

Project Overview

Project Title (in English): Enhancing Students' Communicative Competence in Academic Contexts: Adopting a Blended Approach to teaching and learning of *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)*

Project Title (in Chinese):
增強學生學術範疇的英語應用能力：
學術英語課程中應用混合式教學方法

Executive Summary

(Please provide, within this page, an executive summary of the project.)

Objective: The project aims to design a blended curriculum for two EAP courses by combining face-to-face pedagogy with online teaching and learning to enhance the course effectiveness of these courses for students with varying levels of English proficiency.

Most *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)* courses aim to prepare non-native English speakers for the language demands and challenges of undergraduate coursework in English-medium, post-secondary institutions. However, since classroom time is often not enough for tasks involving oral and written practice of English, developing presentation skills and for increasing opportunities for student interaction with teachers and peers in English, it has been pointed out that these limitations of traditional pedagogical methods can be met to some extent with appropriately designed online learning environments that complement face-to-face instruction. Therefore, increasingly, there is an expectation that faculty and students will use a variety of technologies to support teaching and learning of *English for Academic Purposes* courses.

As Boulton (2008, p. 11) argues, “technology supported courses provide better support for the less able, engage students who do not respond well to ‘traditional’ classroom learning, provide opportunity for accelerated learning for gifted and talented students, and develop independent learning skills through a personalised learning experience”. Neumeier (2005, p. 164) defines this “combination of face-to-face (ftf) and computer assisted learning (CAL) in a single teaching and learning environment” as blended learning; a learning approach that allows for the use of both – online learning environment and classroom-based instruction - in a flexible, authentic and interactive manner. Similarly, the Blended Learning Programme developed by UW-Madison (2014) highlights that “Blended learning courses are instructor-designed and supervised environments that use face-to-face and technology-mediated channels to enhance interactive, engaging learning experiences and to improve learning outcomes”. Blended learning can also allow English language teachers to use class time more effectively by focusing on learning outcomes that benefit more from face-to-face interaction. In view of these benefits of blended learning, this project focuses on designing a blended learning curriculum for the teaching and learning of two EAP courses at Centennial College.

Problems Identified

(Please provide your assessments to the problems / needs identified.)

1. At the national level

Li (2009) notes that Greater China, comprising mainland China, the two Special Administrative Regions Hong Kong and Macao, and Taiwan, has the largest numbers of English language learners in the world. Yet, most of these Chinese learners of English find it extremely difficult to learn English up to a high level, which makes their English very different from the Standard English expected in academic contexts, at both phonological and lexico-grammatical levels. The main factors contributing to the difficulties in acquisition of academic English by Chinese learners are (Li, 2009, p. 36):

- a) typological differences between English (Indo-European) and Chinese (Sino-Tibetan) languages;
- b) linguistic differences such as subject-prominence in English versus topic-prominence in Chinese, alphabetic writing system of English versus logographic writing system of Chinese, use of an independent clause as the subject of a longer clause in Chinese etc.; &
- c) lack of an authentic English-learning environment in which English is rarely spoken among Chinese speakers for intraethnic communication.

2. At the local level

An ongoing educational debate in Hong Kong has revolved around the question: are the English standards of Hong Kong students declining? Based on three empirical studies, Poon (2009) emphasises that English proficiency of Hong Kong undergraduates is indeed low. But besides researchers and educators, Hong Kong students' English standards have also come under strong criticism by prominent figures in business, politics and the judiciary. However, it was only recently in 2008, more than two decades since the debate started, that the then Secretary for Education, Michael Suen, acknowledged at a symposium that "English language proficiency in Hong Kong had declined substantially, and something needed to be done to reverse the trend" (Back to Basics, 2008).

3. At the institutional level

The changes in student demography in Hong Kong in recent years have led students from different parts of the world learning in the same classroom at the College. There has been a steady increase in the number of students who come to pursue post-secondary education in Hong Kong from different regions such as Mainland China, Nepal, Pakistan, India, and Malaysia, to name a few. These students not only have diverse learning styles but also different levels of English language competence. In effect, English language teachers struggle to provide personalised, tailor-made content for students in one class with vastly different language abilities. Therefore, it is deemed crucial for EAP teachers in Centennial College to engage in online teaching as part of a blended learning experience through which students practice and complete different tasks on an online platform in a way that it supplements their classroom-based learning.

