

Building an EAP Assessment Framework for Chinese EFL Learners of Finance and Economics Majors at University Level

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In the context of offering localized and specified English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses for university level Chinese EFL learners, this article explores the issues of EAP assessment for finance and economics majors. Firstly, the study attempts to define the construct of EAP assessment for Chinese EFL learners of finance and economics majors at university level based on prior research literature on EAP assessment models and multiple stakeholders' needs on EAP skills in universities of finance and economics. Assessment standards of academic English for finance and economics purposes, then, are discussed by adopting IELTS Academic testing framework in line with localized course syllabus. Finally, an EAP assessment framework for Chinese EFL learners of finance and economics majors is proposed in an attempt to develop localized and university-specific assessment framework to generate effective feedback to EAP courses and bring about positive wash-back for EAP learners of finance and economics majors in university level.

Keywords: EAP assessment, construct, localized test

Introduction

College English courses are required for Chinese students enrolled in colleges and universities for degree programs, which have been undergoing some reforms over the past decades featured by a noticeable transition from English for General Purposes (EGP) to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in response to the diversified and extended demands of Chinese EFL learners in tertiary level.

Learners needs-based English courses for specified purposes on universities' own initiative were encouraged by educational authorities to respond to the societal outcry at impractical and lower-efficient college English courses (Cai, 2011, 2012; Wen, 2012). English for Academic Purposes (EAP), though less appealing to Chinese EFL learners in university level, presumably due to its boredom and rigorous demands, has received academic attention among Chinese academics committed to building EFL learners' academic language proficiency for their study through medium of English (Cai, 2014).

Assessment Issue in the Reform of College English

Previous researches on EAP-related topics about Chinese EFL learners mainly focused on EAP course design, need analysis, genre and register analysis (Li & Ruan, 2015; Ye, 2020), issues of EAP pertaining to course evaluation and students' assessment are relatively less addressed.

Assessment issues related to Chinese EFL learners were more about large-scale nation-wide and high-stake language tests for Chinese EFL learners, such as College English Tests Band 4 and Band 6 (CET-4/6), and these studies were primarily related to the CETs' validity in measuring language performance and impact on learning and teaching effectiveness at tertiary level (Cheng, 2008; Cheng & Curits, 2010).

Over the past decades, however, the negative impact of CETs on English learning was decried for lack of communicative components in the test process and lower construct validity in spite of the fact that CET Spoken English Test was introduced in 1999 as a complement to assess speaking abilities. To administrate a large-scale speaking test for nation-wide test takers at university levels are faced with growing difficulties such as the limited pool of qualified assessors, inadequate test standards, and hugely varied test equipment and resources in different location in light of China educational resources unevenly funded across the country. As a result, Internet-based CET and Computer-based CET Spoken English Test were adopted in 2008 and 2012 respectively. But CET Spoken English test has not been widely accepted and recognized by EFL learners at universities level and TEFL practitioners in universities and score users.

Thus, there have been studies and proposals for universities with adequate teaching resources and high-proficiency EFL learners to design and administer universities-based English language tests to suit the diversified learners needs and assess the teaching outcomes of ESP-based courses offered to EFL learners in top universities in China (Cheng, 2016).

Assessment of EAP in Localized Exams

EAP is a multiple dimensional and complex topic since it involves variety of disciplines; therefore, its assessment needs to be specified and localized for specific disciplines. University-or discipline-specific EAP courses are expected to accommodate learners diversified and specified learning needs (Hamp-Lyons, 2011). Course design based on multiple stakeholders' needs analysis should be conducted and assessment schemes of EAP courses in discipline-specific need to be designed to support learning.

In order to meet students rising demands for practical and communication-oriented English language courses instead of traditional general purposes-based ones, we designed an ESP-based college English program for undergraduate students in X University of Finance and Economics (hereafter XUFE), a reputable research university in business and economics, where an important part of the ESP-based college English program is English for Academic Purpose courses (Shi, 2018).

