

From L1 undergraduate degree to EAP course to university studies: The story of two transitions

Laurel Acton

School of Education, University of Technology Sydney, NSW, Australia

Email: Laurel.Acton-1@uts.edu.au

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An important but under-researched pathway function for international students wishing to enter Australian universities is performed by English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) colleges. Direct entry arrangements with a linked university facilitate acceptance to a degree course for students who have graduated from an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at one of these colleges. Most research in this area has focused on the skills preparation of EAP students for university studies. Instead, this study focuses on the students' approaches to learning during the two educational transitions they must undergo: from their L1 undergraduate degree to the EAP course, and then the EAP course to the Australian university. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants to investigate their lived experience of these two transitions. The participant cohort comprised seventeen postgraduate coursework students and one undergraduate student completing his second degree. Findings show marked differences in pedagogy and changing ways of learning across the three educational contexts, including hybridisation of study approaches. Participants emerged as pragmatic, resourceful learners in unfamiliar educational settings. These findings suggest the need for more closely aligned teaching practices in EAP and university settings.

Key words: university cultures, inclusivity, readiness.

1. Introduction

International students constitute a major presence in the Australian education landscape, with 726,174 student enrolments from January to June 2020, 51% of which are in higher education (Australian Education International, 2020a). There has been a continuing pattern of growth in international student numbers over a number of years in Australia, which has been attributed to three main factors: Australia's reputation for quality tertiary education; the proximity to rapidly growing, educationally mobile middle classes in East Asia; and financial pressures on Australian universities due to restricted federal funding (Arkoudis, Dollinger, Baik, & Patience, 2018; Arrowsmith & Mandla, 2017; Kettle, 2017).

However, the COVID-19 epidemic and associated travel restrictions have had a significant impact on international student numbers in Australia. Course deferments rose by 45,597 over the year to May 2020, when the number reached 60,870 (Australian Education International, 2020b). Moreover, in the first quarter of 2020, there were 21% fewer student arrivals in Australia than a year before, including a drop of 48% for students from China (Australian Education International, 2020c). These figures reflect the tendency for many international students who have enrolled to study in Australia to either postpone their course or opt to study online from their country. The

negative impacts of COVID-19 are even more evident in statistics on student enrolment at ELICOS colleges, one of the main pathway providers for international students entering higher education institutions in Australia. ELICOS enrolments in January to June 2020 showed a decrease of 15% relative to 2019 figures to a total of 81,416 students, comprising 11% of total international student numbers (Australian Education International, 2020a).

A key function of ELICOS colleges is to facilitate entry to university through the provision of EAP courses. These courses are mainly intended for students who have qualified for tertiary entrance, apart from achieving a satisfactory result in a recognised English language test. ELICOS direct entry courses can be offered by a registered provider which has a formalised entry arrangement with a registered higher education provider (TEQSA, 2020). As EAP courses exist in other English-speaking countries, this study's findings are likely to be relevant beyond the Australian context.

2. Literature review

Despite the key role of ELICOS colleges, there has been limited research into their EAP courses (Benzie, 2015; Dyson, 2014; Floyd, 2015). Studies to date have tended to focus on two main areas: language standards and skills preparation for university. An overview of each will be provided here, followed by an examination of the literature on two less-researched areas: pedagogical differences as students transition through an EAP course to postgraduate studies, and changing ways of learning as they adjust to new study environments.

2.1. Language issues

The regulation of ELICOS colleges has become increasingly stringent in the past thirteen years, since concerns were expressed in media and academic publications about the language skills of international students at Australian universities (Birrell, 2006; Bretag, 2007). This debate prompted the 2008 Bradley Review, an examination of options for higher education reform, culminating in the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Skills Agency (TEQSA) as a national regulatory body to oversee higher education in Australia and its providers (TEQSA, 2020). Moreover, federal legislation in the form of ELICOS Standards 2018 specifies that formal assessment by ELICOS colleges must achieve equivalent outcomes to admission criteria of tertiary institutions (Australian Government, 2019). This regulation has provided a stable framework for the higher education sector. However, it is left to individual universities to determine their language entry levels, and these decisions are subject to competitive pressures between universities for international student fees (O'Loughlin, 2015; L. T. Tran, 2011). Indeed, university entrance scores are still thought to be set too low (Dyson, 2014; Zhang & Mi, 2010), with evidence of a gap of 0.5 of an IELTS band between the recommended level for tertiary entrance (IELTS, 2020) and the commonly accepted entry levels by Australian universities. As these entry scores form the framework within which ELICOS colleges plan their courses, downward pressure tends to be placed on the language levels of their exit-level students.

