Chinese Students’ Perception of English Language Preparation for Academic Studies

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In recent decades, there has been an increasing population of international students enrolling into universities of English-speaking countries. In order to meet entry requirements of university admission, most students have to be equipped with language proficiency through various of preparing approaches, mainly International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program. This essay attempts to examine the perception of Chinese international students studying in Bond University English Language Institute (BUELI) of Bond University, Australia, investigating their perception and outcome of language preparation for their future academic studies. Data used in this investigation were collected through face-to-face interviews among 130 Chinese students at Bond on the track of academic study. It is expected to find out which is a reliable predictor to the success of academic studies, EAP programs or IELTS preparations. This information would be valuable for further linguistic, academic, and social support programs as a means to make the benefits of EAP or IELTS available for the greater international student population.

Keywords: English language preparation, IELTS, EAP, Chinese Bond students, academic studies

Introduction

With an increasing trend of international students enrolling into English-speaking countries for an academic education in recent decades, English language proficiency has been one of the essential criteria for university admissions. Take Bond University of Australia as an example, most applicants are required to present an acceptable score at minimal level of 6.5 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), or complete a direct entry course, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program in Bond University English Language Institute (BUELI). On the one hand, the IELTS test has been one of the most widely recognized tests that open the door to academic opportunities in Australia, Canada, USA, the UK, and New Zealand. It assesses language skills in listening, reading, writing, and speaking (IELTS, 2015). One the other hand, students following the EAP stream of academic English must successfully complete a minimum of 10 weeks’ study and be awarded an EAP certificate as a direct entry into university studies. The direct entry EAP courses, which are especially designed to prepare international students for academic studies, aim at improving academic English and academic-orientated study skills (Bond University, 2015).

Language preparation has been defined as the pre-university language preparations in IELTS and EAP entry courses, this essay attempts to examine the perception of language preparation for academic studies among Chinese students in Bond University.

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Literature Review

Literature is rich in articles that discuss the relationship between students’ language preparation and their academic performance. As early as 1889, questions on how language preparation can meet the requirements of academic studies have worried educators ever since examinations came into widespread use (Green, 2007). In Read and Hayes’s (2004) research on the impact of IELTS for academic studies in New Zealand, some respondents recognize the value of IELTS since it was a quick entry to obtain university admission. One might have expected IELTS preparation to be more relevant to the academic needs; however, more findings were so contradictory that the English proficiency measured by IELTS test cannot be a reliable predictor of academic success of international students (Martirosyan, Hwang, & Wanjohi, 2015). In Green’s (2007) case study, he particularly pointed out that the skills taught to pass an IELTS test might not develop the full range of skills needed for academic study, especially in the area of academic writing IELTS was not regarded as a perfect predictor for academic studies.

EAP courses, which are especially designed to prepare international students for academic studies, aimed to improve academic English and academic-orientated study skills, such as academic essay writing, understanding lectures, speech and presentation, note-taking, text analyzing, and the language basic skills (Bond University, 2015). Terraschke and Wahid (2011) also noted that English language proficiency refers to overall language proficiency and introduction of linguistic conventions and academic skills needed for their university study, which includes the appropriate participation in classroom interactions, adapting the demand of academic writing principles, mastery of specialist vocabularies, critical thinking cultivation, and understanding the required readings (Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). Issues mentioned above are generally addressed in EAP courses, which target to improve both students’ academic language proficiency and other necessary study skills required throughout their degree. A number of studies have considered other aspects of students’ language development after taking an EAP course. In a qualitative study on students’ perspective of EAP program, Dooey’s (2010) research on Chinese students’ perspective of an EAP pathway program showed that students’ language skills could show progress and much more confident in dealing with basic tasks required, including a range of study skills required to master over the course of their tertiary studies and there is indication that students gain capability in using more of the formal languages in their writing after a certain time of EAP instruction (Terraschke & Wahid, 2011), where improvements were found in areas of abstract learning that ranges from the comprehensive ability of spoken and written text, organization of an academic essay, to the reference skills interaction abilities.

Method

This study is an exploratory instead of conclusive study. Interview responses were transcribed for data analysis. The rationale for the interview questions was to gather information relating to two core elements: (1) language perceptions before academic study and language perception after academic studies; and (2) which type of language preparation is more beneficial to students’ academic studies. Questions were designed with intention to cover students’ preference to the type of language preparation, the skills taught in the preparation course, their satisfaction before and after starting academic study, the most challenged skills in academic studies, the most improved skills after their language preparation, the approaches they seek for learning support, and the advice they would like to offer to future students.
Data Collection

Data collection included scheduled random face-to-face interviews on 100 Chinese students who have been on the track of academic study in Bond University, Australia, adopting the method of quantitative research. Statistic tool used in the research included descriptive statistics for various items on the survey to examine the overall outcomes.

In the first step, one sampling technique of cluster sampling has been used to group the required number of Chinese students in order to guarantee a fair representation of the sample. The nature of volunteer participation was encouraged and ethics was confirmed to students when they are explained to the anonymous policy. It took each of them three to five minutes to complete the 10-question survey, and then data were collected soon after completion.