Project Objectives and Deliverables	
Measurable Objectives	How it can be achieved
<p>1. Designing blended curriculum for two EAP courses in Centennial College</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By seeking comments from external advisers with expertise in preparing materials for blended English language learning. - By launching Moodle as a learning management system - By preparing appropriate video and audio materials, a variety of self-study exercises/activities/quizzes, collaborative tasks (e.g. discussion forums), blogs, podcasts, wikis, published materials on learning English, additional useful online resources and readings that complement face-to-face (ftf) teaching of EAP.
<p>2. Integrating ftf (face-to-face) lessons with online exercises</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By planning a detailed schedule of ftf lessons with the corresponding online exercises, by setting deadlines for compulsory online activities so that they can be completed in a timely manner, and by providing mechanisms for prompt feedback on the virtual platform.
<p>3. Evaluating the effectiveness of the blended EAP courses from both the teachers' and students' perspectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Assessing student satisfaction b) Assessing faculty satisfaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) By providing students with an electronic survey feedback with a series of short questions about the effectiveness of the course. These will be administered both mid-way and towards the end of the course. - By asking students to fill a self-evaluation form with questions about the most/least useful aspect of their learning, their ability to apply the skills acquired, their participation in the course, their overall performance etc.

	b) By examining teachers' perceptions of the academic and non-academic outcomes associated with blended learning.
4. Increasing the accessibility and user-friendliness of the out-of-class, technology-mediated learning	By finding out the answers to the following questions from students and teachers: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- How convenient was it to access the course site?- How convenient was it to navigate through the site?- Did you experience any problems or have any concerns about the software tools being used?- Did you receive technical assistance when needed?- How would you rate the quality of technical support provided?
5. Creating an collaborative online learning community	By developing a social virtual learning community in the following ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Making use of Moodle as an online platform to support English teaching/learning activities.- Introducing 'ice breaker" or "warm up" blended learning communities prior to ftf lesson.- Defining roles clearly, and outlining participants' responsibilities and interdependencies- Creating sub-groups of learners for group projects and for learning in small groups.- Engaging learners in web conferencing and online discussions, which can increase openness and sharing.- Establishing operating norms and guidelines for participation in online activities and observation of etiquette.- Building trust by defining the common values and behaviours that will contribute to achieving the shared goals of a group.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creating a buddy system to keep learners engaged and motivated if the online environment or tasks get challenging. - Extending relationships and learning through follow-on communities.
<p>Project Deliverables <i>(Please list out all the deliverables to be achieved and how they can be shared with, if possible, other institutions.)</i></p>	
<p>Deliverables</p>	<p>Sharing mechanism</p>
<p>1. Blended materials for EAP courses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The use of member login and record system for Moodle learning platform can allow Centennial College students as well as students from other post-secondary institutions to use the system. - The impact of blended learning in EAP contexts will be shared through academic papers and project evaluation reports.
<p>2. Out-of-class path for studying EAP courses in a self-directed manner through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mobile assisted language learning technology (e.g. smart phone apps) - Computer-assisted language learning technology (e.g. web-based activities and audio-visual materials) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - After the project is completed, the smart phone apps, audio-visual materials and other online tasks for learning of academic English will be made available to students of Centennial College, other institutions and members of the public.
<p>3. Teachers' professional development</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaboration meetings: during these meetings teachers will share their opinions and experiences in using blended learning materials. - Training sessions: teachers will be equipped with the ability to use ftf materials in conjunction with online materials so that they can monitor and facilitate students' learning in a blended learning environment.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional sharing sessions: will be held to promote collaboration and sharing in post-secondary and other education sectors, thereby providing opportunities for teachers to raise questions and concerns, and provide suggestions for further improvement.
4. Demos and student training workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - These will be organised for students at the beginning of each semester so that they can become familiar with the different aspects of the blended learning mode.
5. An experience sharing booklet on blended language learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The booklet will be published both in hard copy and electronic format. It will be emailed to other post-secondary institutions and distributed in educational expos and exhibitions.

(Please indicate the information that can be uploaded onto relevant EDB websites during and after the project period.)

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Beneficiaries

Expected type and number of beneficiaries of the project	Approximately 3735 teachers and students of Centennial College and other post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong
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(Please provide justification to support the above estimation and explain how they can be benefited from the project.)

