

Optimal Class Sizes in EAP Programs

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One characteristic of university studies is the lecture format, supported by smaller tutorial groups. If EAP students undertake classes in lecture format in larger groups, complemented by smaller classes, to what extent will this simulation of university learning contexts impact on student's abilities to cope with university studies? This paper describes a research project in which EAP students and teachers took part in a weekly lecture series. The data collated focused on students' and teachers' perceptions of:

- *the effectiveness of lectures on student development.*
- *student preparedness for university*
- *the effectiveness of the lecture format in terms of specific speaking and listening outcomes of the EAP course.*

The study found that the lecture series positively impacted on the students' abilities to cope with university studies. Recommendations were thus made on which direction further research in this area should take.

Section One: Introduction and context

The research presented in this paper was carried out at an Australian ELICOS college which offers a 10- week EAP (English for Academic Purposes) program (5 weeks in what I will call Level 2 and if students pass, 5 weeks in Level 3). Entry is based on an IELTS overall band of 5.5 with a band 6.0 in writing or reaching the required level of the college's in- house English placement test. After successful completion of the program students are eligible to enter selected Australian university courses requiring IELTS overall bands of 6.0 to 6.5 with a band 6.0 in writing. The research focuses on the speaking and listening outcomes of the level 2 program. These outcomes focus not only on second language development but also on the development of the study skills necessary for successful tertiary or higher education study.

One vital characteristic of university studies is the different medium used for imparting knowledge: The lecture format, supported by smaller tutorial groups. Consequently, it would seem that another vital skill these students need to learn, in order to be properly prepared for tertiary study, is the ability to learn effectively from a lecture format. This, however, suggests the need for larger class sizes. NEAS regulations for Australian ELICOS colleges (2002) state that the average number of students in a

full time ELICOS class must not exceed 15 and that the absolute maximum must not exceed 18.

If the level 2 students undertake classes in lecture format in larger groups, complemented by their existing sized smaller classes, to what extent will this simulation of university learning contexts impact on student's abilities to cope with university studies?

The results of this study could see EAP courses adopting diverse learning strategies as well as alter people's opinions of the effectiveness of what has become the industry standard of a maximum class size. However, this research has been done on a highly specialised area of English language teaching. Consequently, it may not be possible to generalise the results of this research to other types of ELICOS classes such as General English, Business English or IELTS preparation classes.

Section Two: Review of related literature

Many English for academic purposes (EAP) publications focus on some of the speaking and listening skills students required to undertake successful tertiary study in English-speaking countries. However, there has been no research into the effects a simulation of a university class format has on preparing EAP students for further study, and no EAP texts suggest this method of experiential learning to further prepare students for tertiary study.

Wright's (1982) guide for educators into student behaviour at universities in the UK includes a section on the differences between study skills at university and study skills at high school. Her research finds that university students suffer anxiety because they are unsure of what exactly is expected of them. She adds that this lack of direction in new students at university often means that students continue their studies using ineffective methods. These issues are even more valid for overseas students, as they face language and socio-cultural problems as well as problems adapting their learning styles to become successful tertiary students. Lynn Errey in her article on EAP instruction states that EAP courses do not focus only on language learning but also contextualise the learning to a tertiary study environment. Errey mentions academic reading and writing skills, but she does not discuss specifically the issue of learning in the lecture format.

Sen (1970) and Campbell (1974) found that issues such as academic study skills, socio-cultural and practical problems and awareness of current spoken English language norms and practices were as important as language proficiency for a student's academic performance (Weir in Wright 1982). Weir also outlines the socio-cultural problems

which overseas students may face. One of these is 'not so much of the language but of the cultural inadmissibility of interrupting a lecturer or tutor to ask a question and simply how to ask the question.' (Weir in Wright 1982, p. 93). Jordan (1977) found that overseas students had most exposure to spoken English in situations such as lectures, where the students take on a passive role and comprehension is therefore not explicitly checked. This prolonged practice may have a long-term negative effect on listening comprehension skills (Weir in Wright 1982). Sen (1970), Morrison (1974) and Rogers (1977) (All cited by Weir in Wright 1982) all found that overseas students had great problems with spoken English upon arrival in Britain, and specifically problems arising through lack of exposure to accents, colloquialisms and slang. Moreover, 'the distinctions between formal and informal language may be blurred in a lecture situation where there may be drastic change from formal to informal language when giving explanations... it may be disastrous for the foreign student who may have been taught English in a combination of literary and formal English.' (Winter cited by Weir in Wright, 1982 p.96). Weir cites Straker- Cook (1977) and Jordan (1977) who agree that in the earlier stages of the overseas students' studies the major problem the students will encounter is understanding spoken English, for example in lectures. The next problem for the student will be the ability to express their ideas in English. Later, writing skills will become more important as students may encounter problems when submitting written assignments. (Weir in Wright 1982)

