

## Student's Perceptions of Online Academic English Tutoring

**Hsiao-fang Cheng**

*National United University*

**Cheng, H. F. (2015). Student's perceptions of online academic English tutoring. *Journal of Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics*. 19(1), 183-194.**

English textbooks are widely used in every discipline in the majority of colleges and universities in Taiwan. To prepare college students for their future careers, it is necessary they be given systematic training and practice in reading these books. However, due to time constraints, most content teachers focus on the delivery of content rather than the language in the texts. To compensate for the lack of time available for academic English instruction, this study attempts to investigate an alternative online approach to improving student's academic English reading comprehension. Using a Course Management System, students were given Internet access to detailed explanations by their teachers of both the content and the language of their texts. A survey was conducted at the end of the semester to investigate the students' reading needs as well as what they thought of the online support. The survey results revealed that students needed training in reading strategies, the analysis of complex sentence structure and the accurate pronunciation of terminology. In addition, more than eighty percent of the participants thought online support was a viable alternative to in-class language instruction, but less than ten percent had used the facilities provided. Drawing on the results of this study, some pedagogical implications are proposed.

**Key words:** English for Academic Purposes (EAP), motivation, online tutoring, terminology

### 1 Introduction

To meet the great challenge posed by globalization and internationalization, English as a medium of instruction has become an increasingly prominent issue in university education in Taiwan. Theoretically, college students, as a result of having studied English as a subject in high school, could be expected to be able to use English as an instrument of learning. In principle, it would seem appropriate that they be required to read extensively and deeply, and that they be asked to study large amounts of academic material in English. But, in practice, very few college students strive to read the English textbooks they have bought. Instead, they rely heavily on translated versions, because they generally have difficulty understanding the content accurately due to their limited English ability. In many cases their efforts to read English

texts meet with a decided lack of success, even though this has a prejudicial effect on their vocational or academic progress. Their first feelings of frustration are followed by a gradually loss of motivation and initiative, and finally they give up reading altogether. Furthermore, most content teachers tend to use Chinese as a medium of instruction; conveying content knowledge becomes their main concern. Under such circumstances, improving their English ability is not as important as obtaining content knowledge or new information.

Reading comprehension is an interaction or a dialogue between the reader and the writer. Ausubel (2000), regarding language itself as a medium for learning new knowledge and information instead of the main objective of learning, emphasizes the importance of "meaningful learning". In other words, individuals learn large amounts of "meaningful" material from verbal or textual lessons in school. Grabe and Stoller (2002) state that learning to read does not mean learning rules and separate strategies and practicing them outside of the reading context. Like any other skills, reading from texts to synthesize information requires systematic practice. It is necessary to make it a habit to read in the target language on a regular basis and to set aside a certain amount of time every day to do some reading. Regular practice will improve the learner's ability to quickly and automatically recognize words. This, in turn, will lead to an improved reading rate. As learners read more quickly, they will find reading in a foreign language more pleasurable. As they advance, they will find that they can increase both the number of pages read and the difficulty of the materials they can handle. Extensive reading is an essential skill for learners to gain new knowledge (Krashen, 2002). Significant progress in academic areas is seen and success is achieved when reading skills are strengthened (Anderson, 1999).

Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) point out that reading extensively in academic English requires L2 learners to develop macro- and micro-skills. The macro-skills include the ability to relate new information to background knowledge to form new schemata. Important micro-skills include recognizing logical relationships, definitions, generalizations, examples, explanations and predictions. All these abilities require lots of practice in reading which, in turn, is dependent on strong motivation being maintained. There is no doubt that reading English for academic purposes (EAP) substantially promotes not only learners' language skills but also their content knowledge. Reading academic material is a form of extensive reading, exposing learners not only to the target language but also to the specific information of the texts. In university settings, EAP reading, generally regarded as a set of higher-level comprehension processes, is one significant component of academic learning and it definitely plays a crucial role in a student's academic success. As a result, students need to be equipped with the ability to establish purposes for reading, combine reading strategies as needed, make inferences of many types, draw extensively on background knowledge, monitor comprehension,

form attitudes about the text and author, and critically evaluate the information being read.