2.2. Tertiary skill preparation

Despite the regulatory focus on language standards, findings in several studies suggest that the teaching of academic skills, rather than language skills, is the key contribution of EAP courses to students' tertiary preparation (Dooley, 2010; Dyson, 2014; Floyd, 2015; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). These academic skills are generic rather than disciplinary in nature and include researching online, planning a writing task, avoiding plagiarism, referencing and use of citations. However, Dyson (2014) found that ex-EAP postgraduate students had gaps in critical thinking and the ability to complete lengthy assignment tasks. Moreover, concerns have been expressed that the generic academic skills taught in EAP courses may not optimally prepare students for disciplinary studies at university (Benzie, 2011, 2015; Counsell, 2011; Floyd, 2015).

2.3. Changes in pedagogy

There has been less research into pedagogical approaches across three educational contexts faced by students: their L1 undergraduate degree, EAP course and postgraduate degree program at an Australian university. Shifting from the content- and text-based direct instruction in many Asian students' L1 backgrounds to the greater critical literacy and communication-based pedagogy in the Australian university system is thought to cause problems for students (Benzie, 2011, 2015; Kell & Vogl, 2006). As students transition from the EAP course to the Australian university, the reduced availability of learning support compounds these pressures (Dooey, 2010). More broadly, Benzie (2015) notes with concern the different modes of delivery in EAP and university courses, calling for "more emphasis on ... ways of learning ... in the pathway curriculum" (p. 27). Indeed, English Australia, the peak body guiding the ELICOS sector, advises colleges to include "learning approaches that students may encounter in their further educational experience", such as problem-based learning and self-directed tasks (Brandon & O'Keefe, 2017, p. 9). The need for student guidance in the EAP-to-university transition is illustrated by the success of a book entitled *Academic Culture: A student's guide to studying at university*, now in its third edition, which advises international students on the ways of teaching and learning at Australian universities (Brick, Herke, & Wong, 2016). This study seeks to contribute to the limited knowledge base in this area by examining participants' experience of pedagogical differences across their three key educational contexts.

2.4. Changes in learning approaches

Research is emerging into changes in students' approaches to learning during their transition from an EAP course to studies at a Western university (Benzie, 2015; Fischbacher-Smith et al., 2015; Kell & Vogl, 2006). Benzie (2015, p. 6) utilises the notion of a hybridised "process of cultural becoming" for international students in her analysis of students' EAP pathway experiences, thereby foregrounding their agency and the complexity of the developmental process. This position reflects an increasing awareness amongst researchers of the epistemological adjustment needed by students during the EAP course as they transition from their L1 educational background towards a postgraduate course. According to Fischbacher-Smith et al. (2015), authors of a Scottish EAP study, this adjustment is necessary because each educational context "provides students with a set of study skills in which assumptions, values, preferences and ways of thinking [shape] the students' outlook on study and life" (p. 2). EAP courses, then, need to support students' development from dependence on their teacher to an independent approach to learning (Kell & Vogl, 2006). At the same time, in an acknowledgement of the sensitivity of this adjustment, EAP staff in this study expressed concerns about "imposing on students ethnocentric Western constructions of what it is to be an 'ideal' learner" (p. 123).

There is debate in the broader literature about the extent of cultural influences on international students' adjustment to new ways of learning at Western universities. On the one hand, some researchers argue that students from Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) countries are governed by deep-seated cultural values based on diligence and deference to authority (Li & Wegerif, 2014; Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005). Others argue that CHC students are pragmatic, flexible learners relatively unencumbered by cultural constraints as they adjust to Western practices (Heng, 2018; T. T. Tran, 2013a). In a more nuanced view, Ryan (2013) focuses on the academic ideals behind Chinese and British education systems, with Chinese educators said to value the attainment of expert knowledge under the guidance of a respected authority and supported by self-reflection, while Western educators privilege evidence-based argumentation and vigorous debate. However, the openness of Chinese institutions to utilising useful Western practices leads Ryan to describe their outlook in positive terms, as "an apt example of a transcultural approach" (Ryan, 2013, p. 283).

