

# Teaching for transfer in EAP: Hugging and bridging revisited



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## ABSTRACT

While transfer of learning is an explicit goal of EAP, this end is sometimes neglected. To foster transfer, Salomon and Perkins (1989) advocated 'hugging' – creating learning experiences that are similar to the target applications – and 'bridging' – promoting more abstract conceptual associations between the initial learning and its ultimate implementation. Although these strategies have enjoyed currency in general education, they merit further attention in EAP. This study ( $N = 39$ ) revisited the hugging–bridging framework to explore the relationship between EAP instructors' methods and transfer of learning to the disciplines in an undergraduate programme in Thailand. Data from a self-report questionnaire indicated a significant moderate relationship between students' perceptions of both EAP instructors' combined hugging and bridging methods and of transfer of writing skills to the disciplines; however, the methods accounted for only 12% of the variance in the transfer. While the findings support the development of instructional strategies to foster transfer of learning, recommendations are also made for further studies that examine the validity of the theory in relation to sociocultural factors, and for the development of a general model that takes into account both instructional and ecological factors, so that EAP may attend more fully to its purposes.

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## 1. Introduction

Transfer of learning – the application of previous learning to a new context – has long been proclaimed one of education's central aims. However, despite a long and eminent history of discussion in education and training (since Thorndike & Woodworth, 1901), a general theory of transfer remains elusive, with the apparent failure of transfer being well-documented by a number of studies, such as that of Scribner and Cole (1981).

Since the 1980s, cognitive-based instructional frameworks, such as that of Perkins and Salomon (1988), have predominated in attempting to address the failure of certain types of transfer, decrying what Perkins and Salomon derided as the 'Bo Peep' theory of education: the notion that, if left alone, transfer would find its own way of occurring. The conceptual framework of Perkins and Salomon distinguished between 'low-road' and 'high-road' transfer, the former occurring 'semi-automatically' when the learning and target domains are perceptually similar, and the latter – where failure is most likely to occur – delimiting transfer that requires abstraction of principles and greater metacognitive processing.

To address the more readily effected low-road transfer, Perkins and Salomon proposed 'hugging' – strategies that close the perceptual gap between the learning and the target domains, mainly by emphasising the similar features between the two by,

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for example, modelling, using role play and simulation, or simply alerting learners to opportunities to use their learning in new contexts (Fogarty, Perkins, & Barell, 1992). For the more challenging high-road transfer, they prescribed ‘bridging’ – explicit strategies that focus largely on metacognition and inferential reasoning (Butterfield & Nelson, 1989), such as encouraging students to explicitly plan, monitor and reflect on their thinking in completing an assignment, or helping them to identify analogies between what they have learnt and somewhat different applications.

Although the original intention of Perkins and Salomon was to advocate explicit, conscious *strategies* (as opposed to the assumption that transfer would readily take care of itself), this study was designed to investigate hugging- and bridging-related pedagogy as employed on a practical and regular basis, even if unwittingly, by EAP instructors. For this reason, this study adopts the term ‘methods’, rather than the original ‘strategies’.

The study, hence, aimed to examine the relationship between undergraduate students’ perceptions of hugging and bridging methods and the transfer of learning to the disciplines in an EAP programme in the international college of a university in Thailand.

### 1.1. Research context

Mahidol University International College (MUIC) provides English-medium instruction in all its subject areas. Its 2,728 students (Facts and figures, 2012) are a culturally diverse population: Although most students are Thai, a significant number are foreign nationals, mainly Western. The diversity is also reflected in the students’ different secondary school backgrounds, including regular Thai state schools, bilingual schools, international schools in Thailand, and schools abroad.

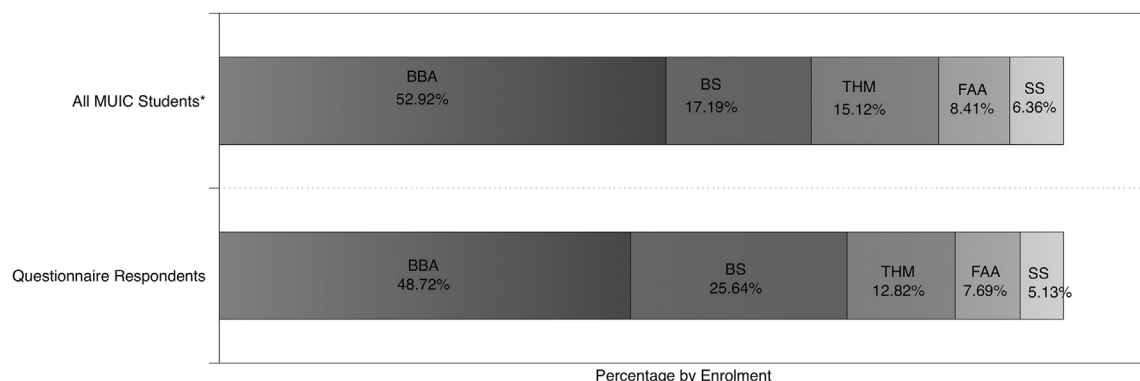
The college requires all students to enrol in at least four trimesters (three for native or near-native speakers of English) in the English Studies Programme as part of their general education requirements. These EAP-based classes aim to equip students with English language and academic literacy knowledge. It is expected that this knowledge complex will be useful to students in their studies in the disciplines.

Transfer of learning is valued in the liberal arts education model (Eyler, 2009) to which the college aspires. In this model, it is expected that students would transfer knowledge from their general education learning experiences to the disciplines within their respective major programmes of study (Benander & Lightner, 2005), which at MUIC include Business Administration, Science, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Fine and Applied Arts, and Social Science (see Figure 1 for the percentage of enrolment in each of these programmes).

Unfortunately, the extent to which the EAP programme successfully fulfils its support aim is uncertain. Indeed, partly prompting this particular research, anecdotal evidence from instructors in the target disciplines indicates that students frequently do not transfer much of the knowledge from the EAP classes to the disciplines. This failure on the part of the disciplinary instructors to detect the sought-after transfer could be accounted for by an incomplete or inaccurate understanding on their part of what is taught in the EAP programme. It is, however, equally possible that students are not, in fact, applying much of the EAP knowledge to their other courses.

### 1.2. Research purpose and questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between students’ perceptions of instructors’ use of hugging-bridging methods (see Section 1 above) and their (the students’) perceived transfer of learning from the EAP programme to the disciplines. The investigation was framed by the high-road/low-road conceptualisation of transfer of learning: While this framework has enjoyed much currency in general education, it has not yet been empirically investigated in EAP. Findings of a



**Figure 1.** College-wide enrolment, by percentage, in various major programmes (above), and that of questionnaire respondents (below). *Note.* BBA = Business Administration, BS = Science, THM = Tourism & Hospitality Management, FAA = Fine & Applied Arts, SS = Social Science.

"Source: "Facts and Figures" by MUIC Computer System: Information Centre, 2012, Mahidol University International College.

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