

The Efficacy of Teaching Independent Study Skills Within English for Academic Purposes Programs

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Abstract

While teaching students how to become independent learners offers great promise for their future academic success, research has yet to offer detailed insight into students' evaluation of learning such strategies. The Study Skills for Independent Learning module was introduced as part of a Canadian university English for Academic Purposes (EAP) bridging program. The objective of the module was to help international students who had been conditionally accepted into their undergraduate programs acquire skills they could employ to become more independent learners during their undergraduate studies. The study set out to collect students' perceptions of the module to better assess the efficacy of teaching independent study skills in an EAP context. Data were gathered from an analysis of the module's overview and learning objectives, questionnaires from a group of students enrolled in the EAP program ($n = 7$), and feedback from a retrospective focus group ($n = 5$) that consisted of students who had taken the module the previous year and had just completed the first semester of their undergraduate programs. Data were transcribed, coded, and organized into themes for analysis. Time management, reflective skills, and strategies for maintaining focus were identified as three transferable skills taught in the module.

Introduction

In Canada, the average percentage of international students studying at tertiary institutions across the provinces has increased dramatically. Statistics Canada (2016) has reported that “the international student population at Canadian universities grew 88% between 2004–2005 and 2013–2014, while the comparable growth rate for Canadian students was 22%” (p. 3). In British Columbia alone, the number of international students studying in the province has nearly doubled in the past five years while the number of domestic students has steadily declined. (British Columbia Data Catalogue, 2017). For universities offering English-medium programs, the implications of this demographic shift are immense. Not only are there linguistic considerations, but also possible cultural differences regarding approaches to teaching, learning, and classroom roles which must be addressed by both students and schools to help facilitate acculturation (Douglas & Rosvold, 2018). One strategy many universities have implemented to bridge these considerations is to offer preparation programs, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses, to international students using English as an additional language (EAL) who have not already met the English language proficiency levels required for direct admission into their academic programs. These programs help these students attain the required English language proficiency, and they teach learning strategies for how to successfully participate in postsecondary studies in a different language and culture (Jund, 2010). A common element of these courses is the emphasis they place on teaching learners academic skills; in other words, not just what to learn but how to learn—a concept referred to as “learner training” (Hall, 2011, p. 248). However, research to date has provided limited insight into student views on learner training in EAP programs. In light of this reality, the higher education community in Canada can

benefit from becoming more aware of these perceptions to better inform EAP curriculum design and facilitate successful internationalization at postsecondary institutions in Canada.

The current study took place at a Canadian university in Atlantic Canada. The purpose of this investigation was to evaluate a Skills for Independent Learning module that was part of a larger EAP program. The module is content-based, and its main aim is to help perspective undergraduate students acquire the study skills that support academic success at English-medium universities. To carry out this evaluation of the model, the study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the Study Skills for Independent Learning module facilitate independent learning?
2. What value do students using EAL place on learning these study skills in an EAP context while preparing to enter undergraduate programs at a Canadian university?

Learner Autonomy and Independent Learning

Learner autonomy, or independent learning, is achieved when learning takes place without direction from the teacher. Teaching learners to become more independent involves creating greater learning by giving the control over learning to the student (Allwright, 1988); however, success depends on how learners “capitalize on opportunities inside and outside the classroom” (Crabbe, 1993, p. 444). The Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) initiative of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), has identified key generic skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, analytical reasoning, and written communication as integral to success in postsecondary studies (Tamburri, 2013).

Similarly, learner autonomy is required for successful additional language acquisition (Benson, 2011). Additional language learners may also need opportunities to produce output and recognize the accuracy of content and language. Little (2007) maintained that language acquisition and learner autonomy can be simultaneously achieved by employing pedagogical approaches which promote learners’ exploration, interpretation, and participation as these approaches are more likely to encourage their application of known and unknown ideas and information to new experiences.