Grabe's interactive reading model (2002) implies that most EAP readers have poorer content schemata than their content teachers and less knowledge of the language used than the English teachers. Reading English occurs not only in English class but also in other academic courses where English texts are used. EAP instruction should focus both on linguistic structures for decoding the language and on global reading strategies. Collier (1987) and Cummins (1979) suggest that students need explicit instruction in the register of academic English. Therefore, the "theoretically-correct" EAP instructional model is for two teachers to teach together a specific subject. One of the teachers is a content specialist who assists students in reading field-specific textbooks and the other, an ESL specialist who addresses the academic language needs of the learners (Shieh & Wu, 1988). They may teach the class together or the class time may be divided between the two of them. However, the results of such arrangements in real teaching situations show that such content-based adjunct instruction providing a transition into the academic mainstream does not work in practice.

In many learning situations, learners must know where they are going and how they should get there. The ability to read academic English textbooks is not a natural phenomenon; it cannot be acquired suddenly and accidentally. It is a time-consuming process taking years and requiring patience, determination and systematic guidance. In recent years, a giant number of online courses have been made available on the assumption that if learners can access them anytime, anywhere without time and space constraints, they will use them and learn by themselves. It is believed, and conceivable, that online courses can compensate for inadequate amounts of class time and the inability of many to attend face-to-face classes, but their effects on learners and instructors are not being effectively assessed.

In a wave that is also reshaping the landscape in language instruction, e-learning has without much input from teachers or students become a dominant force in the delivery of instruction at universities in Taiwan. It is assumed that giving teachers the resources to develop high-tech supplementary course material and students the ability to access that material will result in innovative and efficient learning. The availability and actual effects of online support, however, remains unclear. In view of the need to assess this current trend to virtualization in the teaching situation, in this study online resources guiding students how to read their academic English textbooks provided by their content teachers are compared as an alternative to in-class EAP instruction, by means of an analysis of the students' reactions. Dubin et al. (1986) strongly emphasize the importance of motivation in L2 EAP reading. Eskey (1986) points out that for any approach to teaching to succeed, teachers must take into account the real needs and desires of the learners. Robinson (1991) states that learning needs will influence the

delivery of course content. Taking these theoretical pronouncements seriously, EAP instruction needs to conform to the learner's needs. However, it is not easy to predict the needs or the difficulties that students will face in academic settings. As part of attempts to carry out a rigorous analysis of the linguistic and pragmatic consequences of these current trends, this study will only be an attempt to scratch the surface and seek expression by students of their reading needs and perceptions of online approaches to EAP reading. Three research questions will be addressed.

- (1) Do college students need systematic instruction in how to read English for Academic Purposes (EAP)?
- (2) In what respects do students need assistance to enhance their EAP reading ability?
- (3) What are participants' perceptions of and attitudes toward online EAP reading instruction, in its role as an alternative to face-to-face instruction?

It is hoped that the results of this study will make a worthwhile, if preliminary, contribution to study of the effect of e-learning on instruction in EAP reading.

## **2 Method**

### **2.1 Participants**

One hundred and forty-five sophomores who took courses offered by three content teachers at National United University participated in this study. Group A consisted of 45 students majoring in Finance who were taking a required Financial Management class. Group B was composed of fifty students majoring in Materials and Science Engineering, taking an elective Physics course. The other 45 students majoring in Electronic Engineering, formed Group C and were taking the required Electronics I. The three groups were homogeneous in terms of English proficiency. The participants' survey responses indicated that they had already been learning English for more than ten years. Their English proficiency varied from low-intermediate to high-intermediate level. Some of them had already practiced English reading skills and strategies in Freshman English classes. At the time this study was conducted, they had never been trained to read discipline-related English texts. However, they had been reading English textbooks in four different academic subjects every semester since entering college.

The three content teachers, surnamed Chou, Wu and Lin, volunteered to participate in the pilot version of this study. Professor Chou obtained his PhD from Columbia University, U.S.A. Professor Wu received his PhD from University of California, in Berkeley. Though Professor Lin completed her study in Taiwan, she had been a visiting professor in UC Berkeley for one

year. Furthermore, they were trained to lecture academic subjects in English the year before this study was conducted. There is no doubt they are competent to fulfill the task ahead.

