2014 Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) Conference

Conference Sub-theme: Pedagogical Innovation

Transferring Academic English Skills to Disciplinary Study: Pedagogical Challenges in Developing an English-in-the-Discipline Course in an Undergraduate Curriculum

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Overview of the Presentation

- Research objectives
- Project significance
- Background of English-in-the-Discipline (ED) courses
- Curriculum innovation
- Pedagogical challenges
- Opportunities and future plan

Research Objectives & Course Background

Research Objectives

- Funded by the **Teaching Development Grant** from the University of Hong Kong (HKU)

- to evaluate an English-in-the-Discipline (ED) course for disciplinary-defined group of learners in HKU for the **4-year new undergraduate curriculum**

- to evaluate the extent to which course facilitates students' learning in their discipline and to investigate how the course can improve **students' disciplinary-specific skills**

Project Significance

- The project outcomes such as course templates, developed resources and procedures have immense learning potential for **being transferred to other foundation courses** within other programs in the Faculty of Education (**Cross-disciplinary**) and to other faculties (**University-wide**) to benefit diverse learners.

- The research outcomes inform us of any potential advantages of developing discipline-specific courses with **relevant and specific input from Faculty members**.

What is an English-in-the-Discipline Course?

- introduces students to **relevant academic English discourse** in which to **support their disciplinary learning** and **enrich their learning experience**

- builds connections between **specific language needs and subject knowledge**

Curriculum Innovation

Innovative Features of this ED Course

- **Close mapping** with the Faculty-level learning outcomes
  - Learning components are closely aligned with language requirements in the Faculty assignments
  - All source texts for class activities are discipline-specific

- **Ongoing convergent feedback** and **timely language support** from English teacher and subject teacher

- Close alignment between independent learning **tasks on *Moodle*** and **in-class teaching topics**
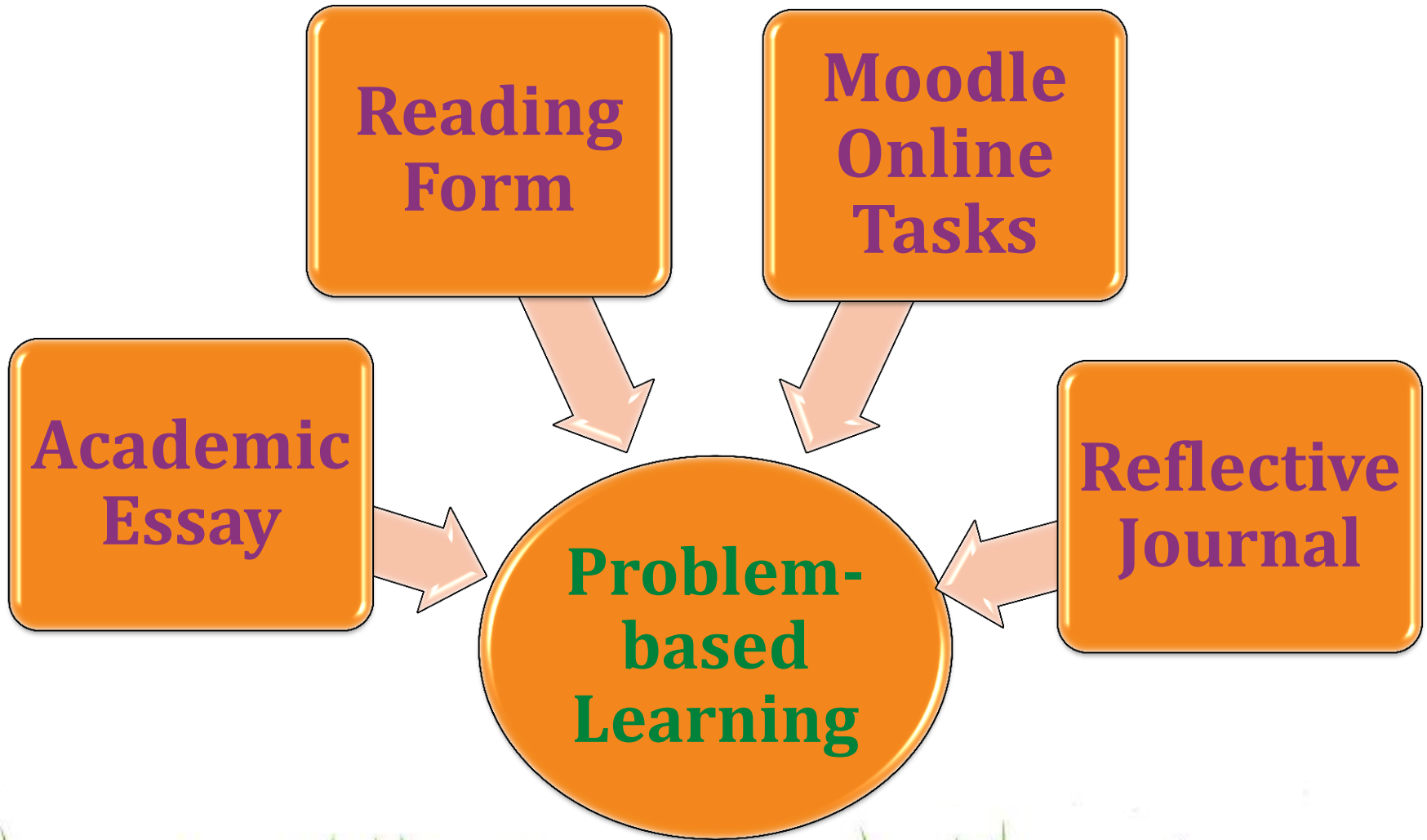
Course Background