There are numerous, mostly theoretical, texts available for students studying at tertiary level in Australia to help guide them to developing effective tertiary study skills. Assuming an overseas student would have the socio- cultural awareness to recognise that such texts exist, they may find them in their university library. Among the many texts available, Hastings (1984) and Burdess (1998) both include chapters in their books regarding note-taking skills in Australian university lectures. Burdess explains that although traditional lectures are between 50 and 60 minutes long, most students lose full concentration after 20 minutes. To assist, some lecturers may give hand- outs, 'However, it is likely that many of your lectures will be traditional ones. The lecturer will talk without a break for 50 to 60 minutes and will provide little in the way of lecture handouts.' (1998, p.10).

Currently, the barrier to teaching EAP students in a lecture format to prepare them for further study has been the NEAS standard of a maximum of 18 students in a class. However, as Philips states, 'Show me the research which says 12 is good, 16 is bad and 36 is criminal. Universities teach content in classes much greater than that.' (2001). In fact, there is only one recent study into the issue of the ongoing relevance and appropriacy of the NEAS standards of class sizes and hours per week in the ELICOS

field. This preliminary report commissioned by the Elicos Association, Australia, in 2003 was carried out in the form of an online survey, focus groups and telephone interviews completed by a range of industry stakeholders. The data collected from this survey reveals a number of issues including:

- *'A need for recognition that there are many variables to consider. These include student ages, type of English language tuition (academic preparation versus conversation class, etc), language proficiency level and attitude of student to independent study.'*
- *A need for greater flexibility for schools in being able to design courses that best meet their students' needs based on the above variables.*
- *The view that the ELICOS industry is too 'homogenized'. The industry is established enough to allow some degree of experimentation with alternative models for curriculum, class size and contact time. Current regulations allow little room for innovation and expansion into new markets and student categories.'*

An example of the variable 'type of English language tuition' referred to above could be Phillips' (2001) proposal where *'language systems are taught in larger groups (36 students) and language skills in smaller groups (16).'* The teaching of academic study skills may be another example of one such variable.

Another way in which educators are attempting to change the face of learning in higher education is through experiential learning projects, usually in the form of group role-play situations. Teaching EAP students lecture learning skills by having them attend lectures could also be described as a type of experiential learning.

Postle (1993) outlines Heron's four different modes of experiential learning; the practical, conceptual, imaginal and affective modes of learning. The diagram below illustrates the diverse aspects of these four different modes of learning and the relationships between them.

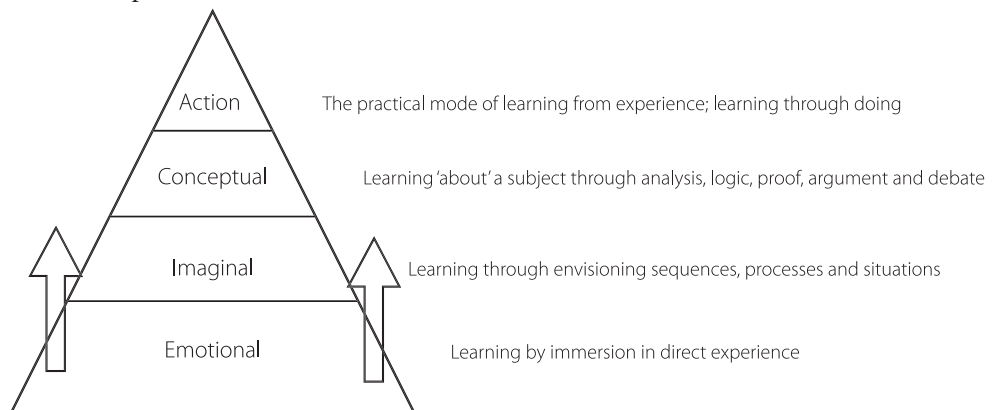


Figure 2.1 Adapted from Postle (1993, pp 33 & 34)

All the modes are dependant on the modes below to be successful modes of learning. The practical, conceptual, imaginal and emotional modes of experiential learning could be activated if EAP students were exposed to a simulated lecture environment. In a role-play where EAP students are playing the role of university students in a university style lecture, academic study skills may improve and students may achieve a promotion of critical thinking, independent learning and communicative skills in EAP. Consequently, this role- play could positively impact on students' abilities to cope with university studies.

Section Three: Research Methods

For this research project students studying in level 1 and continuing to level 2 took part in a level 2 lecture series which comprised four 15 to 25 minute lectures. Approximately 100 students and 6 teachers attended the lectures, with a different teacher each week volunteering to give the lecture.