The requirement of independent learning is considerably greater at postgraduate than at undergraduate level (Evans, Nguyen, Richardson, & Scott, 2018; Fenton-Smith & Humphreys, 2017),

highlighting the need to identify factors affecting student adjustment to postgraduate ways of learning. Given the important preparatory function of EAP courses and the limited knowledge base for this aspect of EAP instruction, more research is clearly needed into the lived experiences of students undertaking this pathway to postgraduate studies.

Therefore, the following research questions form the focus of this research:

1. How do EAP students perceive the pedagogical approaches of their L1 undergraduate degree, exit-level EAP course and postgraduate coursework program at an Australian university?
2. How do they see their ways of learning change across these three educational contexts?

3. Theoretical framework

Complexity Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2017) has been chosen for this study because its fundamental principles of dynamism, instability and contextuality support exploration of participant experiences involving diverse adjustment processes in response to changes of educational environment. The Complexity Theory concept that new forms emerge from the interaction of contextual factors is helpful for understanding how the study's participants may develop different ways of learning as they encounter unfamiliar educational settings. Finally, the notion that patterns can be found everywhere despite the instability of complex systems is conducive to producing coherent outcomes from data analysis. Here, it is the patterns of change in participant response to changing educational environments which are captured through the lens of Complexity Theory.

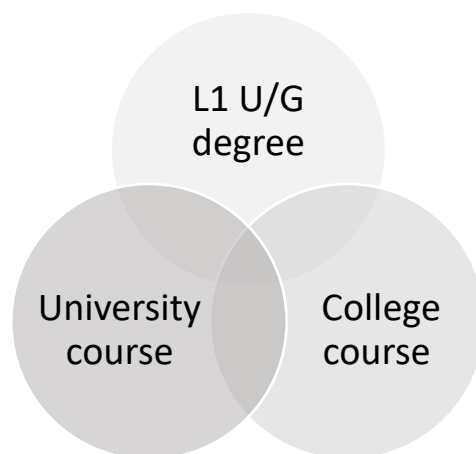
4. Methodology

Participants were recruited from exit-level classes at an ELICOS college which was linked by a direct entry arrangement to an Australian university. These two institutions will be referred to respectively as "the College" and "the University". As indicated in Table 1, the participant group comprised 18 students, ranging in age from 22 to 35, and from five countries: China (12), Thailand (3), Vietnam (1), Japan (1) and Colombia (1). The participants were enrolled in a wide range of courses at the University by coursework. All the participants were in postgraduate studies, apart from one undergraduate student, who was included as he had already completed an undergraduate degree in China.

Three one-hour, semi-structured interviews were held with each participant over a four- to six-month period from the end of their EAP course to late in their first university semester. After probing the participants' ways of learning to date, each interview ended with a question about which learning approach the participant was utilising at that time: the approach the participant associated with the L1 undergraduate course, EAP course and/or University course. A visual prompt (see Figure 1) guided this part of the interview, enabling participants to indicate the position on the diagram which represented their current way of learning. This response has been termed "educational self-positioning" for the purposes of this study. Data analysis of interview transcripts involved an iterative process of comparing written summaries of each participant's experience with thematic coding, in order to reveal individual experiences and behaviour patterns across the cohort.

Table 1. Participant profile.

NAME (pseudonym)	COUNTRY	AGE	ELICOS WKS	UNIVERSITY COURSE (P/G coursework + 1 × U/G*)
Tony	China	28	10	Engineering
Nancy	China	25	10	Marketing
Joanne	China	22	10	Strategic Communication
Mary	China	23	10	IT
Candy	China	25	30	Financial Analysis
Kevin	China	23	10	Finance
Frank	China	24	10	Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP)
Andrew	China	25	20	MBA
Sanit	Thailand	28	30	IT
Lisa	China	30	10	Not-for-profit & social enterprise management
Lois	Thailand	34	10	Law
Mina	Thailand	24	10	MBA
Hiroshi	Japan	24	30	Accounting
Dara	China	35	10	IT
Annie	Vietnam	27	10	Public Health
Felipe	Colombia	25	10	Property Development
Sam	China	29	10	Bachelor of Nursing*
Michael	China	30	10	MBA

**Figure 1.** Visual prompt for educational self-positioning.

5. Findings

Initially, participants' views of pedagogical changes across the three educational contexts will be outlined, followed by findings about participants' educational self-positioning across Interviews 1 to 3.