### **2.2 Rationale of Online EAP Reading Instruction**

The three content teachers shared the same belief, enunciated by Cummins (1979), that students need explicit instruction in how to read field-specific English texts. But due to time constraints, they found it impossible in class to focus on the delivery of professional knowledge and simultaneously to address the extra language demands posed by reading English textbooks. Since students had never been trained to read discipline-based English textbooks, they held it necessary that some attempt, if small, be made to change this. They asserted that when students are equipped with the ability to read academic English textbooks efficiently and effectively, they will be more competitive in their future careers. They argued that online support for EAP reading might be a valuable adjunct—helping in the transition from reading general English to reading academic English. In addition to their lecturing in class, they took time to record their explanations and interpretations in the areas of content and language, hoping that students would become familiar with the registers of academic English and gradually master the skills required to read discipline-related English material.

### **2.3 Procedure**

Professor Lin, lecturing Financial Management, referred to the English textbook in class whenever she explained content or terminology. She usually read the parts she was explaining out loud and asked the whole class to repeat the terminological expressions in it after her. Sometimes she would analyze the grammatical structure of particularly complex sentences. Her lectures were voice-recorded and put on the website, and linked to the appropriate pages of the text. The content of the online support material was thus exactly the same as what had been delivered in class. Students could access the website freely whenever they needed to check their understanding of the material.

Professor Wu, teaching Electronics I, focused on the course content and instructed his class in Chinese and seldom referred to the English textbook in class. He told his students to access the online support material if they wanted to improve their academic English reading ability. In his online material, composed of an audio recording linked with slides showing sentences from the text, he read the sentences first, and explained their Chinese meaning with the help of an indicator marking the corresponding position in the text. Once in a while, he analyzed the structure of the sentences to make his interpretation clearer. Students could access the

website freely if they needed to practice reading. Those who logged on were probably highly motivated to learn English.

Professor Chou, the teacher of physics, pre-recorded the parts to be covered in class and put them on Blackboard, the course management system. On the recording, he first read the English text, explained it in Chinese, and in a similar arrangement to Wu's, underlined in red the terminology he wished the students to focus on. Each student was required to prepare one assigned passage before attending the class and then give an oral presentation on it in class. During preparation, if students had questions, they could access the online support freely to check their understanding. The requirement to use the material was thus a "soft" requirement in this class.

A part-time work-study student helped these content teachers with the recording and uploading of the files. At the end of the semester, a survey was conducted to investigate the participants' needs in reading EAP and their perceptions of the online support as an alternative to in-class enhancement of their academic English reading proficiency. Statistical analysis was performed on the resulting data and the results analyzed.

#### **2.4 Instrument**

The survey was developed by the researcher, based on the theories of language teaching outlined above and the researchers' own teaching practice. To elicit profound interpretations, the survey was written and answered in the subjects' mother tongue, which in this case was Mandarin Chinese. The instrument consists of three parts: participant information, 15 five-point Likert-scale questions and two open-ended questions. It focuses on investigating the participants' needs and perceptions of the online EAP support.

### **3 Results and Discussion**

The survey results detailing the reception of the efforts of the three teachers in this study will be presented in the following section.

Research Question 1: Do college students need systematic instruction on how to read English for Academic Purposes (EAP)? The responses to Survey questions 1 through 5 show that 78% of the participants thought it was necessary and beneficial to read academic textbooks in English. They said if their teachers are able to guide them and show them how to read their English texts in class, they will be more motivated to read them, gain better understanding of the content, and as a result, improve substantially their English ability. They held positive attitudes toward using English academic textbooks and to teacher's guidance in how to read them.

Research Question 2: In what respects do students need assistance to enhance their EAP reading ability? As mentioned before, every student uses

an English academic textbook in at least four different subjects every semester. As teachers, we must first know what help students need to make the best use of these books, and then work out ways to provide this help. The results of Survey questions 6 through 10 show that in terms of systematic instruction in ESP reading, 80% of the participants thought that the content teacher should read the English terminology out loud first, then explain it in Chinese, and finally ask the students to repeat it chorally. Eighty-two percent of the participants thought that being able to pronounce the terminology accurately would enhance their learning. However, reading the English texts out loud before translation by the teacher was not seen by as many students as contributing to their listening proficiency and motivation. One student even commented that the teacher's pronunciation needed improvement (Question 6.) A higher 79 % requested that the content teacher analyze complex sentences before translating them into Chinese, a practice which they thought would help build up their ability to read independently in the future.