Participants in the study are experienced EAP teachers and students. The students, who are Asian, South American and Middle Eastern, had been studying in Australia for between 5 and 50 weeks.

Student and teacher volunteers were called on to take part in the study. A group of 25 volunteer students from various level 1 classes with different teachers were surveyed anonymously. The same students were then surveyed again during level 2.

It was decided to use the format of what is known as the traditional style of lecture to prepare the level 2 students. An interactive lecture series may not have best prepared students for traditional lectures.

Scaffolded pre- and post-lecture lessons were developed to assist the students in their experience of the lecture format. The students in this level are still learning and still preparing for university so need more lessons in small group format than they would receive at university. Consequently, each lecture lesson in the series took four hours.

The data observed and collated for this research project focused on students' and teachers' perceptions and opinions of;

- the effectiveness of the lecture format on student development.
- student preparedness for university after completing the course with a combination of larger lectures complimented by small group learning.
- the effectiveness of the lecture format in terms of specific speaking and listening outcomes of the levels

Unfortunately due to time constraints, it was not possible to monitor students' success at tertiary level. Therefore, only perceptions of the impact this combination has had on the preparedness for tertiary study could be collated in this study.

The study took an interpretative approach and not a contrastive one. The perceptions and opinions of the teachers and students and students' grades were not compared with those of teachers' and students' in smaller classes.

Student perceptions were measured through surveys. In level 1 students were surveyed about their experience of how classes with a maximum of 18 students have affected their scholastic achievements and L2 development, and about their predictions for their scholastic improvement in level 2. In level 2 students were surveyed about their experience of how small classes complemented by lectures had affected their scholastic achievements and L2 development.

Informal in- class discussions on students' opinions of the lecture series were also held with the teachers and observer.

Interviews with teachers were held individually.

In addition, I attended a selection of lectures and focused my observations on:

- The level of student interest and understanding in lectures,
- The level of effectiveness of preparatory tutorials for students' understanding in subsequent lectures,
- The success of lectures in stimulating student thought (as seen in subsequent discussions in tutorials)

Quantitative findings were also available from the grades students received for the listening exam.

Section Four: Analysis and Discussion

The data from the surveys, transcribed individual interview sessions, in-class discussions, lecture observations and level 2 listening exam grades was collated and analysed in order to evaluate the impact of this altered pedagogical model on the students and collate perceptions on the effect it would have on students' abilities to cope with university studies.

Both teachers' and students' reactions to the lecture series have been positive. The students felt that the experience of the lecture series directly related to their future studies and therefore regarded the lecture series as worthwhile preparation for their future studies.

Comparing the results of the open-ended questions in the surveys, in level 1 students overwhelmingly felt that there was a lack of focus on preparation of students' listening skills for university. In level 1, 4% of students said that level 1 had not helped them to improve their note taking skills and they hoped to improve this skill in level 2, but 21% said that after level 2 they still wanted more lectures, listenings and note taking exercises. This may be an indication that students have become aware after level 2 of the need for good listening, lecture and note taking skills in preparation for university. Furthermore, these results may indicate that students felt that their academic listening skills preparation was being addressed, regardless of whether the lecture series affected the improvement of students' academic skills.

The quantitative data obtained from the level 2 listening exam results also indicates that the majority of students benefited and learnt from the lecture series. The largest group of students had a mark of 73% in the listening exam, 75% of students passed the exam, while only 25% failed (The pass mark is 60%). These results indicate that the altered pedagogical model did not negatively affect students' pass rates in the level 2 listening component.

Another important issue to emerge from the data is the comparison between the live lectures and taped listenings. Both the teachers and students commented on the benefits and disadvantages of both. One of the benefits of live lectures as opposed to taped lectures is the fact that audiovisual materials are frequently faulty. In addition, teachers pointed out that the live lectures render the topics of the lectures more up to date and relevant to the Australian context than they seem on the tapes. Also, both teachers and students liked the fact that in the live lectures there was a visual aspect that the students could experience. Students felt it easier to understand the live lectures as they could read the lecturers' body language. '*... watching the body language of the lecturer is necessary for understanding*'. In addition, students could concentrate more on what was being said by a live speaker than they could listening to a taped lecture.

Teachers also asserted that although the level 2 lectures were not the same as university lectures, our students were being exposed to the lecture format in some way, which helps to prepare them for university more than in-class taped lectures do.

However, teachers and students also felt that taped lectures had some positive aspects. The tapes could be played more than once, which could help students with their listening skills. Also, students who had only recently arrived in Australia and who may not have been accustomed to the vernacular could be disadvantaged by practising and attempting to improve their listening skills solely in the lecture series.

