

Content-Based ESP Instruction at Hong Kong Tertiary Level: Student and Teacher Perceptions of a Hybrid Approach in a State of Flux During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This quantitative study explores pedagogical approaches to teaching business proposals, press releases, business presentations, and negotiation meetings in the third and fourth-year English Specific Purpose (ESP) course at an English Medium Instruction (EMI) university in Hong Kong. The findings reveal that the enactment of a hybrid approach rather than the teacher-led, direct-instruction approach assisted students in grasping the understanding of persuasive communication in both written and spoken contexts in the workplace environment. The study suggests that blending several inputs (i.e., videos, online quizzes, online annotated reading platform, corpora, face-to-face instruction) provided multimodal experiences that helped students develop their persuasive communication skills in a state of flux during the COVID-19 pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020,

there has been a wide range of measures taken by governments to combat the spread of the virus, including shutting down universities in many countries. Starting from 2020, Hong Kong has experienced severe changes in the epidemic changes. Social distancing measures have been tightened by the Hong Kong SAR Government to the most severe levels, as seen in the third and fourth waves, and were further tightened for the more severe fifth wave in 2022. As announced by the HKSAR Government to combat the latest epidemic outbreak, most university classes were held exclusively online and in synchronous mode. Face-to-face instruction has largely been suspended across the world and English language teachers have had no alternative but to change how they interact with their students (Bozhert et al., 2020). In the age of technology, educators including English language teachers can now take advantage of a variety of online tools that facilitate student learning, called synchronous meeting tools (SMTs) such as Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020) in both EAP and ESP contexts, regardless of the proximity between teachers and students. Despite the widespread availability of synchronous meeting tools in the market, it is still challenging for ESP teachers to utilise various online learning activities to maintain students' engagement, but they also need to provide timely feedback to keep them engaged. It is therefore essential to abandon or adapt strategies that would usually be used in conventional face-to-face classes to suit the online environment, often without giving any thought to the condition of both teachers and students. Teaching online instead of face-to-face instruction is more than just using available synchronous platforms. It goes far beyond that. The varying levels of preparedness of teachers for conducting online classes and the different learning environments of students should also be considered.

In the ESP teaching context, language instruction in ESP caters to the needs of learners who belong to a particular discipline or profession, and it focuses on the language that is appropriate to such activities. In many universities all over the world, ESP is integral to their curricula since they recognize the importance of helping English language learners master the functions and linguistic conventions of texts they need to read and write in their disciplines and professions (Hyon, 1996). This study focuses on the pedagogical approaches of teaching and assessing Business English in the ESP Course "Workplace English for Business Students" for third or fourth-year undergraduate students at an EMI university in Hong Kong during the COVID-19. As stated by Ku & Zussman (2010), English is considered to be the modern lingua franca on bilateral trade flows. Evans (2013) stated that both written and spoken forms of English play a crucial role in business communication. Nation (2009) believes that such skills will prove invaluable to students in their future endeavors. The ability to formulate a compelling, professional and persuasive business proposal and press release as well as business presentation and negotiation

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