

## ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES COURSES

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**Abstract.** *The purpose of this article is to examine the issues of assessment related to English for Academic Purposes courses offered by the Language Centre at South East European University in Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia. The article aims to analyse the current forms of assessment in higher education and EAP courses and the potential benefits and drawbacks of assessment criteria. In addition, the study incorporates students' view and perceptions on tasks and skills which were assessed and were part of the grading criteria in EAP courses. This study also aims to provide recommendations regarding assessment and assessment tasks and procedures in EAP courses and to contribute to the development of appropriate assessment criteria in EAP courses. The study also attempts to provide solutions for the potential issues which might arise as part of assessment.*

**Key words:** *assessment, English for Academic Purposes, higher education, tasks, learning skills, formative and summative assessment*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to describe and analyse the issues of assessment and evaluation in Academic English courses designed and provided by the Language Centre at South Eastern European University in Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia. The article also attempts to describe recent trends in the assessment and evaluation processes in the context of higher education, as well as in the context of EAP courses. The article also examines the combined model of grading criteria which include both exams and assessed tasks. The article examines the methods of formative and summative assessment which are part of the EAP courses. Students' views and perceptions, collected via interviews at the end of the EAP course are also included. They provide an additional insight on the assessed tasks and assessment criteria in the context of EAP courses.

### 2. ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND EAP (ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES) COURSES

The process of assessment in higher education, including EAP courses, is highly complex and demanding. Barnett, in Boud and Falchikov (2007, 29) states his view on the assessment in higher education.

In the contemporary world, as well as it being a means of acquiring high level knowledge, understanding and skills, higher education should foster the development of human qualities and dispositions, of certain modes of being, appropriate to the twenty-first

century. This century, I take it, is one of the multiplying frameworks of understanding of proliferating representations of the world. And those frameworks and representations are both multiplying and contending against each other. It is a world of uncertainty; indeed of supercomplexity. In such a milieu, the question arises: are the qualities and dispositions characteristically called forth by assessment appropriate to such an uncertain world? It just may be, characteristically, assessment practices in higher education are not always yielding the educational potential that they might.

The quote above illustrates the complexity of higher education and subsequently assessment in EAP courses. Boud, in Boud and Falchikov (2007, 16) determines several foci in the process of higher education assessment, which can be also valid for EAP:

Primary focus characterized by terms: outcomes measurement, integrity. This focus is more product-oriented and emphasises the importance of examinations and results. According to Boud (2007), the secondary focus involves terms such as feedback, improvement and learning as a process. Boud (2007) notices that there are also some notions of a tertiary focus on future learning, although rare not very well defined. He states the following regarding the aforementioned distinction: "There is a ready connection between these distinctions and the common purposes of assessment: assessment for certification (summative) assessment for immediate learning (formative) and assessment for longer term learning (sustainable)" (Boud, in Boud and Falchikov, 2007, 17). He proceeds to argue that the primary focus is given high importance in higher educational settings with a strong emphasis on examinations, rules and marks, whereas less importance is placed on the feedback and the importance of further learning via assessment. According to him, the dominant course in higher education is excessively related to measurement and over assessment of both students and staff without placing importance on helping students and their learning presently and in the future. Boud, in Boud and Falchikov (2007, 17) argues in favour of assessment tasks and activities and he states that: "Assessment frames what students do.", and that it should be directed towards informing learner's judgement, as opposed to informing others (teachers, institution) about students' learning. He also indicates that it is necessary to gear assessment towards learning and to promote learning beyond graduation, thus emphasising the ability for life-long learning.

The notions about assessment in higher education and in EAP courses were undergoing similar developments and changes. At first, EAP courses were assessed predominantly via general language tests and institutional tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. Fulcher (1999, 221) states the following regarding assessment and testing in the context of EAP courses: "Much of the discussion on EAP testing and assessment stems from this basic assumption that there should be a direct link between course and assessment at the level of content." Fulcher (1999) proceeds by investigating the relevance and qualities of tests in the context of EAP courses, among them the specifications defined by Carroll (1980) who specifies the characteristics of a communicative EAP tests, which included language skills and micro-functions such as persuading and advising. Other references in literature about tests and examinations as a form of assessment in EAP contexts include Olaofe (1994), who describes several characteristics of a good EAP test. He includes the following:

- Having a target which is to determine how near are the students to achieving adequate performance.
- Using a real life context.
- Incorporating tasks and activities performed by students regardless of academic disciplines such as writing essays, comparing, contrasting, exemplifying.

