



Teaching English for Academic Purposes Online

Irina Matusevich

eLearning Office, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University
Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University
(Czech Republic)

Abstract

In order to successfully operate in the English-speaking academic environment students need a very particular set of language skills and vocabulary that differs from that of an everyday conversation. Their acquisition takes time, the resource that is often in short supply at the university. At the same time, students are expected to participate in seminars and submit essays that are on par with the university-level requirements from the very first semester of their studies.

A one-semester face-to-face Academic Writing course currently taught at the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, cannot feasibly address all the issues and target individual student's problems. To supplement it and to provide more space for practice, the BA Online Academic English Practice course was created. It is a one-semester fully online course that focuses on improving students' writing and speaking skills by utilising a variety of Moodle functions and external services.

This article provides an overview of the course. It also addresses the common pitfalls of online courses, such as lack of motivation and insufficient learner autonomy, and demonstrates approaches to targeting them that have been applied in the course.

1. Introduction

Proficiency in academic writing can be considered one of the core skills for university-level students. Yet, its acquisition can be a lengthy and complicated process, especially for non-native speakers of English. The course described in this article, *Academic English Practice Online* (AEP), was developed as an addition to a face-to-face course to provide the students with more space for basic skills acquisition and improvement. The description of the course layout and administration is provided in the first part of the article.

Apart from academic skills improvement, and less visibly for the students, this course aims at helping students acquire and develop autonomous learner skills, that is monitoring one's own learning progress and processing information and knowledge in such a way that both the knowledge and the principles of its processing can be applied later and/or in different settings. Constructivist theories recognize that it is, primarily, the process of knowledge construction that needs to be taught to students rather than the end-product itself [1]. This has far-reaching implications for teachers, students and the learning process/administration itself. Each student should receive just the right amount of support they need at a given stage to show the best results in attainment of transversal skills. The teacher's role is key in student support that is executed through dialogue with students, feedback and motivation. These aspects are briefly discussed in the second part of the article.

2. Course overview

This fully online course, launched in the Autumn Semester 2014, was designed as supplementary to the mandatory one-semester Academic Writing course. It is taught in the **Moodle-based LMS** managed by the Faculty of Arts at Masaryk University. Its focus is on the development and improvement of skills ranging from listening comprehension and oral contributions in a seminar to argument building and essay planning. It is primarily targeted at the English and American Studies Department students with the minimum entering requirements of the B2 level of English (CEFR) and basic knowledge of linguistics.

2.1 Materials

The methodological basis of the course is formed by two texts, namely: a methodology booklet *Metodická doporučení pro jazykovou výuku online* [2] and *How to Plan and Manage an E-Learning Programme* [3].



As for the contents, three books were extensively used and adapted for the course purposes. They are: *English for Language and Linguistics in Higher Education* [4], *Academic Writing in English: A Process-Based Approach* (2011) [5] and *The Future of English?* [6]. Additional materials and resources were included to familiarize students with the Department-specific tools and requirements: Sketch Engine (a corpus search software) [7], BYU Corpora (a corpus search software) [8] and APA and MLA Guidelines [9] produced by the Purdue University.

2.2 Course layout

The course is divided into 12 units (grid layout in Moodle) with an additional one, 13th, set up for the final assessment. Each unit consists of **Reference Materials** and **Vocabulary Practice, Reading** (even numbered units) or **Listening** (odd numbered units) and **Extending Skills** exercises. These exercises are mainly based on those in the *English for Language and Linguistics* [4] course book and in *Academic Writing in English: A Process-Based Approach* [5] with additional vocabulary and grammar practice tasks created with sentences found in the BNC (British National Corpus), the NMC (New Model Corpus) and the EnTenTen12 (web-based corpus).

Additionally, units 5, 8 and 10 have **Writing Workshops** (peer-review exercises set up in the Workshop module) in which students are asked to submit a 200 – 250 word piece of writing on a given topic and to give feedback on two of their peers' pieces. The tutor also provides feedback at the end of the activity to both students' pieces and their feedbacks. Units 7 and 9 have **Speaking Practice** exercises where students are, in one case, offered a picture to comment on for approximately one minute and, in another case, discuss a given topic for the same length of time. Students then submit their recordings of themselves for tutor evaluation and feedback. Unit 11 is allocated for the **Webinar**, a synchronous online session in Adobe Connect on a given topic that lasts for approximately 25-30 minutes, which is intended as a practice of seminar-appropriate behaviour both in terms of individual contributions and interactions with other students. Participants are expected to demonstrate that they have incorporated tutor's feedback from the Speaking Practice exercises and that they are able to operate within the formal spoken register. Furthermore, students are evaluated based on their ability to react to each other's contributions, to request the change of turns and to cooperate (instruction on these aspects of conduct is provided in the 2 preceding units).

