981, 1990, 2004; Swales & Feak 2004, Swales, Barks, Ostermann & Simpson 2001; Weissberg & Burker, 1990; among others.) It has been suggested in the literature that the aim of genre-based language teaching is to raise learners' consciousness about the rhetorical organization and the linguistic features related to the genre (Henry and Roseberry 1998:147). An awareness of the generic structure helps them to achieve their communicative goals and produce more highly textured writing. (Kuo 1993:154).

While views on genre-based teaching approaches are mainly positive, some concerns have been raised (Kay and Dudley-Evans 1998). Learning through a genre-based approach, the students are directed into a particular discourse community. They discover how the texts are organized by writers, and become confident in producing texts that serve their intended purposes. However, concerns have been raised that the students might be restrictively told how to write certain types of text, resulting in a lack of creativity and de-motivation on the part of the learners.

Usually, linguistic, pragmatic and rhetorical consciousness-raising materials are expected to be designed when the genre-based approach is used to

teach (Sengupta, Forey and Hamp-Lyons 1999). The teacher usually raises the students' awareness about the linguistic, pragmatic and rhetorical features of a particular genre through analysing samples with the students. Mohamed opines that consciousness-raising tasks can either be inductive or deductive (Mohamed 2004:229). Pang (2002) also observes that when teaching the language, for example, the teacher can either require the learners to "discover" the grammatical features through analysis (Holborow, 1991) or point them out explicitly to the learners (Kalantzis and Wignell 1988, Drury and Gollin 1986). Mohamed conducted a research study in 2004 to investigate whether the deductive or inductive tasks were more effective learning tools that could be used in the language classroom. Results showed that both deductive and inductive tasks were effective learning tools. But his study focused on using the two approaches to raise the students' consciousness about grammatical features only. It would be interesting to find out whether this result can be applied to consciousness-raising in relation to genre analysis. Shaffer (1989) advised that "teachers need to be flexible enough to incorporate various approaches into their lessons depending on the particular situation" (Shaffer 1989). Thus, both methods were attempted in this course.

### *Method of implementation in this course*

In the first half of the course, consciousness-raising tasks were designed using the discovery-based approach based on samples. For example, when the students were taught how to write an agenda and the minutes, samples were given to them to analyse and they had to work out the genre from the samples given with the help of guiding questions. An example of how this method was used to teach can be provided by the author upon request.

But in the second half of the course, the students were provided with guidelines and examples. For

example, when the students were taught how to write the memorandum report and the technical proposal, some guidelines were given to the students regarding how to write a certain document. An example of how the students were taught to write the section on “Benefits” in the technical proposal can be provided by the author upon request. Only some samples were shown to the students in class without allowing them to keep the samples. So, the teaching materials were designed in such a way that there was a gradual progression from the use of the discovery approach based on samples in the first part of the course to the provision of guidelines and examples in the second part of the course when the teaching materials were prepared.

#### *Expected benefits as perceived by the teacher-researcher*

In the first half of the course, when the students were taught documents, such as the agenda and the minutes, in which use of conventional format and language expressions was needed, they had samples to follow to ensure accurate use of the format and language expressions both during this course and in the workplace. The discovery approach was conducive to learning, and they could learn the skill of analysing texts with different genres in the future.

In the second half of the course, students were taught documents, such as the technical proposal, that allowed more flexible use of language. The students were given some guidelines to follow and they were shown some samples as examples but they were not allowed to keep the samples. It was hoped that with the gradual decrease in the amount of reliance on models from samples as the students proceeded through the course, they would have a chance to develop their creativity. They could thus write in their own language in the way they liked based on some guidelines given to them and would

not be tempted to copy the language used in the samples. It was also hoped that by saving some of the time spent on guiding the students to discover the rhetorical organization and the linguistic features related to the genre, more time could be spent on focusing their attention on doing the contextual analysis, for example, finding out the purpose and audience of the communicative task and exploring how language differed in different situations and how the differences related to different purposes.

As the discovery approach to teaching was very time-consuming, whereas the second approach to teaching was less time-consuming, by using both approaches to teach, while gradually moving from the first one to the second one, the time problem related to having to teach so many genres could be solved.