Research Question 3: What are participants' perceptions of and attitudes toward online ESP reading instruction as an alternative to face-to-face instruction? Survey question 11 through 15 focused on the participants' perceptions of the role of adjunct multi-media material, and Power point files in particular, in terms of its usefulness for learning. Less than 66% of the participants cared whether their teachers used Power Point files in the course of instruction or not. It seemed that they didn't have a strong preference either for or against the use of Power Point files (Question 11). High-tech facilitators may not contribute as much to learning as might be expected. Only 62% of the participants thought online support could increase their reading comprehension and motivate them to read academic English material (Questions 13-14). However, 74% suggested that online material related to ESP reading is necessary and helpful (Question 15).

A significant interaction was found between the teacher's requirements, access rates and the expected effect on learning (Question 13, 14, & 19). Sixty-seven percent of the participants knew that there was online guidance to help them to read their textbooks. However, the access rates varied for the different classes. Ten students from Group A and C said that they had never heard about the online supportive programs. Students in Group A and C reported accessing the online help a total of 31 times over the whole semester whereas students in Group B, the physics teachers' group, said they logged on to use the online resources more than 500 times in total. More than 86% of the participants in Group B accessed the online facility whereas less than 53% of the participants in Group C did. As stated above, participants in Group B needed to refer to the online program if they had questions before attending class whereas those from Group A and C accessed the online guidance only if they were interested. A statistical test showed a significant difference in access rates between the three groups ( $df=2$ ,  $F=26.36$ ,

$p < 0.05$ ). A post-hoc comparison revealed a significant difference in access rates between Group B and Group C. No significant difference was found between Group A and C. This finding indicates that a teacher's requirements, advocacy and encouragement together with students' needs have a great effect on access rates of supplementary language help.

Since participants in Group B accessed the online support course more, they thought the facility was of greater help. A significant difference was found in the groups' perceptions of the online materials' contribution to their learning ( $df=2$ ,  $F=26.36$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Eighty percent of the participants in Group B thought they benefited from the online material; however, only 42% of the participants in Group C thought it was helpful. In fact, the material available to the students in the two groups differed very little. It can be inferred that the more students accessed the online course, the more helpful they saw the material as being. In other words, a teacher's requirements, access rates, and perceived contribution to learning are causally related. The more required, the greater the perceived learning benefit and the higher the access rate.

On average, Finance majors had a more positive attitude to and a stronger need for help with ESP reading than their peers majoring in Electronic Engineering. Thirty percent of the participants expressed a clear understanding of the inadequacy of their English after ten years of study in school, stating that they knew that they were ill equipped for the reading task ahead. Five finance majors said that they had failed the course just because they could not understand the exam questions written in English. If the questions had been written in Chinese, they would have been able to work out the answers swiftly and accurately, they suggested. They further wished that assessment could be conducted as a series of quizzes, rather than as one mid-term and one final examination (Question 21).

#### **4 Conclusion**

The survey results revealed that the participants held positive attitudes toward both in-class and online help with their reading and that they thought that it was necessary they use English academic textbooks in their disciplines. Clearly, providing guidance enhances reading ability, because the skills or strategy use necessary for reading EAP texts effectively and efficiently cannot be acquired easily and naturally. Instead, it takes time, perseverance and systematic training to build them. Requirements, soft or hard, can be a powerful motivator developing students' learning enthusiasm and motivation. As for what specific assistance they needed, most students suggested that the teacher analyze complicated sentences before translating them and teach them how to pronounce the technical terms accurately. Since no material is useful unless it is accessed, teachers need to explore what situational factors motivate students to seek help in reading their ESP texts.



## 5 Limitation and Pedagogical Suggestion

Only a small group of students participated in this study, and the results cannot be generalized. Nonetheless, a few problems were discovered. First, the majority of participants knew online help for reading was available; however, very few of them appear to have accessed it. In the future study, I will focus on figuring out methods to increase the rates at which students access online resources. Second, the majority of students have a reading ability that is inadequate to tackle the task of reading in academic English; therefore, I will negotiate a progression from general, through semi-technical texts to ones that are technical and field-specific. Third, students need analysis of complicated sentence structures and accurate pronunciation of terminology. In response to their needs and suggestions, I will provide online help on these two aspects. To pronounce technical terms in a native-like manner, a native speaker of English will be invited to join the study. In addition, to help content teachers equip themselves with better language ability, teacher's workshops or seminars will be held at least once a month. It is hoped that we, both content teachers and English teachers, can provide quality online guidance for reading EAP texts.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the three teachers, Drs M. C. Lin, Y. P. Chou, and Y. H. Wu, for their invaluable help and cooperation. I am also thankful to the students who, in one way or another, have contributed to the results of this study.