- Validity and reliability (content validity which suggests the degree to which the test measures particular skills and face validity - which includes the structure of a test).
- Variety (variety of tasks and skills tested).

On the other hand, Long and Crooks (1992) in Robinson and Ross (1996) emphasise the importance of tasks in the process of EAP assessment and argument against over-reliance on tests and examinations. They distinguish between target tasks (which are activities that students should be able to perform outside the classroom) and pedagogic tasks (which are practiced in a language classroom). Ferris and Tagg (1999) in their research about the academic skills that ESL students need in order to function effectively at English – speaking universities, indicate that EAP teachers should provide more speaking practice and activities which include oral presentations, asking and answering questions effectively and activities which develop listening strategies. Alexander (2008, 8) lists the following assessment methods which might be applicable and appropriate in the context of EAP courses:

- Critical essay
- Critical reading report
- Examination essay
- Case study
- Presentation
- Site visit report
- Dissertation

It can be concluded that assessment design in EAP contexts is by no means a simple and straightforward process. We can conclude that the necessity to modify the assessment in EAP courses is evident. It is also evident that the assessment methods in higher education reflect, or should reflect, the level of knowledge and skills obtained, the learning goals and objectives, and to shift the focus from examinations to learning and feedback. In addition, attempts should be made to incorporate methods of sustainable assessment.

### 3. FORMS OF ASSESSMENT AND AIMS IN EAP CONTEXTS AT SEEU LANGUAGE CENTRE

There are two levels of EAP courses offered by the South East European University and Language Centre: Academic and Advanced Academic English courses. The courses are offered for students whose language proficiency is high. Their level of English, according to the Common European Framework, can be placed B2/C1 which means that the students' level of proficiency is upper intermediate or advanced. The course introduced in the first semester is Academic English. Advanced Academic English is offered during the summer semester.

The main purpose of EAP courses is to introduce the conventions of EAP courses, to foster language skills and to enable the students to acquire learning skills and academic skills. As Alexander (2008, 7) describes it: "Both teachers and students in EAP are learning about the target academic community and this requires the teacher – student roles to be more equal than in most general English classes. Alexander (2008) arguments that one of the main goals of EAP courses is to prepare the students to study in academic environment and higher educational setting. Alexander (2008, 9) emphasises that an EAP course is: "first and foremost a language course". In addition, Jordan (1997, 7) lists the study skills linked to eight different study situations and activities which are connected to study skills needed. Among them, the following study situations and skills are included: lectures (listening, note taking); discussions

(asking and answering questions, debating, stating arguments); reading skills (reading for gist and detail, summarizing); referencing (using and quoting resources, referencing styles); writing essays/papers (paragraphing, outlining, organizing, evaluating); tests and examinations (understanding, answering questions, skimming, scanning, writing under pressure of time limits).

EAP courses provided by the Language Centre define the following purpose:

The intention of this course is to serve as an introduction to the conventions of English for academic purposes and to help students acquire the skills needed to apply these conventions in their future academic and professional careers.

This means that the EAP courses should enable students to develop or gain academic skills which will facilitate their academic studies. The course also aims to enable the students to:

- write an essay of at least three paragraphs including introduction, body, and conclusion,
- skim and scan text, preview and predict information,
- engage, participate in a conversation expressing ideas and opinions,
- organize ideas and create simple plans for writing tasks,
- practice using monolingual dictionary,
- present visual information, predict and understand key information in a text,
- identify main ideas and supporting evidence in a text, analyse and identify topic sentences in a paragraph,
- prepare and deliver short presentations and to evaluate presentation according to given guidelines,
- write and evaluate an essay introduction including a thesis statement, to analyse and evaluate thesis statements,
- analyse and refer to the structure of a poster, respond to requests for further details and prepare short poster presentations.

As a result, we can conclude that assessment tasks should reflect the above stated course aims and apart from testing individual academic skills such as reading for gist and detail, inferring, paragraph or essay writing, need to include some of learning skills. EAP courses assessment criteria include the following:

Table 1 Assessment and assessment criteria

Presentation (Power Point/ Poster Presentation)	15%
Attendance and Participation	10%
Presentation (peer) feedback	5%
Essay writing	20%
Debate (in class)	10%
On line discussion forum	10%
Final exam (consisted of reading and writing skills)	30%

Some of the assessed tasks, such as paragraph and essay writing assess both language skills and learning skills. They are assessed with a combination of formative and summative assessment methods, which means that students receive points and detailed feedback on their writing during feedback sessions organized once per month. The students are also provided with a chance to self-evaluate their essays and their paragraphs, using detailed

rubrics which gives them clear and accurate picture of teacher's expectations and also serves as a set of guidelines for essay writing. Persuasive (argumentative) essays are written in Academic English course, while problem-solution and comparison contrast essays are part of Advanced Academic English course.