- Majored in **Speech & Hearing Sciences** in the **Faculty of Education** at HKU

- Year 2 **compulsory** English course

- **Consolidated English course**

- **Problem-based Learning** (PBL) Approach in the discipline

Course Assessment

Curricular Model

1. **Use of Exemplars**

- **Samples supplied by Faculty teachers**
- Useful for students to learn the organization and linguistic devices of the writing genres

2. **In-class Peer Critique**

- students identify strengths and weaknesses of their peer's work
- **Students take control of their learning**
- **WHAT to critique vs. HOW to critique**

Curricular Model

3. In-class Writing

- Students upload writings to a forum on *Moodle*
- Teachers give **immediate collective feedback**
- **Collaborative learning**
- **Co-construction of ideas within the writing process**

4. In-class Sharing- Reflective Learning Experience

- **Verbal exchanges** with classmates
  - share their views, reflect their learning, learn from their classmates' experience
- **Apply** what they have learnt into their writing

Data Collection Methods (N = 49)

- **Questionnaires** with students
  - Interim (42 respondents) 86%
  - End-of-course (37 respondents) 76%
- **Focus group interviews** with students (29 participants) 60%
- **Personal interviews** with Faculty teachers
- **Assignments** from students
  - Pre-course and Post-course Reading Form and Reflective Journal

Pedagogical Challenges

Challenges: Materials Design

- **Expertise of English teachers** to develop discipline-specific course materials
  - Students' perception of the **immediate relevance**
  - **Alignment** between the English course materials and Faculty assignments
  - Teaching **language skills** vs **subject-knowledge** (Faculty's vs students' expectations)

  ("I won't say CAES solely focuses on language. [...] [The teacher] sometimes gives comments regarding how to apply the concept [into the reading form]. CAES also helps, on top of language.")

Challenges: Collaboration

- **Sustainability of the collaborative mode** between the Faculty and the Centre
  - Ensure close **consultation** and **collaboration** between the Faculty and the Centre
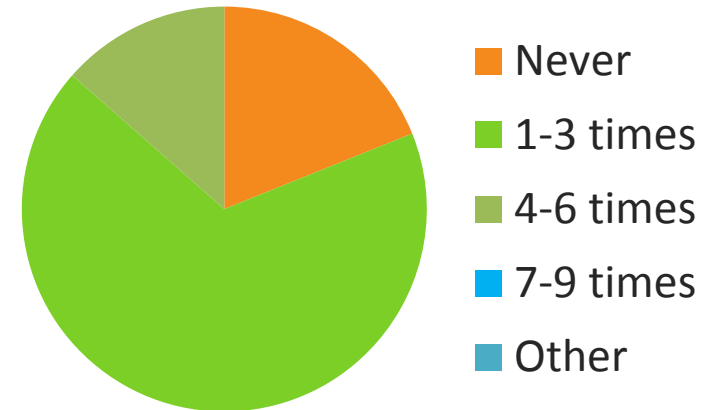 - Identify **achievable goals** to make learning more **motivating**
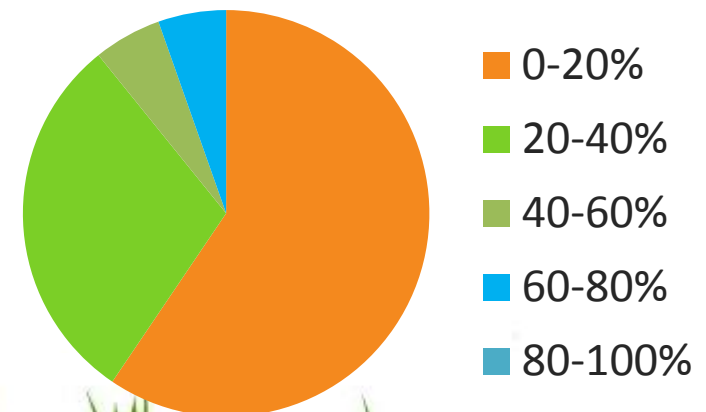
Challenges: Independent learning