We devised English courses for academic purposes for finance and economics majors on the basis of needs analysis from students and faculties. Online questionnaires and focus group interviews were used to collect information on students' learning needs for academic English and faculty's expectation to language abilities to be used in academic settings. The questionnaires have been piloted in previous student population, in which the items received higher validity and reliability, and 372 of total number of 2,500 students who were admitted into the university degree programs in 2018 have completed the online questionnaires in anonymity, accounting for approximately one seventh of the enrollment in that year.

Faculty from disciplines of finance and economics were interviewed regarding their perceptions of academic communication abilities. Language teachers who offered the EAP courses in the tracks of finance and economics were interviewed on their understanding of academic communication abilities to be acquired by the university students majoring in finance and economics.

With regard to the students' needs, wants and lacks in academic communication skills, academic reading was significantly regarded as the most frequently used skill, followed by speaking and translating skills; meanwhile reading was considered as the best commanded skill among five language skills, followed by translating and listening, speaking and writing were deemed as the least commanded language skills. Academic presenting and writing were believed to be the most difficult academic skills. With regard to the priority of academic language use activities, the students ranked them as follows: reading literature, attending lectures or seminars, writing papers or abstracts, presenting research findings orally, translating academic publications, and submitting manuscripts online to journals.

Similarly, the faculty from finance and economics who were interviewed echoed the respondents' perceptions of learning needs in academic communication, believing that academic presenting and writing in English language were the fields that needed more intensive instruction and training.

Learning-Oriented Assessment has been investigated among cross-contextual EAP course deliverers and recommended in EAP assessment for EAP practitioners for promoting beneficial learning outcomes and behaviors (Fazel & Ali, 2022). Therefore, assessment of EAP for finance and economics majors was analyzed by taking account of language abilities and specific disciplinary knowledge. EAP assessment framework in XUFE is designed based on the ideas of learning-oriented assessment to facilitate students in acquiring academic skills used for listening to lectures, reading discipline specific literatures, talking and presenting academic issues, writing and contributing to academic journals through the medium of English, and Chinese-English or English-Chinese translation as well.

The Categories and Construct of EAP Assessment

Defining the Target Language Use (TLU) domain (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) has been reckoned essential for language assessments, EAP assessment is no exception. EAP assessments of different scales and functions base the construct on TLU domain of multiple fields. Topical knowledge and course syllabi are important basis on which EAP construct can be defined as TLU tasks in academic settings call for topical knowledge and are interrelated to course syllabi (Bachman & Palmer, 2016).

Categories of EAP Assessment

EAP assessment can be reckoned as a branch of ESP assessment, which should be placed under the category of English as Foreign Language Assessment (EFLA) based on the tree diagram of EFL and ESP (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 17). EAP assessment, can be divided into EAP assessment for business and economics, science-technology and engineering, social science and humanities. These disciplines demonstrate huge variations in academic language pertaining to subject contents. Figure 1 shows a diagram of relations among ESP and EAP assessment, and sub-categories of EAP assessment; this study focuses primarily on the EAP assessment for business and economics.

EAP assessment can be analyzed and categorized from multiple dimensions, such as the scale and scope for the application of the test, utilities and functions of the test, and timeline of the test as well.

EAP assessment can be international standardized language tests for measuring academic language use abilities for English as a medium of instruction and localized in-house language assessment for measuring academic language abilities demonstrated in particular universities or institutions.