Teachers play a key role in the process of fostering independent learning. Teachers must employ a bilateral approach to instruction so that material covered in the classroom is accompanied by tasks which compel the learner to transfer knowledge and skills from the classroom to their lives (Crabbie, 1993). It is only through the application of content that self-regulation and independent learning occur (Benson, 2011). According to Cotteral (2017), in order for teachers to facilitate such self-directed learning, they must provide learning environments or specific “affordances” which allow independence and autonomy to thrive (p.103). Cotteral (2017) listed the five essential affordances which must be established in any learning environment for learner autonomy to flourish as “engagement,” “exploration,” “personalization,” “reflection,” and “support” (Cotteral, 2017, p.103). According to Cotteral (2017), engagement involves activities that the learners find meaningful and connect with.

Exploration pertains to building a “genuine sense of learner inquiry” beyond teacher-generated “display” questions designed to elicit a predetermined response (Cotteral, 2017, p.104). Reflection combines task-specific reflection with planning for future learning. Support requires instructors to “anticipate” what learners may be able to achieve on their own and to provide support when tasks may exceed the learner’s current learning resources (Cotteral, 2017, p. 104).

Content-based Instruction

In Content-based Instruction (CBI), the target language is taught via subject matter rather than through the explicit teaching of the language (Valeo, 2013). Materials for a CBI course contain language which will be useful for study in a particular field (Brinton et al., 1989). Content-based programs may focus on the teaching of subjects such as science, history, and mathematics in a target language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Content-based lessons are focussed primarily on the teaching of subject matter while focus on language form is viewed as secondary. Therefore, CBI has come to represent an extension of communicative approaches, which put a much larger emphasis on the meaning of language over (grammatical) accuracy. Instruction of CBI also includes, sometimes exclusively, authentic material from the targeted discourse community and culture (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), by framing language learning in this way, students are still able to progress as long as this input is comprehensible. The linguistic complexity that many authentic texts contain means that teachers need to carefully consider how to introduce concepts and adjust the complexity of the tasks. To enhance comprehension and production, CBI courses need to have curricular redundancies so that students have the opportunity to repeat the material at different times and across subject matter. Horizontal and vertical redundancy is easily facilitated in CBI as, when a course is focused on one subject, there is a greater chance for the “recycling” of vocabulary to take place across topics and throughout the duration of the course, which leads to greater familiarity and fluency later on (Brinton et al., 1989).

In terms of assessment, the level of importance that CBI programs usually place on meaning and communicative competence means that assessments must be as “real-life” as possible (Stryker & Leaver, 1997, p. 23). This real-life application is motivating for learners; however, the knowledge resources which the students bring to the course and how they might limit or enhance task completion and assessment performance need to be carefully considered (Briton et al., 1989).

The Study

The participants described in this study participated in the first level of an EAP program at a Canadian university. As part of the curriculum, students were required to participate in a content-based module entitled Skills for Independent Learning. The students studied the module four hours a week for twelve weeks. The study collected feedback from two groups of participants for a total sample size of twelve ($n = 12$) students. The participants in both groups were students using EAL who had not previously studied English outside of their home countries. Seven of the participants had just completed the module and were still enrolled in EAP studies at the university (shown below in Table 1). This cohort consisted of students from China ($n = 6$) and Ecuador ($n = 1$).

Table 1

Breakdown of Participants Who Completed Questionnaire

Participant	Gender Identity	Major
Student 1	Male	Engineering
Student 2	Female	Neuroscience
Student 3	Male	Biochemical Engineering
Student 4	Male	Economics
Student 5	Female	Architecture
Student 6	Female	Sustainability
Student 7	Male	Finance

The study also included five students who participated in a retrospective focus group, who had completed the module and graduated from their EAP program a year earlier, and who had just completed the first academic semester of their undergraduate programs (shown below in Table 2). The group consisted of students from China ($n = 4$), and Lebanon ($n = 1$).