Students' involvement in online independent learning tasks

- Should independent learning tasks be made **compulsory** and assessed?

- How to **motivate** students to complete online Moodle tasks if they are **not assessed**?

- If assessed: lose **interest**, not for learning, lack of **self-motivation**

Frequency

- Never
- 1-3 times
- 4-6 times
- 7-9 times
- Other

Task completion

- 0-20%
- 20-40%
- 40-60%
- 60-80%
- 80-100%

Independent Learning Tasks on MOODLE

- Possible factors **discouraging students to do the Moodle tasks**:

  - **Busy** study schedule ("In fact, I worked on the tasks at the beginning because I was not that busy at that time, but then I became busy so I didn't have time to work on the tasks.")

  - **Types** of Moodle tasks (choices, interactive, short, self-check answers)

  - **Conflicting vs complementary role** with Faculty (students' feeling too intense in PBL – therefore expect more teacher support in language) *(cont.)*

Challenges: Course Implementation

Students' expectations: Content Vs Language

- **pragmatic skills** to help them complete Faculty assignments
  - handy materials e.g. essay checklist, vocabulary list, useful language expressions, good samples
- **Sociocultural context** in Hong Kong: teacher-dependent → learner-centered & independent?
- **Contextual constraints**: ("When the time becomes tight, everything is forgotten; language is completely ignored.")

Challenges: Assessment Methods

- **One assignment two courses**
  - Reading Form and Reflective Journal
  - Content (Faculty) vs Language (CAES)
- **Assessment and feedback**
  - **Peer** assessment (Moodle & peer critique on essay drafts – focus on process) vs **teacher** feedback
  - ("I think the practice of peer critique is so-so only since we do not quite know what to do; this makes it hard for peers to give comments.")
  - ("I think the amount of time for the teacher to give feedback can be increased, maybe on an individual basis")

Conclusion & Implications

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- **Course feedback: POSITIVE** in general in facilitating students' disciplinary learning

- Room for **improvement**: Out-of-class online learning, Teacher-dependent vs Student-centered

- **Transfer**: Other ED courses, promoting **collaboration** between language teachers and faculty teachers

THANK YOU

Question-and-Answer Session

Opportunities

- An early trial of implementing ED course to cross disciplinary-defined groups of learners

- A solid case example for different Faculties and a key reference point for other courses in other departments

- This ED course on academic literacy exemplifies ways in which students can transfer their learning experience from one context to another

Future Plan

- To evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed changes to the ED course
- To investigate the roles of independent learning tasks within our ED course
- To revise and streamline independent learning tasks
  - further cater for students' language need and support students' language subject knowledge

Favorable Reasons for the Success

- Supportive faculty staff
  - active in research collaboration

- Collaborative teaching effort
  - Students can learn better and benefit from teachers' expertise

- Regular consultation with the Faculty
  - assessment methods; assessment criteria; course materials

- Close relevance to the Faculty courses
  - The objectives of the ED course are closely aligned with the program/institutional learning outcomes.

Roles of Faculty Teachers

Consultative roles in course planning and materials development:

- provide sampled students' assignments and source texts for materials development

- participate in co-assessment procedure

- give feedbacks to students

- keep close collaboration with the course coordinator and update her on the students' language needs in their subject knowledge