5.1. L1 undergraduate, EAP and postgraduate pedagogical approaches

The 17 participants from Asian countries had noticeably similar views of each of the educational contexts and of pedagogical differences between them. Most participants were critical of the teaching approach in their L1 undergraduate course. Typical of these was Lisa, who commented that *“in China, it’s one-way communication. The teacher say something, maybe the students sleeping on the table. It’s just for the test”* (Interview 1). A Vietnamese participant had the impression that *“lecturers don’t care more about students. They just say and show all the knowledge and that’s all”* (Annie, Interview 1). The L1 learning of content was presented as a lower priority for teachers than students’ attainment of successful grades in examinations, the primary form of assessment for participants. As Frank said: *“Chinese teacher don’t care about what information you got, they only want to know what methods you learn for the exam”* (Interview 1). To most participants, then, L1 lecturers’ content delivery was direct and explicit, but did not stimulate their interest or ensure understanding. This contrasts with the account provided by the Colombian participant Felipe, who reported that his undergraduate Engineering course was taught through engaging, interactive tutorials.

While Felipe perceived a similarity in pedagogical style of his L1 and EAP teachers, the Asian participants reported marked differences between the two. The EAP classroom was universally depicted as a place where *“the teacher will focus on each of the students, and then they will know your character”* (Dara, Interview 1). Most participants described classes as interesting and enjoyable, although for a few, this interactive pedagogy could be uncomfortable. For example, Andrew had difficulties with the expectation of speaking in class, explaining that when asked a question, *“if I don’t say anything, the teacher will continue to ask you. The reason is I’m a little shy to talk more. But the teacher maybe think I have some problem”*. He contextualised this, though, within the broader process of adjustment: *“Maybe I need a little more time to adapt to that. It’s not a big problem”* (Interview 1). Several participants commented positively on the *“step-by-step”* approach to learning new skills, particularly in the relatively unfamiliar area of assignment tasks. Sam’s description of assignment scaffolding illustrates this staged approach to teaching: *“First is the outline, draft, final, and just inside of draft and outline there’s a lot of tiny practice between these steps that really help to form your final assignment”* (Interview 1).

After several weeks of their first postgraduate semester, participants were asked to comment on their initial impressions of the course. Significantly, the requirement to learn independently was prominent in every participant’s response. This notion was variously expressed as *“learn by yourself”*, *“self-study”*, *“solve problems by yourself”* and *“very, very, very autonomous”*. Some participants described a shift in responsibility from the teacher to the learner: *“The University, I think for the postgraduate student the key point is learn by yourself. It’s not about the teachers. You learn by yourself”* (Dara, Interview 2). Lisa expressed a similar idea in terms of a facilitative, rather than directed, teaching style and an expectation that students actively process information in order to complete tasks: *“At the University, teacher didn’t give us direction. We need to learn by ourself. And when you have some direction, you need to figure out by yourself as well”* (Interview 3).

5.2. Educational self-positioning

Findings on educational self-positioning will be outlined for each interview stage:

- Interview 1: end of EAP course
- Interview 2: between Week 6 and Week 12 (end of semester)
- Interview 3: four weeks after Interview 2

The reason for the asynchronous times across the cohort for Interviews 2 and 3 is that this study is drawn from a larger one which focused on students’ assignment experiences. The interview times were set to correspond to the individual timing of assignments for each participant.

The participant responses and the main reasons for them are outlined below.

5.2.1. Interview 1

Fifteen of the eighteen participants identified themselves as utilising a combination of L1 and EAP approaches to learning. From the L1 context, rigorous study methods for practising grammar and learning vocabulary were most frequently mentioned (five participants), followed by a strong study ethic (two participants). From the EAP course, the interactive, scaffolded form of instruction was mentioned as an effective learning tool by nine participants, with skill learning nominated by three participants. Hiroshi's explanation of his combined L1 and EAP influences is typical of most participants: *"I think I still use some Japanese style, like memorise the vocabulary. But creating the idea, I really like College style. Talk to others and discuss"*. The remaining three participants aligned themselves with an EAP-only learning approach for a variety of reasons.

