Towards understanding the diversity of English for Academic Purposes students at the University of the South Pacific

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Mohammed Sameer
B.Ed.; PostGradDip (Linguistics); MA (by research)

University of Technology, Sydney

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Certificate of original authorship

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student:

Date:

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Dedication

To the wonderful,
cheerful,
full of life lady,
called to rest so soon.

Veena Singh -

this one's for you.

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List of Abbreviations

CLESOL	Community Languages and English to Speakers of Other Languages
DFL	Distance and Flexible Learning
DRP	Directed Reading Program
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EGAP	English for General Academic Purposes
EOP	English for Occupational Purposes
EPP	English for Professional Purposes
ESAP	English for Specific Academic Purposes
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
EVP	English for Vocational Purposes
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
LLF11	Foundation English (course)
NA	Needs Analysis
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NNS	Non-Native Speaker
NS	Native Speaker
PEM	Proficiency in English Measure
PSA	Present-Situation Analysis
Q1	Questionnaire 1
Q2	Questionnaire 2
SELMOUS	Special English Language Materials for Overseas University Students
SLS	Student Learning Support
TBLT	Task-Based Language Teaching
TENOR	Teaching English for No Obvious Reason
TSA	Target-Situation Analysis
USP	The University of the South Pacific
UU114	English for Academic Purposes
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Abstract

The focus of the thesis was to establish the relationship, if any, between the diverse groups of students at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, and the needs and abilities they bring to their studies in the English for Academic Purposes course offered by the university. In order to achieve this, in the first instance, a needs analysis was conducted to identify the challenges faced by the students, and to distinguish any fundamental differences in terms of the challenges faced by these students from individual cultural groups. It was anticipated that the needs analysis would reveal useful demarcations between the diverse groups of students. However, it was also expected that the study would help identify the similarities in terms of these challenges among the various groups of learners. Once these challenges had been identified, the second aim of the project was to identify how the EAP course at the University endeavoured to address these challenges. In short, the thesis set out to identify the needs of the students, understand these in terms of how they approach and make sense of the EAP course, and understand the matches and mismatches between what is needed by these groups of students and what the course offered in its current form.

In order to carry out this research, three main data sources were used. Firstly, applying the principles of document analysis, the university's EAP course documents (assignments, course books, and supplementary resources were scrutinised). The information gathered from this exercise was used to generate items for the two questionnaires and interview schedules that were used to collect data from the participants. The first questionnaire was administered to the student-participants in week 4 of their EAP course while the second questionnaire was distributed in week 11. This was done to compare the confidence levels of the students at the beginning and

towards the end of the course. This allowed for the comparison of trends and confidence ratings of the diverse groups of learners. To supplement these data, interviews were also conducted with teachers of the EAP course. The use of this mixed-method approach and various sources allowed for triangulation of data.

The current study was thus proposed for a number of reasons. Firstly, the literature review revealed that EAP needs analysis studies in the South Pacific region are scarce, and as such the extent of knowledge on this important area is limited. This thesis contributes to the existing literature by offering another perspective; none of the earlier studies had investigated the differences and the similarities among the cultural sub-groups. It is a valuable to incorporate a cultural dimension because it allows for the demarcation of needs based on cultural requirements and differences. The Pacific region has a rich set of cultural heritages, and being linguistically diverse makes it an even more fertile area for research.

A theme that emerged in the findings is the presence of a university culture that is different to the prior experiences of Pacific students. This culture is governed by a number of intertwined factors such as academic demands, westernised notions of knowledge and how this knowledge is presented, the utilisation of critical thinking skills and so on. The USP students, like other university students, have to adapt to this new culture and learn to conform to its requirements. Depending in part on their background, students appear to adapt differentially to these new cultural norms.

This study highlights some significant findings that would aid teachers, curriculum developers, and educationists among others to gain a richer cultural understanding of the South Pacific region. This understanding, it is hoped, will lead to the creation and development of more appropriate course content to meet the specific needs of Pacific students. It should be noted, however, that while the study provides

some evidence for cultural differences in terms of learning needs and expectations of Pacific students in the EAP context, because of the low numbers involved in the sub-groups, these findings should be treated cautiously when making any applications or extrapolations.