Table 2

Breakdown of Reflective Focus Group participants

Participant	Gender Identity	Major
Student 8	Male	Engineering
Student 9	Male	Music
Student 10	Male	Commerce
Student 11	Male	Mathematics
Student 12	Male	Accounting

Methods

When evaluating courses and materials, a variety of data sources are required in order to achieve triangulation of data collection (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Therefore, three main data collection techniques were used in this study to provide an overview of participant perceptions of the Skills for Independent Learning module: an analysis of the module's aims and objectives, questionnaires completed by current students, and a retrospective focus group. Once the data were collected, all of the information was organized based on Creswell's (1998) recommendations of thematic coding and assigned categories that directly addressed the research question. Responses that were viewed as surprising or conceptually interesting to the researcher, participants, or audience were recorded and classified under categories using tables to highlight reoccurring themes across the participants. The quotes presented in the findings are representative of the main points that emerged from the analysis of the data.

Student Questionnaire

The purpose of the questionnaire (Appendix 1) was to provide insight from the seven participants who had recently finished the module. The questionnaire was open-ended to stimulate more detail and elaboration. In order to prevent the participants from feeling that their grades would be

affected in any manner, the questionnaires were completed once the participants had already finished Level One of the program. In addition, the participants also signed a release which stated that their contributions would have no bearing on their academic standing. After the questionnaire had been completed, they were collected and then analysed to identify key points from each question.

Retrospective Focus Group

A retrospective focus group was facilitated with the group of five participants who had previously taken the independent study module. The participants had completed the first half of their first term of full-time undergraduate studies. The purpose of the retrospective focus group was to gain insight regarding the application of strategies from the module and to provide personal views on the efficacy of learning those skills as part of their bridging program. An interview schedule (Appendix 2) was designed following an open-ended format in order to avoid leading questions and promote natural discussion. Participants were asked to sign a release form giving permission to use their comments for research. After the meeting, the recording was analysed and key points from each question were entered into a focus group summary so that the responses could be compared to the other data sources. The summary was also emailed to each of the participants in order to give them a chance to amend any of their comments.

Findings

Course Design

A careful review of the “Module Overview” and “Learning Objectives” (ACT Education Solutions Limited, 2012, p.1) found that the module was aimed at international high school graduates using EAL preparing to attend undergraduate studies at an English-medium university. The module was created to address perceived knowledge and cultural gaps experienced by international students using EAL upon entering postsecondary studies. The module targeted students at an IELTS Band 5, and content and assessments were designed with this level of proficiency in mind.

The module consisted of three major assessments: a semester planner, an interview, and a reflective journal. The students were also assessed for in-class participation and homework completion. Overall, the assessments in the course were designed to test the skills taught in the module (i.e. self-reflection, independent study, interview skills, and life skills to be successful). Table 3 below highlights the skills which are evaluated in each assessment.

Table 3

Description of Assessments

Assessment	Value	Skills being tested
Reflective Journal	50%	Students are required to write 15 short (150-word) entries in which they reflect on various topics: Communication, reflection, and noticing skills. Language is secondary, but needs to be intelligible.
Personal Statement and Interview	25%	A 15-minute interview in which students answer questions relating to the course's subject matter and university life. The context is a university admissions interview. The students practice interview skills for life and are assessed on those skills, as well as their ability to communicate effectively, respond to questions, and their knowledge of their own strengths and weaknesses and where to seek support on campus.
Semester Planner	15%	Students design a semester planner for their Level One deadlines. The planner assesses their ability to plan and manage their own time and work backwards from deadlines.

(ACT Education Solutions Limited, 2012, p. iv)

Student Views on the Acquisition of Independent Study Skills

Questionnaire responses from the participants enrolled in the module revealed that they had learned primarily time management skills and reflective practices. All of the respondents reported that they felt they were better able to organize their time due to the semester planner. Four of the participants felt that they had benefited from writing the reflective journal. Two of the participants commented that they found it helpful to reflect and learn from mistakes. In particular, one participant wrote that they had “learned to know if I’m learning or not and how to be an active learner” through journaling.

The members of the retrospective focus group who had completed the module the year before, and had completed their first semester of undergraduate studies, also commented on the importance of learning time management skills. For example, when asked about how the module connected to their current situations, the participants all agreed that managing deadlines was paramount.

Members of the retrospective focus group also placed high value on learning reflective skills. During the group discussion, they all stated that they applied journaling to their studies because it helped them combine class content with their ideas. One of the members said that reflective writing was a requirement of his engineering program, so having that previous experience gave him confidence to approach this course requirement.