At the end of each unit, students are expected to complete a short – always the same except for the last one – **questionnaire**. It consists of 6 questions, 4 of which are multiple choice and mandatory, and the remaining 2 are not mandatory and open ended. The questions are aimed at finding out how long it took students to complete a given unit, how difficult/easy they perceived it to be, whether they used any additional resources apart from those included in the course and whether they found any mistakes or typos. The goal here is to keep improving the course and adapt it to the students' needs *ad hoc*.

2.3 Learning process

Students are expected to complete one unit per week within the estimated time of three to five hours. Each unit starts with a Vocabulary exercise, followed by Reading or Listening, and then the Extra Skills tasks; in the second half of the course, Writing and Speaking activities are added after the Extra Skills ones. The course progression in the LMS is set in such way that students can only proceed in this fixed order because the tasks often complement each other and any other order would only confuse students. For revision, students are advised to complete vocabulary exercises in Quizlet (flashcards website) [10] in each unit and to go back to exercises in the previous weeks on weeks 3, 9 and 12, weeks 6 and 13 being reserved for mid-term and final tests respectively.

Students are not expected to do any reading before doing the exercises other than rather short chapters from *Academic Writing in English: A Process-Based Approach* [5] and introductions to individual exercises that explains their contents and aims. This hands-on strategy is implemented due to the practical nature of the information presented in the course; however, where deemed necessary, additional explanations and links to further resources are added.

2.4 Assessment



Students are assessed continuously throughout the course with the results being counted by and stored in the LMS. In order for a student to proceed to the next one, they have to successfully complete at least 70 per cent of an exercise. This limitation is imposed for two reasons: first, to avoid confusion on students' part that might occur with random switching from exercise to exercise or from unit to unit, and, second, to allow students to build up knowledge and skills required for the completion of each consecutive exercise because the level of difficulty increases not only from unit to unit but also from exercise to exercise within a unit. At the same time, the course is set up in such a way as to permit any number of attempts without penalty in Vocabulary, Listening/Reading and Extending Skills exercises. This is meant to ensure a low level of stress that can be sometimes associated with exercise completion, especially since they take place in the same module as do the regular tests that students are familiar with from other courses, the Test module. In the AEP course, the exercises setup is *Adaptive mode (no penalties)*. Another reason is to encourage students to come back to the exercises once the unit complete for revision, which they are prompted to do at regular intervals throughout the semester. Once a student fulfils all requirements of continuous assessment, they can qualify for the credit assessment. The credit assessment consists of three parts: **Final Test**, **Final Speaking** task and **Final Writing** task. A student has to achieve at least 70 per cent in each individual assessment component in order to obtain the credits. The course is offered for four ECTS credits.

3. Student autonomy and motivation

Becoming a successful autonomous learner is a lengthy task that includes obtaining and perfecting the following set of skills: exercising **choice** and **control** over the learning process, being **independent**, **responsible** and capable of **critical thinking**, **self-reflection** and **self-correction**. These seven features constitute rather an extensive list of skills, especially taking into account that substantial time investments are required for their processing. Fortunately, their acquisition does not occur in isolation from one another. The features are interconnected: control requires critical thinking, choice, independence and responsibility and critical thinking requires self-reflection and self-correction.

The AEP course aims at helping students develop these features through a carefully constructed system. In it, students start with an extensive amount of support when it comes to instructions, learning guidelines and tips. As the semester progresses, however, the amount of this type of support is gradually reduced minimum. Students are encouraged to create their own meanings and logical links in course materials, while the tutor provides support by acting as facilitator, moderator and content provider. Relaxing the grip on authority also means delegating students some responsibility over the learning process; this strategy can improve students' learning process and results, provided it is done through informed discussion between both parties.

An important thing to consider here is that the emotional component of learning is naturally present in face-to-face classes but can be challenging to recreate online. Michael Moore's theory of transactional distance states that psychological and communicative separation has more impact on students than the physical one and that this distance could be overcome through course structure and dialogue [11]. For beginner learners/at the beginning of the course, therefore, the distance would need to be short, i.e. include more individual support and less flexibility, while for more advanced students/later on in the semester the opposite would be the case. Nevertheless, the course primarily relies on students' independent work on their vocabulary, reading and listening skills from the very start.

4. Conclusion

It is hoped that the AEP course can continue to be taught and improved. However, as has been emphasized above, autonomous learner skills development requires a holistic approach since need time to develop, and their improvement and maintenance can be viewed as a process that does not stop at an educational institution but continues for as long as a learner needs. Thus, more online and blended courses need to focus on autonomy skills development to facilitate student transition into a professional world where, these days, such skills are in high demand.



References

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