

# Helping Students Take Responsibility for their Learning: Reflections on a First-year English Course for Engineering Students

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## ABSTRACT

*LANG 106 is an English communication course for all first-year engineering students at HKUST. The approach adopted in this course is new for HKUST and, as far as we know, for similar courses elsewhere. Now in its third semester, feedback from teachers and students on the course so far indicates that it develops in students a sense of responsibility for their own learning, and fosters confidence and thereby the motivation to actively improve their learning.*

*The course:*

- *requires students to reflect on their previous learning experiences and needs*
- *introduces a range of language-learning strategies for students to try out and consider*
- *requires students to set learning objectives for the semester, and to plan, carry out, and evaluate out-of-class learning designed to meet these objectives*
- *requires students to submit a 'Learning Portfolio'*
- *is assessed on a Pass/Fail basis*

*In this paper we will first discuss the rationale for the course, the syllabus and sample materials, and the assessment/evaluation system. We will then share comments from teachers and students on the course. Finally, we will suggest how we hope this course (and other language courses for engineering students) will continue to evolve.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Education Commission's blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> century states that 'learning brings enjoyment'. Unfortunately, we have found that, at least with regard to English, engineering students arriving at HKUST would not, in general, agree. In the process of re-writing a first-year English course for engineering students, we hoped to address this issue.

Stories from first-year engineering students suggest no kind of link between enjoyment and their previous learning of English. Most report that their experiences have been largely exam-focused and classrooms teacher-centered. Most engineering students start at UST having just completed their secondary schooling. In their 'Use of English' examination most obtained a D or E grade. If we accept the A-level English exams as a valid measure of effective learning of English, we must then conclude that these students have not learned English very well. Perhaps of even more concern, however, is that in terms of learning-how-to-learn, ironically, all the evidence suggests that students have learned little more than how to take exams.

With all this in mind, we set out to develop a course that would promote responsibility, foster confidence and motivation, and thereby result in both learning *and* enjoyment of English.

## **COURSE OVERVIEW**

LANG 106 was first offered in the Fall Semester of 2000. It is a two-part course across the Fall and Spring semesters. Rather than attempting to teach particular skills and sub-skills or focusing primarily on academic texts and associated tasks, the emphasis of the course is on developing students' learning strategies. Students are required to submit a learning portfolio at the end of each semester and assessment is pass/fail.

### **A Strategies-based Approach**

As suggested above, we had become increasingly concerned about the limited range of learning strategies that most first-year students appear to have at their disposal. As is pointed out in the Education Commission's reform documents, most of our students have been exposed to excessive mechanical drilling and numerous tests and examinations in their previous learning of English. We do not feel that it is unjust to suggest that these kinds of teaching practice result in learners who are reasonably proficient at memorizing materials for exams but not at communicating in English.

The underlying premise of strategies-based instruction is that language learning will be facilitated if students are more aware of the huge range of possible strategies that they might consciously choose from during language learning and use. A strategies-based approach to teaching is a 'learner-focused method of instruction that emphasizes both the *what* and *how* of learning' (Weaver & Cohen 1997:iii). Inherent in this shift of focus (to the learner) is a shift in the responsibilities of both teachers and students.

### **Course Content**

Research indicates that at least at the outset, 'explicit instruction in the development, application and transfer of language learning strategies is preferable to implicit instruction' (Weaver & Cohen 1998:67). That said, we would like to emphasize that strategies are neither inherently 'good' nor 'effective' but need to be evaluated by

individual learners who have specific learning objectives and are contemplating particular language learning/use tasks.

Therefore, in our course, while we do offer students particular strategies for reading and listening (Fall Semester) and writing and speaking (Spring Semester), we also offer opportunities and guidance for students to:

1. Self-diagnose their needs across the four language skills.
2. Experiment with both familiar and unfamiliar strategies.
3. Make decisions about how to approach a language-learning task.
4. Evaluate and reflect on both their progress (skills development) and the effectiveness of their learning.

### **Course Requirements and Assessment**

As previously mentioned, students are awarded a pass or fail grade for LANG 106. From the outset, we felt that it was imperative that this course be assessed on a pass/fail basis so that students could be encouraged to focus on their own learning, rather than on their position in relation to their peers. While we are aware that there is increasing public and political pressure on educational institutions in Hong Kong to explain what they are trying to do and to demonstrate how well they are doing it, we are convinced that continuing the competitive focus on grades would undermine all that we hope to achieve in this course.

As should be already clear, we are most interested the language learning *process*. Secondly, we feel that it is the students who should be asking themselves ‘How well am I learning?’