It appears, then, that there was a distinct hybridisation of perceived learning approaches prior to commencing at university as participants attempted to integrate their L1 educational experiences with the new EAP pedagogical style.

5.2.2. Interview 2

At Interview 2, there was a greater range of responses as to educational self-positioning, with seven participants reporting that they drew from all three contexts, six from the EAP course and the University, and five solely from the University.

For those who positioned themselves at the centre of the three interlocking circles in the visual prompt, L1 influences related largely to the study ethic and habits which they had maintained, the EAP course solely to academic skill teaching, and the University to an independent learning approach. These results are exemplified by Kevin's response:

Now as a student, I think I'm in the middle of everything. From China, I think is a positive attitude, such as study is first, so if I don't finish my duty, I feel very uncomfortable. From the EAP course, it is good study habits, like writing and listening. And the university, I should do everything more by myself, not depending on others.

Those who located themselves at the junction of the EAP and University learning approaches commented again on the value of EAP skills for University studies, while two spoke somewhat wistfully of their preference for the interactive, supported teaching style in the EAP course over the more impersonal content delivery of the University lecture system. Once again, most of the comments about the University related to adaptation to the required independent learning approach. Tony's comment encapsulates the most common ideas in this group's responses: *"I think I'm between the College and University. I'm using what the College course taught me and also I'm doing the University way, with self-learning"*.

The five participants who aligned themselves solely with the University approach attributed this to both the culture of independent learning and the pragmatic need to adapt to university requirements. Annie's response highlights the need for self-directed learning efforts by all the University students, characterising this academic culture in terms of the active cognitive task of problem-solving:

At the University, I think I have to do everything myself because you have many many difficult tasks to do. You have to solve problem by myself. I think everyone has same situation and they can solve problems. I can do too!

For some participants, adaptation was the focus of their attention, as a means to prevail in the University course. In Sanit's words: *"I'm here now, this is hard, and I should adjust to stay in this area. I can't go back to my country. I must pass and stay in this area"*.

In this early phase of their postgraduate course, it appears that participants were at varying stages of adjustment to the University's independent learning culture. There was substantial hybridisation of approaches, with participants' L1 degree still valued for promoting disciplined study methods and attitudes, while the EAP course was appreciated more for its academic skill teaching than for the interactive pedagogical methods prominent in Interview 1 responses.

5.2.3 Interview 3

While Interview 2 findings featured a fairly even distribution of results regarding educational self-positioning, by Interview 3, ten of the eighteen participants identified themselves with the University ways of learning. Seven of them based their positioning on having adopted an independent approach to their studies, even if the process still induced strain. This is illustrated by Lisa's response:

In the College, when you have some problem, you can ask the teacher and teacher will tell you. You just remember the answer. But the University, you need to explore the answer. I'm sort of trying the University way, but it's a bit uncomfortable.

Independent learning was expressed by Andrew as a need to “*check the information by myself*” and, like a few others, seen as “*the big difference from the College and my country*”. Andrew contrasted this need to find his own resources with previous undergraduate and EAP practices, where the teacher provided all the materials for students.

There were also comments in this group about the fading relevance of EAP teachings, now that the skills were largely internalised and the postgraduate tasks required an independent study approach: “*I think I still use some of the skills that I've got from the College, but [it] is too easy now for me, so I'm kind of adjust myself into the University, into self-study*” (Mina). For two participants in this group, identification with University practices equated to meeting academic requirements and passing their subjects.

Surprisingly, the second largest group at Interview 3 (four participants) positioned themselves educationally between L1 and University instruction, the former based on their continued use of study methods from their country: “*From China is to review things and take notes to make your knowledge to be well-organised. That's what I did in China and my Chinese teacher asked me to do*” (Joanne).

Offering a different perspective, Frank saw himself as operating beyond the three-circle framework, “*my way*”, regardless of which country or institution he was studying in. Ironically, his personal method was based on a self-sufficient approach to learning.

To summarise, there are four key findings across this three-stage interview process:

- Identification with the L1 educational context was mainly based on useful study methods and a committed attitude to study.
- Self-positioning according to EAP approaches moved from the interactive pedagogical approach at Interview 1 to the learning of useful academic skills at the postgraduate stage.
- There was significant hybridisation of educational approaches during periods of major adaptation, both at the EAP and early postgraduate stages, but a noticeable shift to alignment with the University ways of learning at the last interview.
- Reasons for self-positioning within the University context were mostly linked to attempts to adopt an independent learning approach.