### **Contextualization**

#### *Inspirations/ Ideas drawn from the literature*

It has been recognized that contextualization is an important concept in materials production (Kuo 1993). Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998:312) suggest that teachers need to contextualize a text before presenting it. This can be done by discussing the purpose, audience, institutional beliefs and values, and make sure that all discussions of linguistic features and how they function are done within the context of the text. It is important for teachers to develop students’ awareness of how language differs in different situations and how those differences are related to different purposes. (Chaucer and Balkin 2004:198). Rentz et al (2009:82-83) think that it is highly motivational for the students to have the opportunity to work on a real-world problem which helps the students deal practically with the problematic issues of purpose and audience.

### *Method of implementation in this course*

In most ESP courses, in order to provide the context for the writing of different documents, usually, each document was assigned a different case as the contextual information. So the students had to work on several different cases in one course. However, in this course, a storyline was provided. All tasks were built into a simulated work environment relevant to the students' future profession so that they were all contextualized, related and meaningful. One task was naturally built on top of the other so that the tasks were carried out in a logical sequence within a context and thus the tasks became meaningful to the students.

For example, in this course, students were assigned the roles of consultants working for a computer consultant company and that of the client. The client team worked out some problems that existed in a company that they chose to work on. The problems must be those that could only be solved by computer technology. For example, the client company had no computer networks resulting in inefficiency and inaccuracy in work. The client team then sent a request to the Computer Consultant team asking them to offer them solutions to their problems. Upon receiving the request of the client team, the consultant team had to (1) conduct a consultant team meeting to discuss the solutions to the problems raised by the client team → (2) write an *agenda*, conduct the *meeting* and write the *minutes* → (3) submit a *memorandum report* to their supervisor to report to him/her the decisions made in their meeting and seek his or her approval of the solutions suggested and send a proposal to the client → (4) write the *proposal* together with a *letter of transmittal* to be sent to the client → (5) present the proposal orally to the client team and hold a question and answer session

after the *presentation*.

### *Expected benefits*

In a course designed with a real-world context and related tasks, student would find the writing of the documents meaningful, practical and interesting. They would have to apply the theories, for example, those related to "Audience" and "Purpose", automatically, naturally and meaningfully to each communicative task.

The differences between each type of writing were explicitly discussed by the teacher and the students. Because the content of some pieces of writing was related or quite similar, for example, the minutes and the memorandum report (both reporting on what happened in the same meeting), when the students prepared each document, they did not have to spend too much time figuring out what to write. This would mean they could focus their attention on how to use different formats, as well as the language and style when presenting the same content in different types of writing. This enabled the students to clearly understand the differences in the genre of the documents.

### **Some Assignments Designed to Lead from Individual Work to Group Work**

#### *Inspirations/ideas drawn from the literature*

Rentz et.al.(2009) think that the collaboration process creates better student learning because it makes the task more manageable and focused. Some researchers have a more elaborate view that pedagogically speaking, pair and small group activities promote a favourable affective atmosphere in which students feel less anxious and more confident (Brown 2001; Long & Porter 1985). Peacock (1998:43), in particular, points out that students need group interaction skills in real workplace setting, implying that training them to do group work is necessary. Williamson (2006) when comparing how her pupils

responded to the same tasks in a Mathematics lesson when working individually and in small groups found that the pupils preferred group work when working on problems because they felt more confident and motivated when working in a group. However, when Seymour and Padberg (1975) carried out a study in which they investigated the relative effectiveness of group and individual settings in a simulated problem-solving game, they found that group work preceded by individual work was the most effective arrangement. It would be interesting to know if this result could be applied to writing an assignment for an ESP course.

#### *Method of implementation in this course*

To solve the problem of the work load on students and the marking load on teachers, some assignments were designed as small group assignments. The students formed their own groups and chose their own group leaders. However, each student had to work on the assignment individually first before they came up with a piece of group work. For example, when each group had to write a group letter of transmittal for assessment, each student was asked to bring an individual draft of the letter to class. In class, the students examined the individual drafts of their group members in their group, drew on the strengths of each draft and came up with a group draft which they thought was the best that they could do as a group. The teacher then gave comments on each group draft in class before each group went home to revise it and submit the group letter for assessment in the next lesson.

#### *Expected benefits*

By doing this, each student would be given a chance to practise doing the task and would have a chance to learn collaboratively from the strength of each other's work. This activity was student-centred

and it maximized student participation and learning. It was in line with the OBTL spirit and at the same time, it reduced the students' work load and pressure. Because the individual drafts were not assessed, the students could feel less pressure when writing them. Since a group draft was worked out during class time and feedback was given to them immediately by the teacher, their time was saved and their work load was reduced. As the teacher only needed to mark the group letters in detail, the marking load was reduced as well.