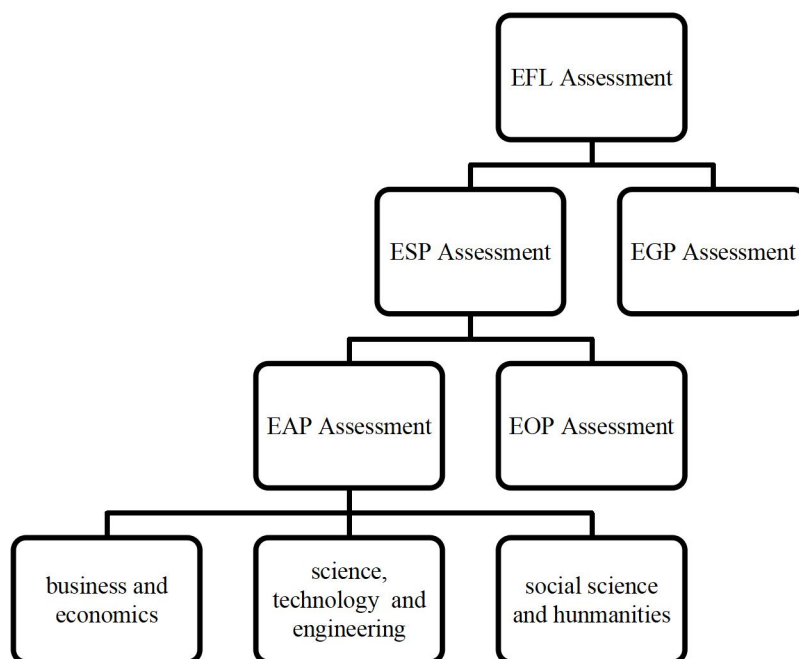


Figure 1. EAP assessment in relation to EFL assessment.

EAP course in the UK tertiary educational context, in most cases, refers to the pre-sessional EAP courses that are designed to help international students who come to UK educational institutions for degree programs. EAP assessment is widely used to assess the applicants' language proficiency level for degree programs in UK, or to evaluate the students' academic language abilities after being admitted in universities. In response to the roles and construct involved in EAP assessment, Seviar (2015) argued the dual roles undertaken by EAP courses whereby the courses are charged with both instructing language knowledge and abilities for academic purposes and assessing the acquired language use abilities and readiness of admitted applicants for academic activities in a wide variety of disciplines.

Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons (2015, p. 3) claimed that the construct of EAP assessment was "under-defined and under-theorized", which could be attributed to the inadequate shared information and perception between EAP practitioners (course designers, instructors, and administrators) and language testing professionals.

Figure 2 indicates that EAP assessment comprises pre-entry, post-entry, and exit assessments, which functions as selecting candidates against pre-set standards, diagnosing language proficiency and tracking progress, and guaranteeing the target proficiency to be met by students respectively (Schmitt & Hamp-Lyons, 2015).

Large-scale international EAP tests define construct on the basis of general language use abilities test takers demonstrate associated with wide range of disciplines; in-house localized EAP assessments that include specific tests designed for universities and courses frame construct on specified language use in specific disciplines.

