

The research methods in english language education essay

[Education](#)



for EAP learners in the Hong Kong higher education context

Introduction

The trend of English as the leading language for instruction in higher education has been witnessed expanding from native English speaking countries, such as Britain, United States and Australia, to other parts of the world, where English is used as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL), such as Singapore and Hong Kong (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). In such ESL/EFL context, the competition between English and learners' native language is pervasive. In Hong Kong, a previous colony of the British Empire, situations are further complicated by the government policy shifting after the handover in 1997. Since then, three languages instead of two — Cantonese, English and Mandarin are competing for the role as instructional language at different levels (Evans, 2013). English has been used as the instructional language at trinity level in Hong Kong, which advances its status at secondary levels to ensure the quality and effectiveness in academic performances at trinity level (Evans, 2011). In 2010, the Hong Kong government announced a "fine-tune" MOI policy, which recommend Chinese-medium secondary schools to teach selected subjects using English to lessen the gap with English-medium counterparts (Education Bureau, 2010). In 2005, the University Grants Committee (UGC), the central body governing Hong Kong education, announced a shift on undergraduate curriculum from three-year to four-year. At the same time with a expanded year on undergraduate education, the secondary education was reduced from seven years to six years. Such so called curriculum-shifting from "3+3+2+3" to "3+3+4" complicated the situation for both

secondary and tertiary education in Hong Kong. In 2012, the first-year undergraduates included not only the students from the old secondary curriculum but also those from the new curriculum. Considering the complicated and comprehensive changes in MOI and curriculum, it is of crucial importance to systematically identify the challenges students may encounter during their stay in university. Needs analysis is used as a systematic way to identify "the specific sets of skills, texts, linguistic forms and communicative practices" among a particular group of learners (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, P. 5). In order to identify the language needs of undergraduates under the complex context in Hong Kong, a considerable number of studies have been conducted. These studies reviewed in this paper, mainly cover two aspects of teaching and learning for Academic purposes, including: overall literacy skills during the 1990s (e. g. Hyland, 1997; Littlewood & Liu, 1996; Li et al. 2001) and post-1990s (e. g. Evans & Green, 2007; Evans & Morrison, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) specific English language skill, such as vocabulary (e. g. Fan, 2001; Lin & Morrison, 2010). In the following paragraphs, I will review the methods sections of these comparable studies in chronological order, with an attempt to highlight the similarities and differences among similar studies, and summarise the characteristics of the methods adopted by these studies in Hong Kong context.

Overall literacy skills

Early research during the 1990s In an early investigation into students' perception of the necessity of EAP courses, Hyland (1997) used a self-reporting questionnaire to inquire 1619 students at different years, from

eight disciplines at five Hong Kong universities. Despite its large scale of sampling, Hyland's (1997) survey failed to specify problems students encountered. For example, the questionnaire did not contain the sub-skills of writing, such as cohesion, writing style and vocabulary. Also, as this research was purely based on the survey results, it failed to maintain an in-depth exploration, which can be achieved by qualitative methods such as interview, ethnography, action research and case study. Another drawback of such one-off survey lies in its incompetence to consider the students' developments over the years in higher education. In another major investigation conducted in the mid-1990s, Littlewood and Liu (1996) explored the English-language experiences, attitudes and proficiency of 2156 first-year students at four local universities. This large-scale study covered a wider range of participants compared with the investigation conducted by Hyland (1997). Also, some micro-level skills such as the sub-skills of writing, speaking, listening and reading were included in the questionnaire. However, with a closer scrutinization on the content of the questionnaire, two limitations arise. The first limitation is the inappropriate categorisation of irrelevant sub-skills. For example, " use idioms or colloquial expressions correctly" was listed as the sub-skill for academic writing. The second limitation lies in the exclusion of related skills such as the ability to summarise and correct academic reference. Similar to Hyland's (1997) endeavor, there was no qualitative methods adopted to enhance the comprehensive understanding of the survey results and there was only one survey conducted without follow-up tracking of students' dynamic learning process in tertiary education. During the 1990s, another investigation carried

out in the local context was Li, Leung & Kember's (2001) diary-based study of undergraduate experience of language use. The data in this study were collected from students from seven higher institutes in Hong Kong, with a representative spread of disciplines and year of study. Students from 17 classes were asked to record their language use in a 2-paged diary for one week. One week after the completion of the diary, semi-structured interviews were held among 55 representative students to probe their language use for greater depth. Compared with the previous endeavors by Hyland (1997) and Littlewood and Liu (1996), this study was more comprehensive by adopting qualitative methods, such as diaries and semi-structured interviews.