The reflective focus group participants also commented that the strategies for note-taking and synthesizing information were important independent study skills. Two participants stated that they incorporated the practice of independently studying before their lessons and then deciding if they needed to attend the lecture or take initiative and ask a professor or tutor for

support. The same participants mentioned that skills such as revision and reading before lectures were both beneficial. The participants specifically mentioned that, in a typical class, a professor might cover as many as forty pages of the textbook. Therefore, building these study skills beforehand was useful. Two of the participants also thought that note-taking and revision were useful and something they applied to their daily practice. One of those students said, “[f]or me, after the class, I just re-do my notes again in my way and not the professor’s way. That helps me to learn.” Another student added, “[y]eah, I do my own notes as well. I do the key notes or a cheat sheet after each chapter, so I can prepare for a test.”

The participants from the retrospective focus group also mentioned that the module’s focus on how to identify and address problems associated with university life was useful to their current studies. For example, one participant stated:

“in Engineering we have lots of help from the teacher assistants if I need help, but for the other [things] like what hurts me, or if I have a bad friend or something like that. How to avoid walking with them, and how to put more priorities [on] studying, yeah I learned that in the [module] as well. High school don’t teach me that.”

Regarding this same theme, another participant commented that “[w]hen I have something, and I don’t know anything about it, and it’s stressful, I usually go to the gym for running. That’s one way I learned from the course—that I can get the stress away from me.”

In addition to these approaches to coping with the above challenges, two participants thought that the module’s focus on researching the university’s support services and taking responsibility for their own learning struggles beforehand also helped their transition into their programs.

Discussion and Conclusion

While the sample size was small, the two cohorts of students in this study lend voice to the notion that such courses do help EAP students take ownership over their learning. The findings indicate that both groups of participants felt that the Study Skills for Independent Learning module helped them to enhance their study skills. Moreover, their responses suggest that the participants in the retrospective focus group, in particular, were able to apply what they had learned to real-world situations. More specifically, the abilities of managing time, reflecting on learning, and dealing with social pressures at university, were three key facets of the module which the participants believed directly impacted their studies. These findings suggest that the students exercised, to some extent, Bruner’s (1986) “reflective intervention” in that they were able to adopt roles and exercise some control over their learning (p.132).

From a design perspective, the subject matter and language appeared to be both suitable in terms of the motivational profiles and proficiency levels of these participants. The feedback from the questionnaires and retrospective focus group reveal that the participants felt the course provided them with the conceptual background and practice they needed to improve their study skills to succeed at university. The fact that the materials target an IELTS Band 5 is promising since it may encourage instructors teaching EAP courses to incorporate activities which focus on

enhancing independent study skills into their approach, even at a pre-intermediate level. This positive evaluation is also important given that EAP students may come from a different “culture of learning” than the one they face during their studies abroad (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, p. 8). The importance of academic and cultural acculturation is often taken for granted or overlooked entirely by EAP course designers (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Dooley, 2010). Having clear academic and social expectations as part of EAP design can be key to future student success (Huang, 2010).

Responses also focused on the need to cope with life at university. One major challenge facing university students is how to navigate the informal interactions that occur within the realm of their studies. Students using EAL often have a reluctance to speak due to a lack of confidence, or they have feelings of exclusion due to their linguistic proficiency (Dooley, 2010). The findings of this study indicate that teaching students strategies to cope with these perceived deficiencies and where to find help if needed is a key element of successful independent learning.

These findings may also lend voice to similar studies (Dooley, 2010) which found that students using EAL see value in opportunities to engage with their academic community as early as possible. This interaction could be exposure to content and assessments which are similar to that which they will encounter when they enter their target community (Thomas, 2012). In addition to note-taking and synthesis activities, the findings of this current investigation indicate that certain programs, such as engineering, try to reinforce reflective practices as a valuable professional skill. Perhaps, strides could be made to identify further transferable skills which could be integrated into a larger EAP curriculum. This inclusion could occur either as a separate study skills/professional skills module, such as in this study, or as streamed discipline-specific assignments as part of a wider EAP or English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) course.