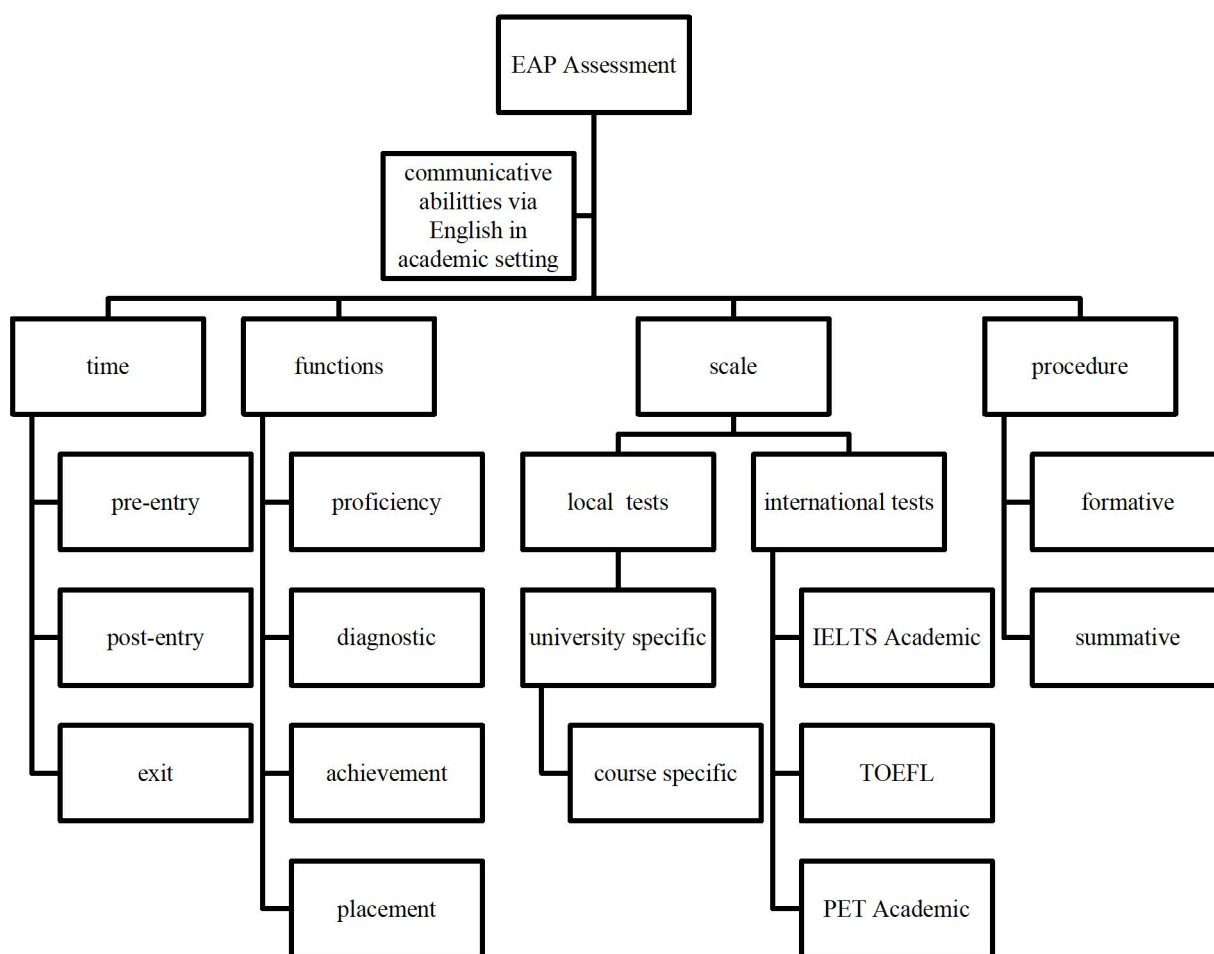


Figure 2. EAP assessment category.

EAP Assessment of International Scale and Scope

There are three academic English tests at international scale that are mainly functioning as pre-entry test, as illustrated in Figure 2.

IELTS Academic is jointly owned by British Council, International Development Program, and Cambridge Assessment English, a paper-and-pencil based English language test claiming to measure academic skills demonstrated by test candidates who plan to study in university-level courses in the medium of English. IELTS Academic measures the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing at four discrete parts, and the speaking part is tested via a face-to-face interview between interlocutors and test candidate.

TOEFL iBT is an internet-based language test from Educational Testing Services, which claims to measure test takers' abilities in using English for listening, reading, speaking, and writing tasks in international academic settings. TOEFL is targeted for EFL learners with intermediate or advanced English level who plan to study in university level courses in English. TOEFL tests speaking by internet-based conversation between test candidates and test terminal workstation through tasks of giving short answers, commenting on and summarizing the speakers. The problem with this type of speaking test is that limited output from test

candidates is likely to undermine the validity of the test as a speaking response of maximum 30 seconds in duration for each item is collected from test takers.

Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE Academic) is run by Pearson Inc., which is a computer-based language test and purports to assesses real-life, academic English in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with speaking and writing as an integrated test part. To measure test takers' speaking skills and abilities more accurately and validly, PTE Academic gives more priority to speaking in the test that is tested by myriad tasks including reading aloud, repeating sentences, describing images, retelling and summarizing, which is more representative of language use domain than TOEFL speaking items.

In order to explore what factors an international test should include and whether the test items are validly representatives of target situations, Gu and So (2015) investigated the factors of test contents, varieties of English in speaking, spelling, and lexical conventions that are likely to be perceived significant for raising validity in international EAP assessment. Gu and So (2015) concluded that there was noticeable readiness to accommodate diversified contents in test input to make the test items more representative of TLU domain, therefore, to promote the international appeal of the test. Meanwhile, negative attitudes were found among respondents against lower standards of listening and speaking input, which are likely to impair the fairness of test results. Therefore, the standards of native speakers or high standards non-native norms for input are preferred.

The fact that these EAP tests of international scale might under-represent language use domains in specific disciplines necessitates the localized, in-house, and subject specific exams of EAP.

EAP Assessment of Local Scale for Specific Disciplines

In light of the complexity and diversity of academic languages for myriad disciplines, construct in large-scale international EAP test is likely to under-represent the academic language use domains in varying disciplines. Therefore, Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons (2015) argued that there needs to be more interaction and collaboration between EAP practitioners in localized assessment and language testing professionals committed to devising large-scale international academic language tests, so as to expand the construct representatives of international academic language tests and theoretically support EAP practitioners from language testing professionals.

Language tests of academic purposes at international scale and local level, be they a test of proficiency, diagnosis, placement, or achievement, are likely to impact learners' academic performance to a large extent.

Course attendants are likely to be extrinsically motivated for a passing grade in post-entry exam rather than being actively motivated in the learning process. Therefore, the assessment with positive wash-back and supportive learning should be given due consideration. In terms of testing procedure, formative and summative exam can be devised in the assessment, with a purpose to encourage students' intrinsically continued engagement throughout of the pre-sessional EAP course. Seviour (2015) argued for an assessment scheme which emphasizes formative as well as summative assessments, which was claimed to be effective in building up students' engagement and improving their academic performance.

The Construct of EAP Assessment for Specific Disciplines

The construct of EAP assessment can be summarized from the international perspectives as the language abilities of EFL learners in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing for academic communication purpose in English.