However, this study was solely based on students' feedbacks, without introducing other voices such as opinions from their lecturers or programme leaders. Another limitation of this study was that the data were collected during one week. In Hong Kong, a student usually spend three or four years to obtain a Bachelor degree. Although the researchers claimed that the quantitative data from the diary accounted for " 67% of students' time", it is still arguable that those data were representative for undergraduates in Hong Kong universities. Recent post-1990s research To revisit the necessity of EAP in Hong Kong higher education, Evans and Green (2007) conducted a large-scale, multi-faceted investigation into the language use and learning of Hong Kong tertiary students during 2003-2004 academic year. In this study, data were collected through both quantitative method (a self-reported questionnaire survey of students and program leaders) and qualitative methods (interviews with students and lecturers, structured focus-group discussion with program leaders) assisted with four-staged tests on students'

writing and speaking skills. It is worth noting that the survey in this study included 4932 undergraduates, from 26 academic departments in one Hong Kong higher institute, making it one of the largest sampling scale in the field of EAP. Apart from its large sampling, this study introduced another voice—lecturer/program leaders' perspective, which was shown in the questionnaires and focus-group discussions). For methods such as self-reported questionnaires, subjectivity would impact the final results, because of various factors such as respondent fatigue, memory lapse, halo and Hawthorn effects (respondents tend to chose the answer reflecting the well side of them and exaggerate that well side) (Evans & Green, 2003, P. 391). However, although this study has drawn a broad landscape and comprehensive portraits of the language use at Hong Kong tertiary levels, the sampling has not reflected the influence of medium of instruction at secondary schools on the subjects' tertiary academic study. In addition, similar to the previous studies conducted by Hyland (1997) and Littlewood and Liu (1996), this one-off survey failed to track the dynamic progress of participants' language use and learning. Building on the previous research, Evans and Morrison (2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012) conducted a large-scale, multifaceted and longitudinal investigation into the students' experiences of English-medium education. In this study, a self-reported questionnaire survey was recycled from 519 undergraduates with even proportion from seven faculties in one Hong Kong university in 2000. Ten years later, in 2010, this questionnaire was completed by 447 similar representative students. Evans and Morrison (2011b) admitted that the quantitative methods such as self-reported surveys (1) fail to capture the complex and

dynamic nature of interaction, (2) are unable to reflect the specific language challenges students face and (3) may have halo and Hawthorne effect, where students tend to provide answers showing the well side of themselves and exaggerate the facts. In order to fill these limitations of surveys, qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews and language logs) were adopted. In this study, 28 students with different societal, educational and disciplinary backgrounds were tracked during three years' (2004-2007) tertiary education. These students were from five disciplines (Business, Applied Science & Textile, Health and Social Sciences, Construction and Land Use and Humanities). Among them, 25 were from local secondary schools, with three types of MOI: (1) purely EMI, (2) purely CMI and (3) a mixed mode: CMI shifting from EMI. Also, students from EFL society, 2 from mainland China, 1 from Malaysia, were included in this longitudinal study. Therefore, it is less arguable to say that the sample in this study managed to cover the varied complicated backgrounds of students in Hong Kong tertiary education. It is also worth noting of the large sample size (28 participants) in this longitudinal studies. For longitudinal studies, usually, the sample size is restricted. For example, in Leki's (2007) comprehensive study, she explored the academic literacy experiences of four college students from ESL or EFL societies. Also Evans and Morrison (2011b) adopted the sampling strategy corresponded to " maximum variation sampling", from " information-rich" cases advocated by Patton (2002, P. 230-243). Such purposeful sampling methods provided a dedicated portrait with a balance of representation achieved by the large number of sampling. In addition to the wide coverage of the undergraduates with varied societal, educational and disciplinary