It was a 10-questionnaire survey with a range of careful consideration. A distinction was made between the EAP learners and IELTS takers in the first question. From the second question, the researcher attempted to capture more details into the confidence about English proficiency, the skills prepared, the most challenging skills, the satisfaction degree of the language preparation, the most improved skills, and so on. These questionnaires were designed into nine multiple choices of questions and one open-ending question. Eight multiple choices were to help perceive the value of perception of their language preparation while the last one indicated the approach to seek learning support. Finally, the 10th question inquires advice for future students.

Result

Results from the current studies offer a framework for understanding: (1) the most preferred type of the language preparation; (2) skills gained during language preparation; (3) degrees of satisfaction and perceptions; and (4) approaches for learning support.

The Preferred Types of Language Preparation

On the participation type of language preparation, 55 of the 100 interviewees took IELTS exam with a qualified score to directly entered university study while 15 started academic study with a completion of EAP course in BUELI in Bond University. Twenty took both IELTS exams and EAP entry, and then 2% of them were accepted with admission by their TOEFL score.

The Most Improved Skills During Language Preparation

Issues on the skills were essentially concerned in the preparation course, students showed different percentages on general English skills (50%), writing a summary (20%), and IELTS examining skills (24%). However, additional statistics have revealed differences between EAP and IELTS outcomes. More interviewed EAP students claimed that they gained essential skills for academic studies, such as the research skills, referencing, presentation skills, understanding lectures, and the organization of an essay, and most EAP students (85%) indicated understanding lectures were taught in their language preparation, while the mastery of research skills ranked second (20%). Look in to the IELTS takers, though the statistics showed that most academic skills like research skills, referencing, presentation skills were not mentioned by the IELTS takers, the collected data in Pie7 on the current degree of satisfaction still revealed students were quite satisfied with what their language preparation course have prepared them. From Pie6, it can be seen that 56% of the respondents revealed they were well prepared. Go deeper into more details on what skills what been improved,
respondents reflected the top three skills that have been improved are the academic research skills, general skills, and presentation skills, which respectively takes up percentages at a half and 3.5%.

**Degree of Satisfaction**

A large proportion of students (both EAP and IELTS takers) seemed to benefit from high satisfaction. About 80% gave high comment that “it prepared me well” or “very well”, over 50% students held a medium attitude about degree of satisfaction, while the other 10% expressed “not satisfied”. Both IELTS students and EAP students committed that they got improved in overall skills, while research skills topped the list as the most challenging and general English skills ranked the second. Meanwhile, general English skills, presentation skills, and formal language were seriously concerned by both groups of students.

**Approaches for Learning Support**

On the question of the approaches for the students to seek learning support, answers varied. The preference of getting assistance from Student Learning Support in Bond attracted that largest population (40%), while a smaller group would (30%) would prefer to seek help from their tutor or school-fellows, and a few had other solutions like finding a private tutor. However, a quarter of them would seek help from “no one”. Sixty-five percent of the respondents highlighted the importance of practice. There were loud voices of recommending attending the EAP program while and going the Student Learning Support in Bond. However, the other 10% avoided the question. Another clinical discovery was that most students seek learning support by different approaches that indeed helped them up to a certain degree, however, no data can prove which was more effective for learning support in this research. It should be noted that students were extremely generous to contribute their advice to future international student on their language preparation.

**Reflection and Perceptions**

With the clear aim to examine the perception and a better type of language preparation by Chinese Bond academic students, this study has shown the perception of language preparation and academic performance did not appear great difference between EAP students and IELTS students.

The overall result presented in this study seemed not to meet the expectation as hypothesized beforehand. Looking back to the previous research that suggested EAP students would benefit more from their language preparation than the IELTS students, either their confidence or their performance in academic skills then those non-EAPs (Terraschke & Wahid, 2011); however, the outcome of the current study revealed some contradiction with those previous research, which did not show reveal much predominance of EAP course over IELTS exams. It neither revealed enough evidence to support that EAP students profit more from their language preparation than IELTS students, nor indicated the more effective type of language preparation for academic studies. It was also noticeable that most students who undertook the IELTS exam believed they benefited from their basic languages skills and the preparation process for taking the IELTS exam. A series of findings in this research have indicated that IELTS students who did not attend the EAP course also showed high confidence in their English proficiency still had a high satisfaction about their language preparation in current academic studies.

**Conclusion**

Based on the data collected from this study on perception of language preparation, it could therefore be assumed that the types of language preparation were alternative to students, all of which could possibly have a
positive effect on students’ academic study. One of the issues that emerge from these findings is uncontained to judge which type of language preparation could directly or better lead to students’ academic success. It was also difficult to judge that whether IELTS or EAP as a language preparation for academic study, which is more a reliable predictor to the success of academic study. Additionally, there was no adequate evidence to weigh the strength of the two main types of language preparations, nor indicate the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of an EAP program. The important implication of this research could be that the type of language preparation does not impact on the performance of the academic study directly, but English proficiency properly does. There is a possibility to further hypothesis that students’ academic performance was related to their language proficiency or other factors.

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