## **STAGE 4: EVALUATING THE SOLUTIONS THROUGH STUDENTS' FEEDBACK ON THE IMPLEMENTED SOLUTIONS**

### **Research Method**

A 13 week ESP course "Communication Skills course in Computing" was taught to 127 Computer Science students, following the materials and methods designed by the teacher-researcher. The students were first year students majoring in Computer Science. All of them had reached the threshold of English proficiency as approved by the university before they could come to take this ESP course. A questionnaire (See Attachment A) was given out to all of them at the end of the semester to find out how they felt about and how much they had benefited from the three methods implemented. The questionnaire contained three sections, one section on each method, namely, (1) gradually moving from the discovery approach based on samples to the provision of guidelines and examples, (2) centrally contextualizing all tasks, and (3) working out a group draft from several individual drafts. In each section, one or two questions were asked eliciting "Yes", "Neutral" or "No" answers. In order to elicit original and unaffected ideas from the students as



far as possible, most of the questions were open-ended. Each method was clearly explained in the instructions to make sure the students understand what was asked. The students were given about 20 minutes during class time to complete the questionnaire, so there should be enough time for them to write down their answers in reasonable details. An attempt was made to find out whether what the students identified as the merits of the solutions matched with what was recorded in the literature and what the teacher-researcher expected as benefits for the students. The students were also asked about the problems encountered (if any) when each solution was implemented and possible solutions to these problems to get their input on how the solutions could be improved. Frequency counts were made for the quantitative part of

the questionnaires. Open-ended questions were analysed using the content analysis method.

## Results

The quantitative and qualitative results in relation to the three solutions are reported below

### *A gradual progression from Method 1 to Method 2*

When the students were asked whether they liked a gradual progression from the discovery approach based on samples (Method 1) to the provision of guidelines and examples (Method 2) or only Method 1 or only Method 2, as seen in Table 1 below, most students (70.9%) preferred going from Method 1 to Method 2.

*Table 1*

The percentage of students who liked each teaching method

| Teaching Methods  | Which method do you prefer?  |
|---|------------------------------|
| <i>Discovery based on samples → provision of guidelines and examples (Method 1 → 2)</i> | <b>70.9% ( 90 responses)</b> |
| <i>Discovery based on samples (Method 1 only)</i>                                       | 20.4% (26 responses)         |
| <i>Provision of guidelines and examples (Method 2 only)</i>                             | 8.7% (11 responses)          |

Why the students liked the gradual progression from Method 1 to Method 2 is shown in Table 2 below.

*Table 2*

Reasons for liking the gradual progression from method 1 to method 2

| Methods   | Reasons for liking the method and number of responses | Frequency of responses |
|---|---|------------------------|
| Discovery based on samples → provision of guidelines and examples | • <i>Learned effectively</i>                          | 27                     |
|   | • Easy to follow and understand                       | 13                     |
|   | • <i>Allowed creativity</i>                           | 5                      |
|   | • More interesting                                    | 4                      |
|   | • Helped students to adapt to different situations    | 2                      |

(The italicized points are points that are in line with those in the literature or the benefits expected by the teacher researcher.)

While the teacher researcher perceived that such an arrangement of teaching method was conducive to the students' learning, as indicated by the highlighted points in the table, some students also

thought that they could learn effectively through such an arrangement. Some students' opinions that such an arrangement allowed creativity was in line with the expected benefits as perceived by the teacher-

researcher and this in fact addressed Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998)'s concern about the lack of creativity resulting from using the genre-based approach to teach. The students did not think that using both methods would cause confusion. Instead, they thought that such an arrangement was easy to follow and understand, more interesting and helped them to be

more able to adapt to different situations.

### *Contextualization*

How much the students liked contextualization and whether they would like the methods to be used again in the following year is shown in Table 3 below.

*Table 3*

How much the students liked contextualization and whether they would like the methods to be used again in the following year

| Methods           | Do you like this method?        |                       |                       | Should this method be used again next year? |                      |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|----------------------|---------------------|
|                   | Yes                             | Neutral               | No                    | Yes   | Neutral              | No                  |
| Contextualization | <b>91.3%</b><br>(115 responses) | 1.6%<br>(2 responses) | 7.1%<br>(9 responses) | <b>94.2%</b><br>(114 responses)             | 0.8%<br>(1 response) | 5%<br>(6 responses) |

As shown in Table 3, the majority of students (91.3%) liked contextualization. The majority of them (94.2%) would also like to learn through this method

again when the course is taught in the next round.

