

An Assessment of Commercial Learning Materials for English for Academic Purposes in Southeast Asian Countries

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Abstract

Commercial materials can offer many practical benefits to the EAP teacher. But how useful are EAP materials produced predominantly for western contexts to learners in Asia? This paper examines some limitations in commercial EAP materials. In particular, I will focus on socio-cultural bias present in these materials. I will do this in the context of three EAP environments, which I have distinguished. Each of these environments will be described and compared. I will end by proposing some possible solutions to help meet the needs of Asian EAP environments. Although examples will be drawn mainly from Southeast Asia, the discussion will be of interest to anyone involved in EAP in other Asian countries.

Introduction

This paper describes the limitations of commercial materials for the teaching and learning of English for Academic purposes (EAP) in Southeast Asia, and proposes ways in which we can better meet the needs of EAP students in our unique teaching and learning environments. The term "EAP" is used here to refer to the learning of language and communication skills in order to meet the demands of academic tasks in tertiary level education. These include taking lecture notes, making oral presentations and participating in seminars, writing academic essays and reading long academic texts or literature texts.

Publishers offer a wide selection of course books for the teaching of those skills I have just mentioned. Many of these course books have been used for a number of years and some are in their fourth or fifth reprints. This shows the demands there are for commercial EAP materials. Many EAP course administrators and teachers prefer to use these commercial materials to producing their own materials. This should not come as a surprise since there are several advantages in using commercial course books. One common reason given is that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Besides many of these commercial texts are high quality work produced by professionals who have spent hundreds of hours writing and subsequently field testing these materials. Many of the course books available are also based on sound principles of language teaching and learning. In addition, commercially published materials saves time and energy, which could then be reinvested in activities like conferencing with students, and grading

assignments and writing feedback.

While the use of commercial materials can bring many benefits, these materials have a number of limitations, particularly when used in the context of Southeast Asia. I will discuss these limitations in terms of two emerging EAP environments, of which these regions are an important part.

Traditional and Emerging EAP Environments

I have identified three main environments in which EAP teaching and learning take place. I shall refer to these as classic EAP, domestic EAP and new EAP.

Classic EAP

This is typically one in which students from non-anglophone countries go to anglophone countries to study tertiary institutions. Countries in which the classic EAP situation exists are Britain, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. A large number of overseas students arrive in these countries each year to take up courses, such as engineering, law, business, accounting, medicine, and computer science. They range from undergraduates to postgraduates at the MA and PhD level. Their subject lecturers are predominantly first language speakers of English. Most of these overseas students are taught EAP either in pre-sessional or in-sessional courses, or in both. Classic EAP has its beginnings in countries like Britain many decades ago. By now, it is a well-established discipline with a growing body of research, journals and a plethora of published learning materials.

Domestic EAP

This situation is one in which students in non-anglophone countries receive a tertiary education in their own countries where courses are taught fully or partially in the English language. For most of these students English is a second or third language. In some cases, it is a foreign language. The subject lecturers consist of mainly speakers of English as a second language. In some situations there is a sizable proportion of western expatriate teachers.

We can further distinguish three learning contexts in domestic EAP :

English is used as a medium of instruction for all disciplines in universities and polytechnical institutions. Some examples are Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

English is used as a medium of instruction for students in some courses. For example, courses that prepare undergraduates to become teachers of English in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei Darusalleh, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and Japan. In some universities in Malaysia and Thailand, science courses, such as engineering and medicine, are also taught in English, while all postgraduates in these

fields can write their theses in English.

English is used as a means of acquiring information and knowledge. Students receiving tertiary education in their national language often have to understand written, and to some extent, spoken materials produced in English. Some examples are Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia China and Japan. This need will likely be extended to such countries as Laos and Vietnam as their efforts to internationalize coincide with their measures to improve the teaching of English and the level of English spoken throughout the general population. An innovative step has recently been taken by Malaysia in allowing national universities and several technical institutions to determine the amount and extent of English used in the various academic disciplines (Asmah Haji Omar 1996). This model has been followed closely by the Thai Ministry of Education and recently steps have been taken to introduce the same type of plan in Thai national universities and some technical institutes (Somdet Narapong 1998). Thus EAP students will learn English not just for the purpose of understanding, but also as a means of production in these two countries.