Students are required to submit a Learning Portfolio at the end of each semester. In the Fall Semester, this comprises four pieces of ‘reflective’ writing:

1. ‘Me, as a learner of English’  
This task requires students to reflect on their personalities and their learning experiences. We believe that students’ later assessments of the learning that they have done through participation in LANG 106 depend fairly heavily on their perceptions of themselves and their previous learning of English at the beginning of the semester. In other words, students establish their ‘starting point’ for LANG 106.
2. ‘A reading task to plan, complete and report on’  
This task requires students to plan (make decisions about personal objectives as well as materials and strategies to use), carry out, evaluate and reflect on a language-learning experience.
3. ‘A listening task to plan, complete and report on’  
This task is similar to Task 2.

#### 4. 'A final report'

This is the students' final 'assessment' of their learning for the semester. It requires students to reflect on their achievement of personal objectives and their strategy use. In this report, students also suggest plans for future learning.

The following three criteria are used by teachers when looking at portfolios and deciding whether to award a pass or fail grade:

- Depth of thought/understanding
- Relevance to learning objectives
- Clarity and elaboration

### **FEEDBACK**

Just as we are convinced that grading would not be appropriate for this course, we are confident that a lack of grades does not mean that we cannot evaluate and review LANG 106. Our evaluative data is of a different kind.

#### **From Students (quantitative data)**

At the end of the Fall Semester 2000 a post-course questionnaire was given to students. Section 1 of the questionnaire asked students to rate their level of agreement with ten statements, such as 'I now have a more positive attitude towards learning English'. Analysis of student responses to this and other statements was encouraging.

#### **From Students (qualitative data)**

The following comments are taken from students' portfolios as well as Section 2 of the post-course questionnaire (open-ended questions).

##### *Responsibility*

Comments of the following kind suggest that students appreciate their (new) 'freedom'.

"LANG 106 is always my favorite lesson at UST. I like this class because I found myself a university student when I attend the class. In the past learning was a send-recv process. We had little freedom in choosing what we want to learn or which way to learn"

"The best part of the course is the freedom it gives us. There are no limitations at all, as long as we fulfill some requirements. I can never think that I can watch movie as a task, and do something that I was really interested in"

### *Confidence/Motivation*

Much has been written about the role and kinds of motivation in language learning. We take the position that generally any factors that motivate our students to learn will result in increased acquisition of English. We also believe in an intrinsic link between confidence and motivation. This link manifests itself most obviously when students lack confidence. For example, the student who lacks confidence in his/her ability to choose appropriate learning strategies will seldom appear motivated to experiment with different strategies. Much research has found that more motivated learners report using a greater range of strategies more often than less motivated students (see, for example, Megan 1997).

Comments of the following kind suggest that our course enhances learner confidence and motivation.

“My attitudes to learning English become very positive. In the past, opening my mouth was very difficult and I was very nervous when I spoke in English and the purpose of previous learning was just to pass the exams, but now I learn English for myself. I really want to learn English and opening my mouth is easy now”

“Self motivation is very important for learning English because in the past I disliked English and hence had no self-motivation”

### **From Teachers**

As this approach requires learners to take responsibility for their own learning, the language instructor then takes on more of a supporting role as students strive to achieve personal objectives. Comments from teachers would suggest that they like this new role and believe in the value of the approach.

“I’m enjoying myself teaching this course and I think for some students it’s a breath of fresh air”

“ The materials have proved challenging, motivating and fun...so I’ve enjoyed the classes and it has certainly encouraged and ‘thought provoked’ students”

“That we are solidly involving students in self-access tasks and reflection for independent learning, rather than just talking about doing it, is excellent; it is a strategy well suited to, even necessary for, student language improvement given the in-class time available to us”

“Students were more motivated than in previous years”

## **THE FUTURE**

We continue to evaluate the course. We are currently making changes to the Spring Semester component to bring it more in line with the approach adopted in the Fall Semester.

Given current moves and educational reforms taking place in Hong Kong, we hope that in the future the learning experiences offered to students in LANG 106 will not be so radically different from those that they have had at other levels of their schooling. Nevertheless, we feel sure that LANG 106 will continue to play an important part in establishing not only ways of learning but also ways of thinking about learning for students and that these ways will have significance for students throughout their time at UST and beyond.

### **Links with Other Courses for Engineering Students (LANG 206 and 306)**

Other language courses for engineering students already offer some learning experiences similar to those of the LANG 106 course. For example, the LANG 306 course now includes a self-access writing project. This project requires students to diagnose their writing needs and plan for improvement by choosing a grammar 'pathway'. It is our hope that similar projects will be created in LANG 206 so that students can learn to take responsibility for their learning of English throughout their three years at UST.

We feel that this will be dependent on decisions made about grading systems used in the two courses and hope that like LANG 106, at some time in the future, both LANG 206 and 306 might also be pass/fail courses.

### **Learning English Brings Enjoyment!**

Most of all, we hope that we can state with confidence in the future that our students believe that learning English brings enjoyment. Feedback already received would indicate that we are on the right track.

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