Why the students liked contextualization is shown in Table 4 below.

*Table 4*

Why the students liked contextualization

| Methods           | Reasons for liking the method and frequency counts  |  |
|-------------------|---|--|
|                   | Reasons   | Frequency  |
| Contextualization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Practical and realistic because it simulates the real world</i></li> <li>• <i>Good structure</i></li> <li>• Easy to follow step-by-step</li> <li>• <i>Assignments are related</i></li> <li>• Clear objectives</li> <li>• A lot of skills learnt</li> <li>• Opportunity for group work</li> <li>• <i>Interesting</i></li> <li>• <i>Related to students' major study</i></li> </ul> | 46<br><br>27<br>25<br>18<br>11<br>6<br>5<br>3<br>3 |

(The italicized points are points that are in line with those in the literature or the benefits expected by the teacher researcher.)

Regarding why most students liked contextualization of the tasks in the course, their thoughts were in line with what the teacher-researcher expected as benefits for the students. As seen from the highlighted items in Table 4, they realized that such a course design simulated the real world and the tasks were

related to their major studies. They could see that the assignments were related and that one task was built on top of another in a simulated context. They felt that this was a good structure which took them through the tasks step by step. It was easy to follow and the objective of each task was clear to them. They

thought the tasks were interesting and they could learn a lot of skills from them. Their views supported the one in the literature, that the opportunity to work on a real-world problem could be highly motivational for students (Rentz et al 2009).

*Going from individual work to group work*

How much the students liked the third solution and whether they would like the methods to be used again in the following year is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5

How much the students liked the third solution and whether they would like the methods to be used again in the following year

| Methods                      | Do you like this method? |                      |                         | Should this method be used again next year ? |                      |                         |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|--|----------------------|-------------------------|
|                              | Yes                      | Neutral              | No                      | Yes  | Neutral              | No                      |
| Individual work → group work | 77.6%<br>(97 responses)  | 0.8%<br>(1 response) | 21.6%<br>(27 responses) | 88%<br>(103 responses)                       | 0.9%<br>(1 response) | 11.1%<br>(13 responses) |

As shown in Table 5, the majority of students (77.6%) liked going from individual work to group work. The majority of them (88%) would also like to learn through this method again when the course is

taught in the next round.

Why the students liked to go from individual work to group work is shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6

Why the students liked to go from individual work to group work

| Methods                 | Reasons for liking the method and frequency counts   |           |
|-------------------------|--|-----------|
|                         | Reasons  | Frequency |
| Individual → Group work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Learned from others</i> 24</li> <li>• Group work and cooperation 14</li> <li>• <i>Better end product after discussion</i> 14</li> <li>• <i>Shared work load</i> 12</li> <li>• <i>Had chance to work individually first</i> 11</li> <li>• <i>Ensured individual contribution</i> 9</li> <li>• Feedback from teacher 5</li> <li>• Effective 2</li> </ul> |           |

(The italicized points are points that are in line with those in the literature or the benefits expected by the teacher researcher.)

As indicated by the highlighted points in Table 6, the students valued the chance to work individually first, which ensured individual contribution, and at the same time could learn from their classmates. These thoughts were in line with the expectations of the teacher researcher that students benefited from

doing individual work first. The benefits that they reported from doing group work as listed in Table 6 were good illustrations of Rentz et. al. (2009)’s view that the collaboration process makes the task more manageable and focused and creates better student learning.

## STAGE 5: IMPROVING THE SOLUTIONS BASED ON THE STUDENT FEEDBACK

Insights related to how to improve the solutions were gained from the students' reports on the problems they identified and their suggested solutions to the problems.

## Problems Identified by Students and Suggested Solutions to the Problems Related to the Methods Used

The students did not mention any problems and possible solutions related to the gradual progression from Method 1 to Method 2. However, they identified the problems and possible solutions related to each method as listed in Table 7 below.