New EAP

This EAP environment is one in which students from non-anglophone countries go to other non-anglophone countries where English is a medium of instruction. Singapore is an example of this. It has for decades been receiving students from other Asian countries into different levels of university education. Malaysia, and now Thailand, with the setting up of more universities which use English as a medium of instruction will also be well-poised to become "a center of learning not just for Malaysians and Thais but for the people of the Asian regions as well" (Narapong 1998). It is also foreseeable that Hong Kong with its socio-political changes, may become a popular choice for prospective tertiary level students from Mainland China. Students arriving in these countries will have varying proficiencies in English, but most will have studied English as a second or foreign language. Like students in domestic EAP, new EAP students will be taught mainly by academics who are second language speakers of English.

Domestic EAP and new EAP are not situations that have developed only recently in this region. These environments have, nevertheless, become more prominent because of changes in language policies and the increasing importance of some Southeast Asian countries as centers for learning in the region.

A Comparison of Three EAP Environments

The three EAP environments share some common ground. This is mainly in the area of academic systems, since many universities in Southeast Asia have been modeled after western ones. In other words, we can expect to find similarities in the way courses are structured and in the mode of teaching. For example, many universities here have a system of lecture and tutorial seminar. Another similarity is the presence of overseas

students who have learned English as a second or foreign language. In the case of classic EAP and new EAP, both groups of overseas students are also operating in socio-cultural contexts that may be very different from the ones they have come from.

One major difference between classic EAP and the other two EAP environments is in the composition of academic staff. Whereas university teachers for the various disciplines in classic EAP environments are mainly first language speakers of English, academic staff in domestic and new EAP universities consist predominantly of local lecturers who speak English as a second language. In addition, students in these countries may not always have to communicate with local students in English because they share a common language with the community at large, as is the case of students from China studying in Singapore.

Domestic EAP and new EAP, on the other hand, have more in common if considered within the larger socio-political scene. In spite of the great diversity in Asia in terms of race, religion and culture, Bray and Lee (1996) have identified three areas of commonalities: educational and colonial transitions, interrelationships with economic changes, international forces and the evolving role of the State. They stressed that these features will have significant effects on education as a whole. With Bray and Lee's framework of commonalities, I would like to discuss particular implications for the teaching of EAP in this region, in particular the choice and use of learning materials.

1) Educational and colonial transitions

Countries that have gained their independence from colonial powers often take a long time to make a full transition into complete autonomy in every aspect of the word. Although many relics of the colonial past are slowly demolished during this transition, some things like education systems remain (Altbach and Kelly 1984). In the context of our discussion here, one such example is the way in which university courses are structured and taught, and the procedures by which students are assessed. The most common model for teaching is perceivably the lecture-followed-by-tutorial one. Another common feature is student seminars, particularly for post-graduate students, where readings or research done are presented. A popular form of university assessment is through written work, whether as a piece of assignment, timed-answers produced in cavernous exam halls, or theses of a several thousand words. The main goal of EAP teaching is therefore to help students to develop skills to meet these academic demands. As Bray and Lee (1996) have noted, structures of education that originated from the West are not exclusive to countries with a colonial history, but this influence can be found in other Asian countries not formally colonized. An example of this would be Thailand, which though never colonized, borrowed heavily from European educational structures beginning soon after the turn of the century when King Rama the Fifth brought back to Thailand with him various new methods and techniques from his extended European visit.

As a result of the similarities in the structure of tertiary education between western and Asian universities, we find that a great deal of EAP materials based on British or American universities contexts find their way into Asian EAP classrooms. While the materials are generally of very high quality, there is inevitably a socio-cultural bias in them. We will return to this point in a later part of this paper.

2) Interrelationships of education with economic changes

Bray and Lee (1996) noted that socio-political changes may cause economic changes which may in turn cause educational changes. One such change has been a further increase in the number of Asian students going overseas to study. UNESCO (1993, cited in Bray and Lee 1996) reported that between 1980 - 1990, there was a rise of about 10% of Asian students studying in non-Asian institutions. The organization also noted that for some East Asian countries, such as Japan and China, there was a significant increase in the number of students studying in both Asian and non-Asian institutions (UNESCO 1993, cited in Bray and Lee 1996). If this trend continues, and we may expect it to do so in the near future after a temporary drop due to economic setbacks in the region, we will see a rise in the number of foreign learners at tertiary institutions in those Southeast Asian countries that are developing an increasingly important role as regional centers for learning.

Another outcome of economic changes is the increase in the demand for English to be learned as a language for academic and professional communication. As we are already seeing in a number of ESL countries, this demand is a direct result of economic forces as well as students' perception of English as shaped by these forces (for the case of Thailand, see for example, Rangseuwat 1995, Nachtikit & Suriporn 1997). With this increase, we can also expect a dramatic increase in domestic EAP teaching activity. English departments that already have their hands full with teaching will find that they will be stretched even further.