1. 650 students of Centennial College

All students at the College are required to take both *English for Academic Purposes* courses (1 basic + 1 advanced) to build their foundational communicative competence in academic settings. Even students who have completed these courses will have access to the materials available on the online platform to practice their oral and written English, and their presentation/interviews skills.

2. 35 teachers (full-time + part-time) of the College

Due to students' inadequate level of English proficiency, English language teachers as well as teachers of content subjects find themselves spending extra time ensuring that students understand the lectures, which are delivered in English at the College. With an online platform

to support students' English language learning needs, time spent explaining academic vocabulary or discipline-specific jargon (which will be made available online) can be reduced. This can facilitate learning in all subjects and allow class time to be used more effectively.

3. Students and teachers of other post-secondary institutions

As the online content of the blended learning curriculum will be made available to students and teachers of all other post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong, the unique aspects of this course will benefit all other users from local post-secondary institutions who access the system. It is expected that within 3-6 months of completion of the project (and its publicity) approximately 2500 users from other post-secondary institutions will start using the system.

4. Future students at Centennial College

Each year as new students enrol in the College and student numbers increase, it is expected that by 2018, approximately 1,000-1,200 students will be making use of the proposed blended learning mode for EAP courses at the College.

Implementation Schedule		
<i>(Please list out the implementation schedule and key milestones to be achieved on a half-yearly basis.)</i>		
Estimated start date of the project (month/year)		01.09.2015
Estimated end date of the project (month/year)		31.08.2018
Project duration (months)		36 months
Month	Key milestones	
	In terms of project activities and deliverables	In terms of monitoring and evaluation
1-6	<p><u>PREPARATORY STAGE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conduct a needs analysis - Collect data for preparation of relevant materials for blended learning of EAP courses - Recruit a professional/qualified digital consultant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project team members will design a survey to assess students' EAP needs, and their learning preferences and know-how of technologies for blended learning. - The project team will gather data about the different areas of ftf and online content to be included in the curriculum. - Interested parties will submit a technical and a financial proposal, and the party rated the highest on both counts will be offered the post of Digital Consultant.
7-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepare online tasks/discussion forums/chats/audio-visual materials, and links to relevant publications and English language learning sites that complement ftf teaching materials. - Start the preparatory work on the digital online platform (Moodle) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The design consultant will submit the interface design, wireframe of web sites and smart phone app versions along with the management and analysis systems of the online learning course materials. - The design consultant will submit the trial version of the online virtual chat rooms, language activities, quizzes, discussion forums and audio-visual material. - Preparatory trial workshops will be run with selected teachers and students during term break. - The selected group of students' attendance and performance will be monitored, and their progress recorded. When the trial run is complete, the selected and control group of participants will participate in an EAP test to assess the effectiveness of the

		<p>blended EAP courses. A survey and some interviews will also be conducted at this stage to elicit more in-depth data on the effectiveness of the blended EAP courses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On the basis of the test results of the selected and control group of participants, as well as the survey and interview data, the project team will offer initial feedback to the design consultant. Once the feedback is incorporated into the curriculum, the project team will approve the trial version.
13-18	<p><u>IMPLEMENTATION STAGE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish the online digital platform for EAP blended learning courses. - Develop the front-end for both website and smart phone app versions along with the back-end of the management and analysis of the online system. - Compose, revise and update self-learning materials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The project team will monitor the monthly progress of the online platform. - The professional digital design consultant will complete the trial run of the online learning system and give feedback on its effectiveness. - The project team will approve the final trial run and operation of the system.
19-24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Launch the digital online platform of the blended learning EAP curriculum (first phase) - Launch the EAP blended learning online platform for students of Centennial College for trial run in class and for promotion outside the classroom. - Compose, revise and update materials based on the feedback collected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EAP teachers and other teachers of the English domain will assist in the publicity of the system within the College. - Students taking EAP courses will engage in using online materials as part of the blended curriculum. - Teachers and students will be invited to comment and give feedback. - Online visitors' count system will be set up to find out the usage of the system outside the classroom.