Table 7

The problems of using Method 1 and Method 2 and possible solutions

| Problems of such a method  | Possible solutions to the problems   |
|--|--|
| Method (1) - Discovery approach based on samples   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Just copy from the examples / samples</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give a brief sample instead of a completed one</li> <li>Give samples which are not related to computer science to avoid copying</li> <li>Have a look at the samples in class but do not put them in the notes</li> <li>Cut the samples into smaller parts and illustrate them by providing guidelines</li> <li>Give samples after the submission of assignments</li> <li>Provide fewer samples and give more guidelines and explanations instead</li> <li>Deduct marks if copying occurs</li> <li>More on method two than method one</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not enough time / time consuming</li> </ul>   |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May limit the creativity of students</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gradual shift of proportion of models and guidelines</li> <li>Samples can be constructed sentence by sentence by students during class</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May mix up the wrong information from different kinds of samples</li> <li>Samples cannot show how to write and the reasons for writing in that way</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More explanation on samples given</li> <li>Add important points like "common mistakes", "attention to structure" to the samples so that it is easier for students to follow</li> </ul>  |
| Method (2) - Provision of guidelines and examples  |  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Too few samples / templates</li> <li>Students may get lost without samples</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Add more examples / templates / samples</li> <li>Add more examples / templates / samples</li> </ul>   |

As shown in the above table, the students also felt like the teacher-researcher that it was very time consuming using Method 1 to teach. They also shared Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998)'s concern about the lack of creativity resulting from using the genre-based

approach to teach. The results from the above table seem to suggest that the best possible solution to these two problems identified was to supplement Method 1 with Method 2. The students only identified one typical problem related to Method 2, which was the

lack of guidance through samples. This suggests that in fact the students did not find Method 2 problematic.

The students had given very useful and practical suggestions regarding how to prevent students from copying from samples. For example, when describing the problems of Method (1), a student wrote “My classmates may just copy from the samples without thinking”. Examples of some suggestions that they gave on how to solve the problem were: “ Give samples which are not related to computer science to us”; “Let us look at the samples in class but do not put them in the notes”; and “Give us the samples after the submission of assignments”.

Upon reflection after this action research, the teacher-researcher will adopt the students’ idea of giving some samples unrelated to the computer field

when Method (1) is used in the course in the next round. In this case, the format and other features that they can learn from the samples will be for their reference only. The students cannot copy directly from the samples and they have to rewrite using the language related to their field. This will give them room to develop their adaptability and flexibility.

### **Problems Identified by Students and Suggested Solutions to the Problems Related to Contextualization**

The problems of contextualization as perceived by the students and the possible solutions are listed in Table 8 below.

*Table 8*

The problems of contextualizing the tasks and possible solutions

| <b>Problems to such a design</b> | <b>Possible solution to the problems</b>  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Tasks are too short.             | More exercises, take-home notes, reflection, consultation, thus more practice.                  |
| Feel confused                    | Give more exercises and reflective activities to ensure the students remember what they learnt. |

In line with what the teacher-researcher perceived as a problem for this course, some students found that they got confused about different types of documents because very little time was given to the teaching of each task. The possible solution suggested by them was that they could spend extra time to do additional work to help them have a better understanding about each type of writing. For example, one student wrote in the questionnaire: “Give us more exercises after Week 4 because the work load of this course is light. We can write reflections or a report on what we have written over the period of a few weeks so as to ensure we remember what we learnt.” It was encouraging

that the students were willing to do extra work to clarify their concepts about each document. However, this might further add to their work load.

Upon reflection after this action research, the teacher-researcher thought that it might be more time-saving and effective if she can strengthen the part of the lecture on the differences between different types of the document when the course is taught again in the next round. Comparison tables can be given to the students to help them understand the similarities and differences between each type of genre. Examples of confusion as evidenced in the students’ assignments could be shown to the class for analysis so that the

students could work out from real examples how not to mix up the parts that can easily be confused. It is hoped that by doing so, the students will have a clear idea about the differences between each type of genre.

### **Problems Identified by Students and Suggested Solutions to the Problems Related to Going from Individual Work to Group Work**

The problems encountered by the students and the possible solutions are shown in Table 9 below.