Another assessed task, poster presentation, involves formative assessment (the teacher evaluates the students according to a given rubric) as well as peer feedback that the students provide in a written form for their classmates, indicating the positive and negative characteristics of the presentation in addition to suggestions regarding which aspects of the presentation might be improved and how. This task, which is also assessed, provides the students with an opportunity to learn and reflect on the qualities of a good presentation. The task involves elements of summative assessment: the teacher collects the written feedback first, evaluates the quality of the feedback and the student who wrote the feedback receives points. Afterwards, the written feedback is forwarded to the student who delivered the presentation.

The in-class debate was conducted according to a pre-determined set of instructions and criteria. The topic was pre-selected on behalf of the students, who also formed the debate question (Should abortion be banned and prohibited by law?) The students have their roles and groups (pro and con group) determined prior to the debate: one of them delivers the opening statement; another student delivers one or more of the arguments for or against a given topic. The summative assessment is given according to a set of debate rules and criteria, which define the appropriate structuring and delivering of arguments. Similarly to the debate, the students' arguments and the quality of their responses are evaluated in the discussion forum. The topic of the forum is a controversial TED talk video which relates to a question that students comment upon and reply to other students.

Final exam tests both language and learning skills: students' ability to understand a text, to read for gist and detail, to infer meaning from context and to write an academic essay (persuasive/problem solution/comparison-contrast essay) on a given choice of topics and applying the relevant and appropriate organization, register grammar and mechanics.

Clearly, an attempt is made to combine various forms of assessment methods and to provide students with assessment which will support further learning. It can be concluded that every task is assessed with combined methods of formative and summative assessment.

#### 4. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ASSESSMENT AND ASSESSED TASKS IN THE CONTEXT OF EAP COURSES

This study also aims to present students' views and perceptions on the tasks assessed in EAP courses. Their responses and opinions about the assessed tasks were collected in the course of students' course evaluation, done at the end of the semester. The purpose of the course evaluation was to provide the EAP instructor with a deeper insight into students' opinions and perceptions of the assessed tasks and their beliefs and comments about the level of difficulty, their expectations, their perceptions of the knowledge gained and ways to improve some aspects of the assessed tasks. The survey form was distributed to 23 students. The survey was distributed in May 2015, during the last week of the semester. The survey was anonymous. It consisted of 10 multiple choice items and 7 open ended questions. The multiple choice items analysed students' opinion regarding the materials, activities done in groups or pairs, scheduling and syllabus. However, the

second part of the survey is more relevant for this particular study, since it investigated students' opinions and comments regarding the assessed tasks.

The majority of the students agreed that the assessed course assignments helped them to learn, since 21 out of 23 students answered positively to this question. A similar conclusion can be drawn about the grading policy. Most of the students (22) believed that the grading policy was fair and they were aware what was expected of them. This chapter will also provide summary of some of the comments that the students gave on the assessed tasks and assessment in general.

#### 4.1. Essay writing

Students' comments on the essays were divided. From their answers, it could be concluded that although the majority of them were aware of the importance of essays and essay writing, some of them (2 in total) still expressed their dislike for writing in general. Still, their answers were generally positive and these are some of the comments.

- *The advantages of the essays were: they helped us to improve our writing and the way we should write (organization, outlining) no matter what the topic was. The disadvantage is that we do not read as much as we should in order to write a proper essay.*
- *I have learnt to write other types of essays (problem solution, compare-contrast essay) apart from persuasive essays. This helped me a lot to improve my writing skills.*
- *I think that essays are good for improving your writing skills. But sometimes I felt that they were just too much. And not always language can be improved by writing.*
- *I liked organizing and pre-writing essays, the rules, the topics, and the fact we had a lot of time to do them.*
- *Personally, I understood that this task is important because when we write, we have to use the language and rules how to organize the structure. And the rubrics helped a lot, I had a clear picture what was expected of me. Still, I hate writing.*
- *I learned about essay writing a lot. The problem solution essay was a tricky one, but my favorite was comparison and contrast essay.*