6. Discussion

This study contributes valuable knowledge to an under-researched area of EAP research, that of approaches to teaching and learning throughout the EAP pathway to an Australian university.

This focus distinguishes the study from other EAP studies, which have investigated academic skill development for university purposes (Dooley, 2010; Dyson, 2014; Floyd, 2015; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011) and language levels of EAP students entering university (Birrell, 2006; Bretag, 2007; Dyson, 2014). The research perspective adopted in this study builds on previous studies by Fischbacher-Smith et al. (2015) and Kell and Vogl (2006), which have explored changes in EAP students' learning experiences across their pathway route, not so much in terms of *what* is learnt, but rather *how* it is learnt. This study's perspective also reflects a broader trend amongst researchers to reframe requisite skills for Western universities within an epistemological framework (Hammersley-Fletcher & Hanley, 2016; Owens, 2011; Ryan, 2013).

Importantly, this study may be the first to examine EAP students' experiences in terms of not one, but two transitions, as suggested by Fischbacher-Smith et al. (2015). The first transition is from the L1 undergraduate degree to the EAP course, and the second is the further transition to an Australian university. This more comprehensive approach to student experience helps to enhance understanding in three main ways. Firstly, it foregrounds the staged adjustment process of these students to different ways of teaching and learning during two major educational transitions and the associated challenges of undertaking these adjustments within a short period of time. Secondly, it raises awareness of the potential impact of L1 (as well as EAP) pedagogies on students' experience of their postgraduate course. Finally, it conceptualises EAP courses as serving a bridging function between the L1 and university contexts, rather than merely as preparing students for university (Dooley, 2010; Floyd, 2015).

The study's findings reveal significant pedagogical changes across the three educational contexts examined here. These findings support Benzie's (2011, 2015) claim that pedagogical differences are worthy of investigation due to potential adjustment issues, although her argument was largely limited to the EAP and university contexts. More specifically, this study found that in the L1 undergraduate degree, content was delivered explicitly and directly to students, with assessment almost exclusively through examinations. In contrast, in the EAP course, academic skills were introduced progressively, using heavy scaffolding and a dialogic approach, and assignments constituted a major form of assessment. Finally, the postgraduate course was reported by all participants to require a self-directed, critical learning approach by students. It is noted here that the increasing use of online modes of delivery associated with COVID-19 pressures does not diminish the importance of this study's investigation of longstanding teaching and learning approaches across the EAP-to-university pathway. Potential modifications of pedagogical methods provide opportunities for future research related to this study's core finding as to the importance of aligned modes of delivery for students' postgraduate adjustment.

Given the potential dissonance between L1 and EAP pedagogies, there has been insufficient research into implications for the bridging function of EAP courses between L1 and postgraduate studies. Although English Australia advises ELICOS colleges to supplement teacher-directed methods with more facilitative approaches requiring self-directed learning (Brandon & O'Keefe, 2017), the accounts of this study's participants suggest that these ways of teaching and learning were in the minority. It is possible that intensive support and scaffolding, while highly valued in EAP courses, might not in fact be setting the students up for success in postgraduate studies. Further research, based on the pedagogical approaches in other EAP courses and the students' subsequent university experiences, may yield a range of findings to broaden the knowledge base in this area.

While it may be tempting to see EAP and university settings as constituting a Western approach to education, an alternative perspective is offered here. It is argued that, based on the experiences of these participants, L1 and EAP settings bear similarities as they both feature largely teacher-directed pedagogy aimed at maximum content and/or skill acquisition in a limited time. In contrast, the expectation of Australian universities that students act as independent learners suggests

a substantially different student role. The comparisons made by a few participants between learning approaches in L1 and EAP settings on the one hand, and the University on the other hand, support this view. EAP skill teaching was still utilised by several participants towards the end of the first postgraduate semester, but the dialogic mode of teaching was no longer mentioned as of value for their University studies. This is important because broader research on international students at Western universities has pointed to the lack of familiarity of an independent learning approach for many international students, as well as the academic difficulties this can cause (Evans et al., 2018; Heng, 2018; Ryan, 2013).

