



Collaboration for English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP): building cross-disciplinary communities in transnational education

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Context



Chang'an-Dublin International College (CDIC) is a transnational partnership college between University College Dublin and Chang'an University in Xi'an, China.

Students study for undergraduate degrees in:

Civil Engineering (CE)

Automotive Engineering (AE)

Transport, City Planning, and Environmental Policy (TCPEP)



Context



Students take EAP modules in the first two years of their four-year programmes:

Stage One Semester One: *English for University Studies*
Stage One Semester Two: *English for General Academic Purposes*

Stage Two Semester One: *Academic Writing and Communication Skills*

Stage Two Semester Two: *English for Specific Academic Purposes*

Classes are taught by both Chinese and international EAP teachers.



Progress report



An exploration of ‘the conditions to facilitate collaboration across disciplines’.

Intention to conduct interviews with CE, AE, and TCPEP faculty and EAP teachers to interrogate attitudes and approaches towards cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Project still in very early stages: this paper will identify current areas of collaboration, challenges in implementing collaboration, and plans going forward.



Research Context



- ‘the contexts where students are expected to transfer their EAP learning are often vastly different from the initial one (where EAP instruction takes place)’.
- how to achieve appropriate balance of knowledge and skills (especially across modules that move towards increased specialization).
- the importance of knowledge *about language* (and the ways in which language creates meaning in specific disciplines).
- argument for use of Legitimation Code Theory (LTC) and especially use of semantic gravity continuum.

Monbec, L. (2018)

Research Context



- ‘mismatch between EAP courses and students’ actual learning needs’
- listening (and note-taking from lectures) identified as areas of particular challenge
- issues of targeted vocabulary acquisition: how can content experts assist with this?

(Shing, S., Sim, T. S. & Bahrani, T., 2013)

Research Context



‘An Apology for EGAP’:

‘University preparatory courses that focus on the specifics of a certain field of study may be useful in some contexts, but reduce language learning to a purely functional role, with the narrow goal of academic success.’

Marshall, P. A. (2024)

Context of CDIC



Undergraduate students often arrive with limited subject knowledge as well as limited experience of using English in academic contexts.

Many first-year subject modules are more foundational than specialized: eg. foundational Physics and Maths modules before encountering modules on Fluid Mechanics or Thermodynamics.

In our context, then, we need to move gradually from an EGAP focus towards a more discipline-specific focus.

Context of CDIC



In doing this, we still benefit greatly from collaboration with subject lecturers:

- to help identify threshold concepts and subject-specific lexis that students need to grasp early on.
- to establish what kind of skills might usefully be emphasized (eg. for engineers, a greater emphasis on writing about processes might be more important than an emphasis on argumentative essays).
- to share real-world applications and case-studies that could work within an EGAP as well as an ESAP syllabus.

17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals





Content throughout Stage One focuses on SDGs as a means of helping students to gain epistemological access to their subject area – and its real-world applications – without being overwhelmed by high-level / technical content and lexis.

All subject lecturers engage, in different ways, with addressing issues related to the SDGs.

Three Areas of Collaboration



Interviews with lecturers about their research (used for Listening-into-Note-Taking Tasks)

Needs Analysis – what language-related issues do students have in discipline-specific assessments?

Facilitating meetings and collaboration between EAP teachers and subject lecturers.

Interviews with Lecturers



Prof Emeritus Mark Richardson discusses transport infrastructure in relation to SDGs 9 and 17.

Interviews with Lecturers



Dr Luke Kelleher
defines GIS.

Interviews with Lecturers



In addition to potential for note-taking and summarizing tasks, interviews help students to become familiar with lecturers' accents, pace of speech, intonation and to develop subject knowledge in a non-specialized context.

Feedback from lecturers who have taken part in interviews indicate that they also find it useful in terms of reflecting on the language they use to address students and how they pitch their own speech.

Needs Analysis (and influence on assessment strategy)



Feedback from lecturers on students' performance in subject-specific assessments is informing our practice.

For example, students struggling on short-answer questions (50 to 100 words) suggests argument for focusing more on cohesion across sentences than on the structure of longer essays (1,500 words) that they typically don't need to write in their assessed modules.

Equally, the EAP team has encouraged subject lecturers to adapt their assessments – eg. by relying less on MCQ format (especially post-pandemic) and understanding what students ought to be able to accomplish in their written responses.

Facilitating meetings and collaboration between EAP teachers and subject lecturers.



Professional Certificate in TESOL enabling Chinese EAP teachers to study for a summer in Dublin and hold planning meetings with subject lecturers.

Collaborative projects – research, materials development.

Teachers attending lectures; lecturers observing EAP teachers' classes.



Challenges



Top-down encouragement of such collaboration required.

Promoting status and visibility of EAP practitioners within the institution

Time constraints

Toogood, C. & Hale, K. (2025)

In the move towards ESAP, interdisciplinarity may also pose a challenge (and opportunity) – eg. Civil and Automotive Engineering students requesting modules on coding and AI.



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