From my observations, one of the most common problems that English departments in tertiary institutions face is the production of relevant and appropriate materials. The problem is usually not in a shortage of expertise, but rather a constraint of time. Departments often have to cope with the administration and teaching load that come with increased student intake. Sometimes there are also the added demands of changing policies that directly affect the curriculum and learning materials. Thus, if Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore continue to attract foreign students to their institutions of higher learning, these constraints in terms of teaching and learning resources will become even more pronounced.

3) International forces and the changing role of the state

The flow of ideas and expertise from one country to another is often viewed as

desirable as it can promote better understanding across countries' borders. In this rapidly changing age of information technology, and especially with the advent of the internet, it has become a tremendous challenge, albeit a necessary one for English departments to try and keep up with the flow of new information available. Students will increasingly be able to access a multitude of web sites and thus be exposed to English of all sorts, but especially for academic purposes, curriculum changes must take into account this phenomena. In order to guide students through the spectrum of information, teachers themselves will require computer skills training.

Aside from this, there is the constantly shifting role of the state and its subsequent influence upon how English is taught at tertiary level. Often, as with the recent case in Hong Kong, upon Mainland China's takeover from British authority, English teaching began to undergo a subtle shift in policy. One that seemed to discourage communicative approaches to teaching English. Teachers must be able to not only go with the flow of the socio-political climate they find themselves in, but to be sensitive and cognizant of them before they ever step foot in the classroom. However, their input and dedication to principles of ESL teaching need to be taken into account as well. It is crucial that there be a vital cross-cultural interchange going on between foreign ESL teachers and their host faculties. But in most cases, the governments of Southeast Asian countries recognize the importance of improving and upgrading materials used in English for academic purposes. Foreign teachers hired to teach at tertiary institutions bring with them an array of teaching styles, attitudes and approaches. Not to mention accents and vocabularies! It seems the most successful universities that incorporate foreign English teachers, whose native tongue is English, into their English departments, have a well defined and coordinated curriculum, giving the teachers a sense of goals and objectives. Too often though, foreign English teachers are left to their own devices as to what to teach and how to teach it and what materials they wish to use. This often creates a hodge-podge of English learning and may often be counter-productive, if indeed the goal of the students is to achieve proficiency in academic English. Of course, the flip side of this, is an overly controlled English department. One in which the teacher is told which materials to use and how they must teach them. This form of bureaucratic red tape and uniformity can often have a stifling effect on students' desire and ability to achieve proficiency in academic English.

Taking into account Socio-cultural bias in EAP

1) Diversity and relevance in new EAP situations

As English increases in importance relative to the internationalization of Southeast Asia, it is important to realize that major differences exist in the way in which members of different cultures express themselves and structure their speaking and lecturing styles, and the effect that has on the students who are listening to them. In the past it was widely

assumed that all lecturers use discourse markers or phrases (Chauldron and Richard, 1986) to indicate the structure of their talk and alert their listeners when making transitions. We know for a fact that not all lecturers do this. Lynch (1994) has called for university teachers to receive training in delivering lectures. His proposal was made in the context of a western country. Can we expect even greater diversity in lecturing style among lecturers in domestic and new EAP situations, such as those in the universities in Southeast Asia? Experience seems to suggest that this is true. We may also extrapolate this from Wolvin and Coakely's (1992 :59-60) observations that there are differences in the way people from different cultures or philosophical orientations structure their message. In this case, the question we need to ask is how relevant are classic EAP listening and note-taking materials for preparing our EAP students to understand lectures by speakers from diverse cultures and discourse practices?

2) Models of spoken English

Another aspect of socio-cultural bias is one concerning the types of spoken English found in listening materials. As most published listening courses aim to prepare learners to understand common regional accents in an anglophone country, many have made a conscious effort to include speakers with these accents. Once again, this can be extremely useful for students in classic EAP environments, but it may turn out to be of little value and sometimes even a source of frustration for students who may never have to listen to a particular accent in their university. The demands of having to cope with these unfamiliar accents, coupled with an attempt at understanding the content of a talk, may detract some learners from the real objectives of a lesson.

Providing Students in Domestic and New EAP Environments with Learning Materials

Since most commercial materials are intended for use in the classic EAP environments, the materials typically address the needs of learners in these countries. Needless to say, the socio-cultural and political contexts of countries like Britain and the United States are very different from the Southeast Asian region. In spite of this, commercial materials are extremely popular in this region for some of the reasons I mentioned at the beginning of the paper. For further discussions about this see Richards (1993).