#### 4.2. Poster presentations/feedback to other students

Most of the students responded very positively and with great enthusiasm. It is clear, from their answers that they enjoyed this task and they also felt that this task supports their learning skills in other content areas apart from language learning. These are some of the comments:

- *I think that presentations were a good way to express our thoughts and communicate them. We also need them for the future, I expect to present in other courses as well. And it was interesting to evaluate our classmates and to learn to be objective.*
- *It was very effective and we learned how to organize our presentation, how to communicate, even how to stand. The feedback to others made me pay attention more during others' presentations.*

- *The advantages were that we improve our speaking skills and after the presentations we received feedback from our classmates immediately. The disadvantages were that I do not feel comfortable speaking in front of other students.*
- *Poster presentations challenged both our creativity and our organizing/public speaking skills. I liked that we could choose our topics ourselves. I did not like evaluating other students. Sometimes I had to be harsh.*

#### 4.3. Debates

Debates were also very well accepted. These are some of the comments:

- *Debates are always good. They help us speak better and develop a critical approach to different subjects we debated upon. One thing I didn't like when we had a debate was that we could end up debating pro or against regardless of our personal opinion.*
- *The debate was necessary and helpful for us to develop our communication skills. I liked it very much because everyone was involved.*
- *The debate helped us to think deeper about a topic and to provide more arguments for or against. We also learned that we need to support our opinion with some arguments and facts. We also learned not to take everything personally.*
- *We should have more debates.*

#### 4.4. Final exam

The final exam also caused divided opinions and comments. Some of the comments were positive, but the majority of students in fact believed that it can be replaced by other assignments and removed from the course. These are some of the comments:

- *Remove it and add other assignments and tasks!*
- *It was OK in terms of difficulty.*
- *Multiple choice questions from the texts should be replaced with other types of questions. Perhaps it is a good idea to add some type of oral exam.*
- *There weren't any surprises in terms of instructions and tasks. Still, it was stressful.*
- *Nobody likes exams, especially from 8 o'clock in the morning.*

#### 4.5. Online discussion forum

The online discussion forum received mainly positive reactions and comments:

- *I liked the TED talk and the video.*
- *Appropriate subject to be discussed. It was interesting. Still, I would prefer an inclass discussion.*
- *It was OK because we had plenty of time to do it.*

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENTATIONS

For the reasons and arguments mentioned above, it can be concluded that the assessment in EAP courses is a complex process and entails several issues. First of all, English for Academic Purposes courses assessment should include the language skills and knowledge.

The assessment should also encompass the learning skills listed above and promote those. It is also clear from the questionnaire that the students acknowledge the importance of both writing and presentation skills. Those skills are transferable and possible to implement in other subject areas apart from language learning.

Furthermore, it is also important to comprise methods of formative and summative assessment as well as sustainable assessment. Assessment in the context of EAP courses should contribute to forming an informed judgement – students' awareness of their learning which would extend beyond the course itself. The assessment should also contain elements of peer and self-assessment, thus increasing students' understanding of the grading criteria and their awareness of positive/negative qualities of the assessed tasks. This means that feedback is also an important part of the assessment. It can be provided on behalf of the teacher. In this case, it should be detailed and supported with arguments. Peer and self-assessment should be facilitated with detailed rubrics and sets of criteria.

It is also important that assessment criteria should not overemphasise one skill or one part of the course. Although it is perhaps natural and to be expected to emphasise the importance of reading and writing in the EAP courses, speaking skills should be also part of it.

Another recommendation which can be drawn from the students' responses is that the exams can be modified by adding an oral component (oral exam). In addition, replacing the final exam with other assignments is possible.

We can conclude that assessment and assessment criteria in EAP courses is not a straightforward and simple process. However, it should always be designed by taking into consideration that assessment should facilitate learning and empower the learners above all.

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APPENDIX 1

Please comment on the following assignments and tasks (what were their advantages or disadvantages, how would you improve them)

a. Essays

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b. Poster Presentations - feedback

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c. Discussions/Debates (in-class and after the presentations)

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d. Discussion forum

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e. Final exam

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f. Please comment on the grading policy. Is it fair (according to your opinion)? Include your suggestions how to improve this aspect of the course.

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g. Do you believe that the course assignments helped you to learn? Include your suggestions how to improve this aspect of the course