Table 9

Problems of going from individual work to group work

| <b>Problems to such a design</b>  | <b>Possible solution to the problems</b>   |
|---|--|
| Some members depend on the others, and do not fulfil their own responsibilities   | Ask each group to give a distribution list of workload   |
| Time consuming<br>Only some work is adopted; the others are wasted  | Require group assignments only<br>Complete the group work in class<br>Teacher should pay attention if only one member's work is used |
| Difficult to come up with a draft incorporating everyone's idea in class<br>Only feedback on the group assignment is not enough | No suggestions<br>Students write individual reflections for both individual drafts and group drafts                                  |
| Work load too heavy   | No suggestions   |

The results from the above table seem to suggest that the students were concerned about fairness, the technical problems related to the production of the final assignment and the problems of getting enough feedback and work load. Some very useful suggestions were made by the students to solve some of these problems. For example, one student suggested, "We can write individual reflections for both the individual drafts and the group drafts to show understanding and improvement". This suggestion is useful, however this will increase the students' work load.

Upon reflection after this action research, the teacher-researcher would adopt the method of asking each group to provide a collaboration form indicating

how the group members share their work when the course is taught in the next round. This will make sure that the students have equal shares of work and the existence of free-riders would be prevented. To help the students come up with a draft incorporating every one's idea in class, the students would be asked to bring their note-books to class and work on their group drafts over the note-books. This facilitates the collaboration process and it is easier for each student's contribution to be incorporated into the group draft.

### **DISCUSSION**

In this section, how successful the implemented solutions are, the new insights related to the methods

used to solve problems and to do Action Research, and the directions for future research will be discussed.

### **How Successful the Implemented Solutions Were**

In this course, the implemented solutions were well received by the students and proved practicable by the teacher-researcher when teaching such a packed ESP course.

The quantitative feedback from the students on the three implemented solutions indicates that they worked for them. The fact that the majority of students liked to learn through these methods in this course and when the course was taught again in the next round indicated that the implemented solutions were successful.

Some students' qualitative feedback was in line with what was said in the literature and what the researcher expected as benefits for the students. This partly suggests that these students supported some of the rationale behind the design of the solutions and partly suggests that the solutions which were worked out as a result of following the procedural framework proved to be appropriate in solving the problems encountered in this packed ESP course.

The students also raised some additional benefits from the three solutions which could further help confirm the usefulness of the three methods. An example can be seen from the students' perception on the benefits of solution one, that is, a gradual progression from teaching method (1) to teaching Method (2). As perceived by the teacher-researcher, such an arrangement of teaching methods had long-term underlying effects on the students' learning. Method 1 could ensure students' accurate use of the format and language expressions related to documents that were heavily loaded with conventions

and also equip students with the genre analysis skills which could help their writing in future. Method 2 helped the students to develop their creativity and do contextual analysis of different types of writing. A more immediate benefit was that using a combination of these two methods helped to solve the time problem. Though the students did not explicitly state the above-mentioned long-term underlying benefits of Method 1 and Method 2 as perceived by the teacher-researcher, they reported on the effectiveness of such an arrangement of teaching methods from a here-and-now perspective. The here-and-now perspective was that the method helped convey easy understanding and it was interesting. It is natural that they would not think about the long-term effects at this stage because they were only in the first year of their studies at university. However, their here-and now perspective was helpful because it added another dimension to the effectiveness of the approach.

The findings seem to suggest that the three solutions were successfully implemented in this course. It is hoped that these solutions can become a source of reference for course designers or teachers teaching such packed ESP courses in similar learning contexts.

### **New Insights Related to Methods Used to Solve Problems Arising from a Course**

From the study, it can be seen that to solve the problems arising from a course, solutions can be worked out from different angles. In this study, changes were made in the teaching method, course design and method of handling assignments to help solve the problems related to one root problem of a packed course. An implementation of different methods to bring about changes from different angles seems to be a useful way to help solve the problems completely.

In fact, each teaching method (i.e., the discovery

approach, the inductive approach, contextualization, individual work, group work) included in this study is by itself a useful method. One great achievement of this study is that it demonstrates how individual methods when put together in the right order (i.e. going from the discovery approach to the inductive approach and going from individual work to group work) can become effective solutions to pedagogical problems arising from a packed ESP course. One new insight obtained is that a combined use of appropriately chosen and well-ordered methods can be a useful approach and solution that can be applied to other situations arising from other courses having similar pedagogical problems.

Some very useful suggestions have been given by the students, for example, regarding how to prevent the students from copying from samples, how to help students to be less confused about different types of writing and how to do group work effectively. Some of these brilliant ideas together with some other suggestions proposed by the teacher-researcher after reflection on the student feedback will be put into practice next time the course is taught to improve the three solutions implemented in this study. These suggestions by themselves were useful sources of ideas to help teachers cope with special problems related to different pedagogical situations.