Limitations and Future Studies

Although the data collection methods provided a variety of views on the module, they could have been made stronger in three ways. Given the small sample size, it is difficult to draw conclusions which can be generally applied. While Gay et al. (2012) maintain that qualitative research’s main objective is to understand what occurred and identify reasons for why that occurred across the particular population, future studies could look at a wider and more diverse sample to see if conclusions could be more broadly applied. In addition, more data sources such as undergraduate faculty, admissions staff, and student counsellors from the university could have been involved to collect data regarding other means of student support on campus. Adding more perspectives would lead to a more refined investigation into beliefs surrounding the connection between language proficiency, acculturation, and academic readiness.

Additionally, the questionnaire and interview schedules could be redesigned to include a student-specific needs analysis to more explicitly elicit the participants’ own views on what it means to be an independent learner. This needs analysis could also contain questions that ask participants to reflect on their existing knowledge and comment on their abilities to engage within their target communities. One drawback of modules focusing on learner autonomy, such as the one in this study, is a possible perception that students using EAL should not rely on their existing knowledge resources, rather, they need to adapt to the host culture’s norms; placing the

students in a deficit framework. Douglas and Rosvold's (2018) synthesis of key themes found in two decades of scholarly work pertaining to intercultural communicative competence (ICC) identified problematic calls for EAL students in EAP programs to change their behaviours to accommodate the behaviours of the host culture. The authors recommended that EAP course designers and instructors move away from such an ethnocentric approach to acculturation and towards a more ethnorelative one (Douglas & Rosvold, 2018). Such an approach would encourage both students and the academic community to share the responsibility to adapt. Issues of acculturation identified in this study primarily appeared within the context of the discourse community and independent study skills.

In addition, student testimonials eluded to some levels of acculturation relating to social relationships. Finley (2018) highlighted the importance of belongingness to language acquisition and successful integration. Future studies could look at further expanding current research on the belongingness of students using EAL in a higher educational setting in Canada to evaluate how those students perceive themselves within the greater academic community and how curriculum designers can incorporate themes related to belongingness in EAP curriculum design. Such a study would seem useful given that the value of helping students expand their cultural understanding through EAP program curriculum has been recognized as beneficial to academic, work, and social interactions (Galante, 2014). In terms of intercultural relations, future investigation could start with Bennett's (1993) developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) and explore the current level of the EAP students and interlocutors and identify ways in which program designers and administrators can address deficiencies on both sides by creating instructional materials which provide strategies for recognizing and addressing cultural misrepresentations and promote intercultural sensitivity. Such measures would likely enhance the process of acculturation by providing additional resources students can draw on to independently cope with university life and positively impact internationalization at the institutional level.

Acknowledgements

The author extends his thanks to the peer reviewers and the BC TEAL Journal editor for their valuable feedback and support throughout the publication process.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire for Enrolled Students

- 1) What is your opinion of the Skills for independent learning module?
- 2) What have you learned from the Study Skills for Independent Learning Module?
- 3) What is your opinion of the module text book in terms of content and level (difficulty)?
- 4) What is your opinion of the Reflective Journal?
- 5) What is your opinion of the Interview/Personal Statement and Resume Assessment?
- 6) What is your opinion of the Semester Planner Assessment?
- 7) If you could, what would you change about the course?
- 8) If you could, what would you keep the same?

Appendix 2

Questions for Retrospective Focus Group

- 1) Grand Tour) Tell me about your experience in the Skills for Independent Learning module.
Follow-up: Did it meet your expectations?
Probe: How has it met or how could it have better met your expectations? Or, what do you mean by “good”?

- 2) (Grand Tour) Tell me about your current situation
Follow-up question: How has the module connected to your current situation as an undergraduate student?
Probe: Any examples, anecdotes?
- 3) How did you feel about the course materials?
Follow-up/Probe: Which ones were good or bad, and why do you think they were so?
Clarification: Were they easy or difficult? Was the level of language suitable to your level?
Was the content of the course suitable to your situation?
- 4) How did you feel about the assessments?
Follow-up: Did they test your knowledge of the content and language? Or,
What are their strengths or weaknesses?



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