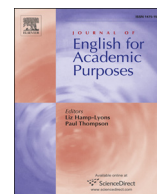


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Assessing academic writing on a pre-sessional EAP course: Designing assessment which supports learning



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ABSTRACT

Pre-sessional EAP courses in the UK fulfil a difficult dual role. Not only are they charged with helping students learn the academic language and literacy skills they will require on their degree courses, but they are also expected to summatively assess those skills in order to decide on the readiness of students to begin English medium degree study. This creates tension between assessment and learning. Students are often extrinsically motivated by the need for a passing grade rather than focussing on the learning gains they make throughout the course. For this reason it is important that the approach to assessment on pre-sessional courses actually supports learning. This paper outlines the approach taken to the assessment of academic writing on the PEAP course at Nottingham Trent University. It describes how the assessment was redesigned to emphasise process over end product and to maximise early and sustained student engagement. This was achieved by careful scaffolding of the writing process, the strategic use of summative elements of the assessment, and an emphasis on formative feedback, reflection, and understanding of the assessment criteria. The paper considers how this approach to assessment is supporting student learning but also points out some ongoing concerns.

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1. Introduction

As uncomfortable as it may make many university teachers feel, it is difficult to disagree with Gibbs' (2006) assertion that "assessment frames learning, creates learning activity and orients all aspects of learning" (p.23). Pre-sessional EAP courses are no exception to this. These courses are typically high stakes with students required to reach specific grades in assessments before progressing to their various degree courses or PhD study. International students on pre-sessional courses are no less strategic than others in the way they focus their time and efforts on what they believe will bring them the grades they require to pass. This focus on assessment and grades often seems to undermine what pre-sessional teachers perceive as their key role of facilitating the learning of the academic language and skills students need to fully engage with their academic courses. Because of this obvious tension between assessment and learning it is critical that the assessment strategy chosen actually leads to effective learning. Boud (2000) puts this neatly when he describes assessment activities as having to do 'double duty' (p.159) since they must encompass both formative assessment *for* learning as well as summative for certification. This paper will outline some recent innovations in the assessment of one key component of the pre-sessional EAP (PEAP) course at

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Nottingham Trent University and evaluate the extent to which these innovations have led to assessment which actually supports students' learning rather than detracting from it.

Like many other UK pre-sessionals, PEAP is a year-round course with multiple entry points depending on the entry level proficiency of students. The summer months see the largest number of students (typically 250–300) aiming to reach the required grades in the final assessment before beginning their degree courses in October. Class sizes during this period range from 10 to 14 students. Over the last five years the assessment of PEAP has undergone a fairly rapid evolution in response to changing demands from both inside and outside the University. Visa requirements for international students have dictated that they are formally assessed in all four language skills and there has also been some pressure internally to ensure that the number of students who progress from PEAP remains high. From a situation in 2009/10 when PEAP students were assessed only by means of an academic essay and an individual presentation we now have a validated course with five assessment elements (a coursework essay, exams in academic reading, listening and writing and a group presentation) each weighted at 20%. Work is ongoing in all these elements to align them more closely with the course learning outcomes but it is in the coursework essay where the most innovative changes have been introduced. In its previous form, the assessment was very much focussed on the end product, there was little scaffolding of the writing process itself through classroom input and limited opportunities for students to receive formative feedback or to reflect on their writing. In short, student engagement with the task was at best sporadic. There was a clear need to remodel this assessment so that it better supported student learning.

2. Redesigning the assessment of the academic essay

In redesigning the coursework essay component of the PEAP course we used [Gibbs and Simpson's \(2004\)](#) conditions under which assessment supports students' learning' (p.11) guide our choice of learning and assessment activities. Gibbs and Simpson outline eleven such conditions relating to the quantity, distribution, quality and level of student effort required on a particular assessment, the quantity, timing and quality of feedback provided to students and student response to that feedback. In summary, these conditions suggest that to support learning, a particular assessment task should require significant student effort which is distributed across a number of weeks rather than being concentrated at the end of the course and should lead to engaged learning activity in which students take a deep approach to learning. 'Learning friendly' assessment tasks should also articulate challenging but clear goals to students so that they can self-monitor. Feedback on assessment should be frequent, timely, detailed, understandable and clearly linked to criteria. Finally students should have opportunities to respond to feedback in order to improve their work and their learning ([Gibbs & Simpson, 2004](#).)

Perhaps the overriding aim of the redesign of the assessed coursework essay component was to ensure that it allowed a shift away from a fixation on the end product towards writing as a multi-stage process. Consideration was given to using portfolio assessment since it allows for a broader evaluation of a student's writing development than does a 'single-shot' approach ([Weigle, 2002](#)). However, time constraints on PEAP (the assessed part of the pre-sessional course is only 6 weeks in duration) meant that it was unrealistic to expect students to produce several pieces of writing in different genres and for different purposes and audiences which is a key requirement of a portfolio ([Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000](#)). Instead we opted for an approach which would allow us to assess the development of a single 2500 word academic essay over a 6 week period. This is closer in format to what has been termed the 'processfolio' (see, for example, [Pearson, 2015](#)) since it aims to capture the steps taken to produce a single piece of writing rather than a selection of different pieces produced over time. Unlike the processfolio, however, our approach does not involve student selection of evidence of learning.

[Fig. 1](#) below illustrates the various stages in the assessment of the academic writing process on the 6-week PEAP course and indicates the points at which formative and summative assessment take place and where feedback of different types is provided to students. The following section outlines how this approach aims to support student learning through creating and sustaining engagement, providing quality feedback to students and allowing them time to reflect, respond and improve, and ensuring that students are fully aware of the various assessment criteria used and what is expected of them at each stage.

3. Assessment which creates and sustains student engagement

[Hu and Kuh \(2002\)](#) define engagement as "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes" (p.555). It is generally assumed that students with high levels of intrinsic motivation also have higher levels of engagement in learning and achievement than students who do not. Yet, experience suggests that for university students, extrinsic motivation, in particular the desire to obtain the necessary grades to pass a course, plays a significant role in their approach to study. Pre-sessional students are no exception to this and they are often 'fixated' on the passing grade and on the summative assessment at the end of the course rather than on achieving learning gains and making use of the formative feedback and opportunities for reflection along the way. This can in turn lead to students leaving assessed work until deadlines loom, rather than developing a text over a number of weeks. The outcome of this is that work is rushed and underachieving and often displays bad academic practice including textual copying, plagiarism and collusion or, at worst, contract cheating.

To avoid the above scenario we have attempted to arrange the summative assessment to put more emphasis on academic writing as a process but still meet the students' need to know their grade. To achieve this we have reduced the weighting of

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