Interestingly, alignment with cultural values rarely emerged in participant accounts of their three educational contexts, with L1 pedagogy presented as impersonal, unstimulating and not conducive to learning, and unfamiliar EAP skill learnings valued for their practical relevance to future university studies. It appears that participants' outlooks on teaching and learning approaches were based more on pragmatism than on cultural factors. This interpretation was reaffirmed in responses on educational self-positioning, a new methodological tool used in this study, with substantial shifts in participants' ways of learning according to their perceived needs. The few participants with some continuing use of L1 undergraduate learning approaches throughout the three interviews attributed this largely to the usefulness and familiarity of rigorous study methods from their country. Moreover, the University's independent learning culture was reported neutrally, as an observed reality requiring adjustment on their part, rather than as a confronting new perspective towards acquiring knowledge. Using the words of Gram et al. (2013, p. 771), participants appeared to meet each new educational reality with a "pragmatic openness", viewing each new skill as "simply an ability to be learned". These findings support depictions in the literature of international students from CHC countries as fundamentally pragmatic, flexible and individualistic learners, who are perhaps influenced by, but not captive to, cultural factors, and can adjust over time to new settings (Heng, 2018; O'Dwyer, 2017; T. T. Tran, 2013a).

Through the data on educational self-positioning, this study also adds useful findings to Benzie's (2015) work on students' hybridised changes through the EAP-to-university transition. Approaching international students' adjustment processes in terms of hybridisation has already proven productive in studies about academic adjustment to Western universities (L. T. Tran, 2011; T. T. Tran, 2013a). This study found that hybridisation of learning approaches occurred to a significant degree in the participants' adjustment to the EAP course and early stages of their postgraduate degree program. Significantly, several weeks into the first postgraduate semester, the largest group (seven participants) reported that they were drawing on all three educational approaches. This suggests a process of major educational realignment involving synthesis of learning approaches. However, extensive hybridisation across the cohort was mostly replaced by a single educational self-positioning towards the end of their first semester, as the participants aligned themselves increasingly with the University's independent learning culture.

7. Conclusion

Approaching the EAP pathway to postgraduate studies at Australian universities from the perspective of ways of teaching and learning is a useful avenue for research, although still in its infancy. Unfamiliar learning approaches may pose both skill and epistemological challenges for international students. The overlap between the two is evident in the need for critical thinking skills in postgraduate courses at Western universities (Hammersley-Fletcher & Hanley, 2016; Kettle, 2017), an area of difficulty for former EAP students studying at university (Dyson, 2014). Students who progress from EAP to postgraduate studies at an Australian university must undertake two major educational transitions in a relatively short period of time. This raises questions as to the appropriate pedagogical approaches in EAP and university courses.

The ability of EAP courses at ELICOS colleges to prepare students fully for an independent learning approach within a 10-12 week direct entry course is likely impacted by pressures from low

university language entry scores (Birrell, 2006; Bretag, 2007; Dyson, 2014) and commercial imperatives of ELICOS colleges (Kell & Vogl, 2007). Indeed, EAP courses need to achieve a difficult and delicate balance between scaffolded skill development and the nurturing of more self-sufficient, resourceful approaches to study. Cognisant of this need, most ELICOS colleges include some academic acculturation in their programs (Floyd, 2015). Useful practices for this purpose may be the provision of regular independent learning tasks, structured around students' future subject areas, as well as dialogue with current postgraduate students about their transition to an independent learning culture from the EAP course. Further research is required into the role of EAP courses as a link between content-heavy, explicit teaching in the L1 undergraduate degree and self-directed learning based on critical thinking in postgraduate studies. A similar requirement for more research applies to the university setting, in order to enhance international student transition through adjustment to different learning approaches, although research in this area is already underway (Gram et al., 2013; Kettle, 2017; L. T. Tran, 2011).

While discussion of institutional roles in student transition is important, so too is a recognition that EAP students are resourceful drivers of their own unique transition processes. Hybridisation of learning approaches during adjustment to a new study environment exemplifies student agency and supports a view of student adjustment in terms of "generative processes of knowledge building" (Ryan & Viète, 2010, p. 151). It is also consistent with Ryan's (2011) argument for a trans-cultural approach to international education, which would facilitate the creation of new forms of hybridised knowledge.

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