<p>25-30</p>	<p><u>FINAL LAUNCH & PUBLICITY STAGE</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review the operation of the blended learning online system and the revisions made to the online, self-learning materials. - Make preparations for external publicity. - Launch the online platform of the blended EAP curriculum (second phase). - Open online platform for public use. Collect feedback from different stakeholders. - Compose, revise and update materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The project team will review the operation of the blended learning system for EAP courses as well as the revisions made to the online materials. - The professional design consultant will review the interface design, the operation of the system and the revision made to the blended learning online materials. - Centennial College, in particular staff members of the English domain, will prepare materials for external publicity and invite other post-secondary institutions to use the revised version of the blended learning courses.
<p>31-36</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compose, revise and update final blended learning materials. - Prepare a final report and booklet on the project. - Arrange seminars, sharing sessions and workshops to share experiences and good practices with other staff and stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - After one month's operation, the project team will review the operation of the system and check the final revisions made to the blended course materials. - Feedback about the system will be collected from people in the College as well as from outside users, and revisions will be made accordingly. - The professional digital consultant will fine-tune the interface design, the operation of the system, and the revised study materials based on the final revisions suggested by the project team. - The project team will review the operation of the system, the contents of the blended learning courses, and evaluate the overall effectiveness of the project.

Publicity Plan

(Please describe all the publicity activities to be organised and materials to be produced to acknowledge the support of Quality Enhancement Support Scheme. Please suitably reflect the publicity activities as key milestones in the implementation schedule above.)

Internal Publicity

1. All EAP teachers will promote blended learning in their classes and introduce the online platform as part of their teaching during ftf lessons.
2. The English domain will promote the online platform to students at Centennial College through seminars, sharing sessions with exchange students, and extra-curricular activities (e.g. Speaking Club).
3. A detailed report about the results and experience of implementing the project will be published on the College's website, Facebook page and in the College newsletter.

External Publicity

1. EAP teachers along with other teachers from English Language Centres in Hong Kong will be invited for sharing sessions and encouraged to ask their students to register and use the system.
2. Online advertisements and links will be posted on different online learning sites or social platforms, e.g. specially targeted YouTube or Facebook groups.
3. A hard and soft copy version of a booklet on blended approach to English language learning will be compiled. The booklet will be emailed to post-secondary institutions in Hong Kong and will be made available in educational expos and exhibitions.

Cash Flow and Budget				
Project Expenditure				
	Amount in HK\$			
Period	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total
Manpower	HK\$ 300,000	HK\$ 300,000	HK\$ 300,000	HK\$ 900,000
Equipment / Facilities	HK\$ 400,000	HK\$ 55,000	HK\$ 55,000	HK\$ 510,000
Services	HK\$ 45,000	HK\$ 30, 000	HK\$ 30, 000	HK\$ 105, 000
General Expenses			HK\$ 13,000	HK\$ 13,000
Others	HK\$ 6,000	HK\$ 7,000	HK\$ 27,000	HK\$ 40,000
Total	HK\$ 751,000	HK\$ 392,000	HK\$ 425,000	HK\$1,568,000
Project Income (if any, e.g. fees received)				
	Amount in HK\$			
Period	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Total
Total				
Grant Sought under the Quality Enhancement Support Scheme			HK\$1,568,000	
Funding from the Applicant			N/A	
Funding from Other Sources			N/A	
Total Project Value			HK\$1,568,000	
<i>(Please specify the amount to be funded by each funding source (e.g. donations, contributions from applicant / its parent organisation) and whether the funding has been secured. If not, please provide the plan to obtain the funding.)</i>				
N/A				
<i>(Please provide the duty lists of manpower to be funded by this project.)</i>				
Post	Duties			
Project Officer	Responsible for: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. launching the online learning platform; 2. ensuring its smooth operation; 3. conducting trial runs; 4. revising and updating online platform/materials; and 5. handling administrative matters arising from the project 			
Project Sustainability				
<i>(Please estimate the amount of recurrent expenditure and describe how you will commit the resources to ensure sustainability of the project. Please put supplementary information (e.g. proof of financial support) at appendix.)</i>				

1. The project team and teachers of EAP courses will regularly monitor the blended language materials in order for learning materials to be maintained by the College for continued use in the future after the completion of the project.
2. Ideas pertaining to the implementation of blended learning will be shared with other staff members and newly recruited peers.
3. Good pedagogical practices will be identified, and consequently, applied to courses from other disciplines within the College.