### **New Insights Related to Action Research**

The procedural framework developed in this study to help improve the course, though not particularly unique in nature, proves to be very useful to the teacher-researcher, not only in solving the problems arising from this packed course, but also in further improving the solutions when the course is taught again in the next round. It is hoped that such a procedural framework can be used to help to solve

the problems encountered in teaching other courses as well so that they will continue to improve and will become courses that will benefit the students to the full.

In this study, an attempt was made to implement several solutions to solve several problems within one Action Research project, and the project was still manageable. This seems to suggest a breakthrough in terms of the scope of Action Research projects and thus the potential powerfulness of Action Research.

### **Directions for Future Research**

It must be noted that the results of this study are not meant to be generalized to all computer science students at this level or in other learning contexts as the sample size was small and the subjects were not randomly chosen. Further empirical studies with a larger sample are needed to support or not support the findings of this study. Nevertheless, the findings in this study can clearly help to shed some light on the teaching methods used for ESP courses, especially when it is carried out with students in similar disciplines and in similar learning contexts not only in Hong Kong but also in other parts of the world. It is hoped that the study can be replicated in other institutions in different places with a larger number of students at different levels to find out if the result is the same.

Empirical studies may also be carried out to find out the effectiveness of different methods of teaching so that the right method or the right combination of methods can be chosen for the course in question in order for the course to become one that will benefit the students to the full.

To tackle the crust of the problem of a packed ESP course, it may be necessary to conduct a needs analysis research project on the communication



skills needs of the Computer Science students in their internship to find out whether some of course intended learning outcomes can be reduced keeping only those that are truly helpful and relevant to them. It is also hoped that the procedural framework used in this study can be tried out in other courses. If it is found to be widely applicable to other situations, it will become a useful tool to help teachers solve the problems that they encounter in their courses and a new model for doing action research.

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Received: 16.3.11, accepted 31.3.11, revised 1.4.11.

**Appendix: The Questionnaire**

1. This course was designed in such a way that (1) in the first half of the course, students were guided to discover characteristic features of a document through given samples (e.g the agenda, minutes) and (2) in the second half of the course, students were provided with the framework and guidelines about how to write a document instead of samples to model on (e.g the proposal and the letter of transmittal).

1.1 Which of the following method of material design/teaching do you prefer? Please tick the method that you prefer in the appropriate blank below.

- Method (1) + (2) \_\_\_\_\_
- Method (1) only \_\_\_\_\_
- Method (2) only \_\_\_\_\_

1.2 Regarding the method that you have ticked above, Why do you like this method?

1.3

| Problems of such a method (if any) | Possible solutions to the problems |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|                                    |                                    |

2. Contextualize the whole course, i.e. carrying out all communicative tasks (such as conducting a meeting, writing minutes, writing a memorandum report, writing a letter of transmittal, writing and presenting a proposal) as a consultant team in a simulated consultant company (Cybertech 2000). One communicative task is meaningfully built on top of the other and all the tasks are related in content.

Do you like this way of designing the assignments?  
 (Please tick in the appropriate space below.)

2.1

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
 Neutral \_\_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_\_  
 Why? \_\_\_\_\_

2.2

| Problems of such a design (if any) | Possible solutions to the problems |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
|                                    |                                    |

2.3 Do you think such a design should be used again for next years' students?

- (Please tick in the appropriate space below.)  
 Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
 Neutral \_\_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_\_

3. When doing group assignments, such as the memorandum report,

- each group member writes his/her own draft at home first ;
- all the group members work on the individual drafts together in class and come up with a group draft;
- they receive feedback from the teacher on the group draft
- before they work on the final version of the group assignment for assessment.

3.1 Do you like this way of working on group assignments?  
 (Please tick in the appropriate space below.)

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
 Neutral \_\_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_\_  
 Why? \_\_\_\_\_

3.2

| Problems of this way of coming up with a group assignment (if any) | Possible solutions to the problems |
|--|------------------------------------|
|  |                                    |

3.3 Do you think such a method of dealing with group assignments should be used again for next year's students?  
 (Please tick in the appropriate space below.)

- Yes \_\_\_\_\_  
 Neutral \_\_\_\_\_  
 No \_\_\_\_\_

Received: 16.3.11, accepted 31.3.11, revised 1.4.11.