backgrounds, this study managed to maintain a diachronic perspective of the survey. Reviewing the previous research conducted in Hong Kong context (e.g. Evans & Green, 2007; Hyland, 1997; Li et al., 2001; Littlewood & Liu, 1996), the questionnaire surveys in those research were one-off surveys. Despite of their success in synchronic perspective with large-scale sampling, none of them achieved the diachronic tracking of the subjects. Unlike these one-off questionnaire surveys, Evans & Morrison (2011b) used the same questionnaire to examine the first-year students' experiences in 2000 and in 2010. Such 10 years has witnessed the significant and comprehensive changes in government policy in terms of education, such as the MOI shifting and curriculum alternation. With an intention to re-examine the undergraduates 10 years later, a more vigorous and comprehensive picture of students' needs and expectations can be drawn.

Specific literary skill

Academic vocabulary size
In order to pinpoint the vocabulary needs for undergraduates in Hong Kong tertiary education, Fan (2001) conducted a large-scale study of the vocabulary size of students. In this study, over 1000 students were assessed on 144 test items, from Nation's Vocabulary Level Test. Despite its large coverage of students, this study was restricted for mainly three reasons. First, the test was conducted without monitoring, therefore the reliability for the test result was discounted. Second, the receptive and productive tests evaluate " separate slices of a learner's vocabulary" (Nation & Beglar, 2007, P. 10). However, in this test, there was no distinctive examination on students' receptive vocabulary and their productive vocabulary. Finally, the variables such as students' societal and

educational backgrounds were not considered. Build on Fan's (2001) investigation, Lin and Morrison (2010) conducted a more comprehensive study on students' vocabulary after the language policy shifting. In their study, 762 first-years students from eight faculties in one Hong Kong university completed two tests (one in receptive vocabulary, another in productive vocabulary). The test results of 585 students were judged valid, with a representative spread of gender (249 male, 336 female) and of different educational backgrounds (372 from EMI secondary schools and 213 from CMI secondary schools). After the tests, 413 students volunteered to write an argumentative essay (at least 300 words) on one of the nine topics within one hour. Then, these essays were assessed by an experienced language instructor. In Lin and Morrison's (2010) recent research, the students' vocabulary size were assessed from both receptive and productive perspective. In addition to this distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary, students' ability to use the productive vocabulary in real context was evaluated (e. g. students were asked to write an essay). Also the subjects of this study were cautiously sampled considering students' societal and educational backgrounds.

Conclusion

After reviewing those studies in Hong Kong context, one common feature is their large sample size. For example, more than 1500 students were investigated in Hyland's (1997) questionnaire and Littlewood and Liu's (1996) questionnaire survey. As for studies in recent decade, almost 5000 students were involved in Evans and Green's (2007) survey and more than 3000 first-year students participated in Evans and Morrison's (2011b) survey.

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The sample size in those studies in Hong Kong context is large, compared with other studies conducted in other ESL/EFL societies (e. g. Liu et al., 2011; Taillefer, 2007; Zhu, 2004). Earlier research in Hong Kong tertiary level usually adopt single method—a self-reported questionnaire to survey cross-discipline undergraduates (e. g. Hyland, 1997; Littlewood & Liu, 1996). The content of their questionnaires were related with general literary skills, such as speaking, listening, writing and reading. Differing from the mono-method, cross-discipline, general survey in the 1990s studies, recent research tend to employ multiple methods (both quantitative and qualitative) to explore the detailed language needs of students from different societal, educational and disciplinary backgrounds (e. g. Evans & Morrison, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). By reviewing those studies chronically, the development of methods in needs analysis in the field of EAP can be traced in four rails. First, the later studies build on previous ones and expanded the research perspectives, such as introducing lecturers' and program leaders' voices. Second, the later studies supplemented the previous ones with manifold methods. Third, the later studies select data with a consideration of cultural and educational factors of the students. Finally, the later studies refined the previous ones by specifying the challenges that student may encounter, such as listing sub-skills under the general literary skill.