From my observation, teachers use these commercial course books in at least two ways. One is to *adopt* a course book, and with it the underlying theories of teaching and the way the content and the learning tasks have been graded. A second way, and by far a more common one, is to *adapt* the materials to local conditions. An example of this is "home-based" writing tasks based on readings in commercial textbooks (Wong 1997). Another way, which is less overt, is to devise learning tasks based on ideas gleaned from commercial materials. Yet another way is to provide class sets of various titles, so that

teachers can select those units or topics that they feel will be useful to their students.

This use of commercial materials from classic EAP environments has no doubt benefited many EAP programs in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, I believe they need to explore other long-term solutions in order to meet the needs of their own teaching and learning contexts. One possible solution is to *assemble* their own materials. In considering this, we will look at two potential ways.

1) **Customize course books**

This idea was piloted by Harvard University's Programs of English as a Second Language in 1992 (Harvard University 1992). The aim was to provide relevant and appropriate "authentic" reading texts without infringing copyright laws. Articles came from a selected publisher's catalogue as well as from *Business Week* and the *New York Times*. Customized texts also consisted of extracts from ESL course books like *Mosaic* (Price, 1995). Through customizing course books teachers can select the materials they want, students get a collection of materials that is tailored to their specific need, and publishers and writers get paid. This is made possible by technology "for reproducing and storing text files digitally, binding finished products inexpensively, and keeping track of material and number of copies used for fair use purpose" (Harvard University, 1992).

The benefits of customizing courses are clear. Course materials can be updated and revised regularly. It also saves precious time spent on looking for the right articles which is often further constrained by the legal implications of using some of them. With the rapid advancement in computer technology in the region, customized course books is definitely one prospect they need to explore. Because of the scale of such a project, it is best explored at the institutional level where negotiations with publishers can be carried out.

2) **Produce EAP courses commercially**

To date, there have been very few EAP course books produced by Southeast Asian writers for the region. I will not attempt to explore the possible reasons for this here. Nevertheless, I believe that this is one avenue that should definitely be explored for reasons discussed earlier. There is certainly a need for high-quality, ready-to-use materials that are appropriate for the EAP environments in the region. Materials used at an institutional level are potential commercial materials. Many EAP course books produced in classic EAP situations began this way.

There are at least two other advantages for producing materials locally. One is face validity of the materials. This is particularly important for listening materials. Recordings of lectures that include varieties of English spoken in the Southeast Asian region can make the whole listening experience more "real-worldlike".

The second advantage is that materials selected from local contexts will be useful

in increasing students' awareness of socio-cultural and political matters in the country they are studying in and the countries around it. Texts on general topics will also offer points of view of writers and thinkers in the region. This will provide learners with opportunities to develop broader perspectives about important issues rather than be restricted to Anglo-American points of view found in most texts produced in the classic EAP environment.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described what I perceive to be limitations of commercial EAP materials produced by and for traditional anglophone countries. By proposing that Southeast Asian educators assemble their own materials for the region, I am not saying that we should aim to completely abandon those materials produced in countries like the United States or Britain. On the contrary, I think some of these, materials should continue to be used because many of them contain excellent learning tasks. What I am suggesting is that EAP learners in the Southeast Asian region should be given equal opportunities to work with texts and models of spoken English that take cognizance of local socio-cultural and political situations. It is important to add that challenging learning tasks that can help learners develop language and communication skills for academic purposes must accompany these texts.

The opportunity for students to learn EAP skills through culturally relevant texts should be readily available. This can be achieved if materials can be assembled effectively. Two possible ways of doing this—customizing texts and producing commercial courses—have been suggested. More importantly, local educators need to produce course books that are of a high quality and that can meet the unique needs of learners in the Southeast Asian region where classic EAP course books often fail to do. To this end, Southeast Asia needs a great deal more research on EAP teaching and learning. One possible strand of research is ethnographic studies of academic cultures in the region's institutions of higher learning and comparisons of these cultures within the region and with those in western countries. This research can be broad-based, encompassing general areas of learning, or more focused in scope, such as dealing with individual types of academic tasks. More information is also needed about the actual types of language and communication skills that students in the region need to develop. This is to avoid a mismatch of learning tasks and real world needs such as that reported by Williams (1988) in a classic EAP situation.

Furthermore, there is a need to know about learners' perceptions and concerns in learning English for academic purposes. In particular, the need to know about those issues that affect foreign students in Southeast Asian universities. In conclusion, a knowledge base for different aspects of the teaching and learning of EAP in Southeast Asia needs to be built up. This type of information can offer important insights that can

guide the assembling of relevant and appropriate learning materials for the emerging environments in Southeast Asia.

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