## References

- Anderson, N. (1999). *Exploring second language reading: Issues and strategies*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Ausubel, D. P. (2000). *The acquisition and retention of knowledge: A cognitive view*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Collier, V.P. (1987). Age and rate of acquisition of second language for academic purposes. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21, 617-641.
- Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49(2), 222-251.
- Dubin, F., Eskey, D. E., & Grabe, W. (1986). *Teaching second language reading for academic purposes*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Eskey, D. E. (1986). Theoretical foundations. In F. Dubin, D. E. Eskey, & W. Grabe, (Eds.). *Teaching second language reading for academic purposes*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Flowerdew, J. & Peacock, M. (2001). *Research perspectives on English for*

Hsiao-fang Cheng

- academic purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grabe, W. G., & Stoller, F. L. (2002). *Teaching and researching reading*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Krashen, S. D. (2002). *Explorations in language acquisition and use: The Taipei lectures*. Taipei: Crane.
- Robinson, P. (1991). *ESP today: A practitioners' guide*. Hemel Hemstead: Prentice Hall.
- Shieh, Yen-lung & We, Yu-shi. (1988). A needs analysis for the curriculum and syllabus of Freshman English at Tsinghua University. Paper presented at the Fifth Conference on English Teaching and Learning in the R.O.C.

Hsiao-fang Cheng  
National United University  
#1 Lien-da, Kung-cheng Li, Miaoli 360, Taiwan  
Phone: 886-37-381710  
Cellphone: 886-0912-640055  
Fax: 886-37-381900  
E-mail: hfcheng@nuu.edu.tw

Received: March 30, 2015  
Revised: June 1, 2015  
Accepted: July 1, 2015

## Student's Perceptions of Online Academic English Tutoring

### Appendix Survey Questions

Dear students:

This survey contains two parts. Please answer the questions based on your own views. The statement of your views here will not influence your final grades. Thank you for your cooperation.

#### Part I. My own views on using English textbooks and the help I need

Item	Question	Mean	SD
1	I think it is necessary we use English academic textbooks.	3.90	0.75
2	I think my English ability will be improved if all my content teachers use English textbooks.	3.80	0.68
3	I think it is necessary and helpful if our content teachers help us with reading English textbooks in class.	4.10	0.62
4	I think if our content teachers give us guidance when reading English textbooks, I will understand the content better.	3.95	0.76
5	I think if our content teachers help us to read English textbooks, I will be more motivated to read them.	3.40	0.90
6	I think our content teachers should read sentences from the textbook aloud before translating them.	3.70	0.88
7	I think my listening ability will be improved if my teachers read from the textbook aloud before translation.	3.50	0.87
8	Oral reading by my content teachers will motivate me to read academic English.	3.20	0.87
9	I think our content teachers should teach us how to pronounce technical terms accurately, because this will help us learn better.	4.05	0.69
10	I think our content teachers should analyze complex sentences to improve our understanding.	3.95	0.73
11	I think the provision of Power Point files is a more effective instructional tool than the requirement that we read the original text, as written in our English textbooks.	3.30	1.15
12	I know that for this course, apart from lectures in class, Chinese explanations of both the content and English have been made available online.	3.35	1.12
13	Due to time constraints, online support with EAP reading are good alternatives to in-class provision of help, and this support also contributes to my understanding of content knowledge.	3.10	0.99
14	Due to time constraints, online support with EAP reading helps give me the motivation to read academic English.	3.30	1.04
15	On the whole, I think it is necessary teachers provide online support with EAP reading.	3.70	0.90

#### Part II. Participant's Background Information

16. Sex: Male      Female

17. Year: Freshman   Sophomore   Junior   Senior

Hsiao-fang Cheng

18. Program:    Undergraduate    Polytechnical Program    Graduate

19. Times I have logged on to the online course this semester:

---

20. Number of subjects in which I use English textbooks:

---

21. My suggestions for improvements or advice:

---

---