These newer students may need more practice in listening skills before fully benefiting from lecture practice.

The students who had been studying in Australia for 5 or more weeks agreed that live lectures are better than taped listenings: *'We are preparing for university therefore we should not listen to tapes, just live lectures.'* although many said that a combination of both tapes and lectures would be most beneficial in preparing for university.

When asked about the lessons scaffolding the lecture series, students said the lectures were not too easy. They considered the vocabulary in the lectures difficult, and confirmed prelistening exercises and readings were necessary preparation for the lectures. Also, the overviews highlighted the keywords and discourse markers they needed to listen for, so they knew what to focus on during the lecture. From my observations during the lectures, students were able to keep up with the points in the lectures using the provided overview sheet with its keywords to guide them.

Students said they did not feel stressed or under pressure from being in a lecture theatre with 100 other students. They felt the environment in the lecture was as comfortable as the learning environment in their classes, which had a maximum of 18 students. Some students said the decision about where to sit in the lectures was important; *'the distance of the lecturer to the students made us feel too distanced to pick up all the information. The distance made the situation more formal and so it was more difficult to catch everything from the lecture. Next time we will get there earlier and sit closer to the front.'* This may mean that students have learnt experientially.

Teachers also commented on the experiential learning aspect of the lectures. They said that some students initially found the simulated lecture environment challenging because they had to listen to a live person speaking to them, each lecturer speaks differently, and each lecture was only given once. This was beneficial as it challenged them to be in the lecture environment and deal with the lecture format, and the students were also positive about the experience, *'because it felt more like being in a lecture.'*

It must be remembered that the aim of the lecture series is not to practice listening skills but to improve academic study skills in order that these students can better cope with their university studies. The data from this research has revealed the ongoing need of these level 2 students for listening skills practice as well as academic study skills preparation and practice.

Data from the interviews shows that teachers believe the lecture series should continue. However, if the lecture series is to continue, it should be altered slightly in order to more effectively prepare students to cope with their university studies.

Teachers and students both agreed that the live lectures should be supplemented by taped listenings. More taped listenings or videos of the lectures need to be programmed into the syllabus to be practiced in class to address the need for ongoing listening skills practice for these students and to therefore better prepare students for the level 2 lectures series lectures.

The post lecture lessons could also be changed to include more discussion on how the level 2 students felt while they were in the lectures. As Postle explains, knowledge, and therefore learning, depends for its success on the learner being in touch with their feelings (1993). The emotional mode of experiential learning could be further explored by introducing discussions about the students' attitudes and feelings in the lectures, and about how they feel the lecture series is benefiting their preparation for university studies. After the lectures, the level 2 students could report back to the class on their experience of the lecture, what they had understood from it and how they felt about it, rather than it being an assessed component of the course.

All teachers felt the students were impressed with the whole listening lecture series. They thought it beneficial; what they really wanted and needed, as it was '*more authentic*'. In addition, it made students realize more clearly what would be expected of them at university: '*Some of them do realize they haven't got the skills and they are shocked.*'

Consequently, the lecture series can be seen as beneficial as it has made students aware firstly of what they may face at university, and secondly of skills they need if they wish to further improve.

Section Five: Conclusion

The limitations of this study are that it measured the perceptions of individuals in an extremely specialised area of English language teaching. If the study were to be replicated, there would be no guarantee that a different group of individuals, each with their strengths and weaknesses, would produce the same results and the same types of comments. Perhaps one of the teachers on the study will not be good at lecturing students, while the other teachers will find it enjoyable and therefore easier. Also, the study may reveal that while some students are able to learn note-taking skills more effectively in a lecture format, other students may not be able to. Some students

may be comfortable in larger classes, while others may find them too daunting and therefore not be able to learn from this format.

As a different method of instruction has been introduced at this particular college, it is expected that when teachers continue with the lecture series, they will naturally fall into a pattern of action research where activities or lectures will be reworked, improved, reused or discarded. This would reflect the constantly changing nature of teaching and the constantly changing nature of ELICOS.

The English Australia preliminary report suggests that the ELICOS industry has become too homogenized, and needs to recognise that nowadays there are many more variables to consider in English language teaching, such as English for academic purposes courses. This research has shown that there is a benefit for students in experiencing simulations of university learning contexts, and perceptions are that a project such as the lecture series has positively impacted on students' abilities to cope with university studies. More innovative projects such as this one need to be undertaken and implemented into current EAP curriculum in order that the industry reflect the constantly changing nature of teaching and education.

This paper developed from research undertaken for my Masters TESOL project. For the full version of my research paper, please contact me at: geckert@aim.edu.au

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