to access academic ideas through aural and visual channels

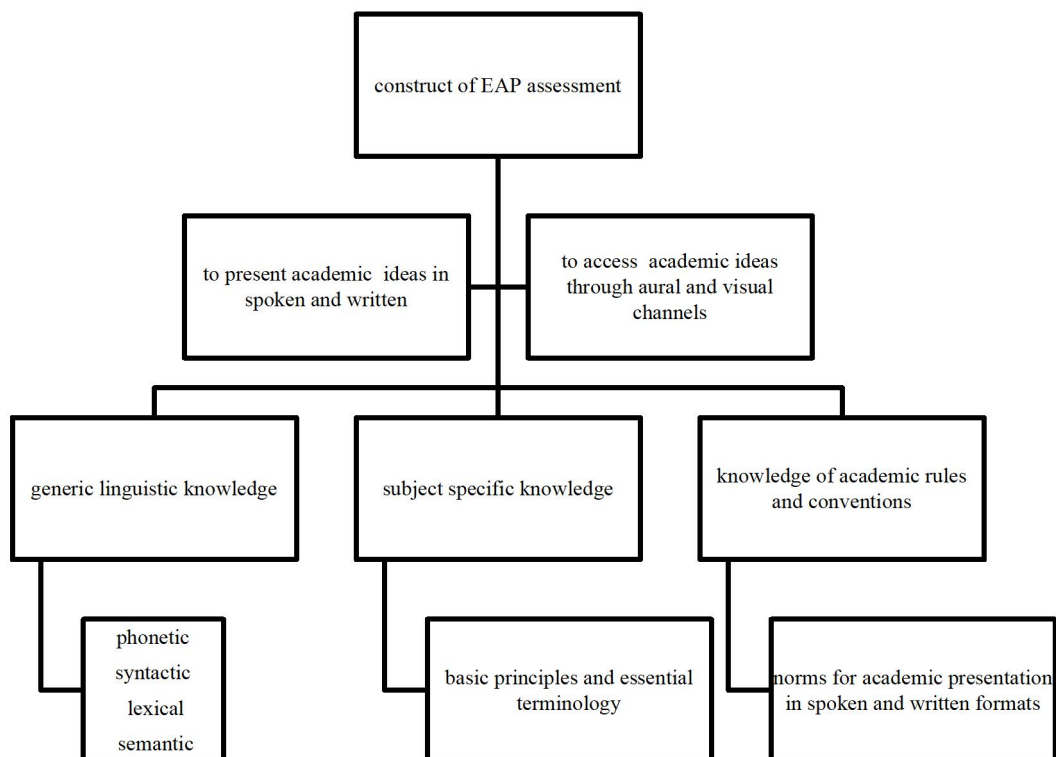


Figure 3. Construct of EAP assessment.

Previous literature gave more investigation into the writing part embedded in EAP assessment (Baba, 2009; Keck, 2006) as writing is believed to be a skill of value for academic study through medium of English.

Weigle and Frigal (2015) found that linguistic differences between disciplines in academic writing were more significant than the differences demonstrated by native English speakers and non-native English speakers by looking at multi-factors affecting academic writing corpora in the disciplines of humanities and arts, social sciences, biology and medicine, natural science and engineering.

With regard to the writing part in the internationally renowned academic tests, timed impromptu writing is adopted in TOEFL, IELTS Academic, and PTE Academic.

The timed impromptu writing assessments in the above-mentioned international academic language tests, be they integrated or independent, are efficient ways to test the basic writing skills of test takers used in general academic communication settings. For specific academic writing, however, the construct to be measured by the test should be more specific, containing not only the broad range of general academic writing, but more importantly, the specified genres and registers required in academic scenarios in the specific disciplines.

To conclude, the construct of EAP assessment is constituted by multi-facets of TLU domains in different disciplines, which can be summarized as three aspects: generic linguistic knowledge including knowledge of pronunciation and grammar of the language, subject-specific knowledge of disciplines, such as the basic principles and essential terminology in specific disciplines, and knowledge of academic rules and conventions in English, like the accepted norms for academic presentation in spoken and written formats.

The Construct of EAP Assessment for Chinese EFL Learners

EAP in China's tertiary educational context is manifold, complex, and not easy to conclude; thereby a wide range of disciplines are covered across humanities and arts, science and engineering, business and economics, medicine and biology, and the like.

The target students for EAP in China are mainly intermediate or advanced EFL learners enrolled in bachelor or master degree programs, who are likely to use English for research, academic exchange, and publications.

In response to varying disciplines of TLU domain for EAP, an array of teaching materials was developed that were categorized into varied disciplines including science and engineering, medicine, social sciences, business and management (Cai, 2012; Cheng, 2016). These teaching materials were constructed on the basis of the genres and registers applied in the specific disciplines, which are selected as textbooks by EAP practitioners in universities across China.

With regard to EAP assessment, most universities who offer EAP courses design and administrate the examination at the course deliverer's disposal, which are achievement tests based on what have been covered during the course delivery.

In XUFE, we deliver the EAP for finance and economics majors in 18 weeks during which modules of finance and economics related topics are discussed in class time and after-class reading and writing homework are scheduled over the course.

The EAP courses for finance and economics majors offered by XUFE are designed to help those EFL learners in finance and economics disciplines improve their language use abilities of reading, speaking, writing, listening, and translating in academic settings, to familiarize them with academic writing and presenting competences required for academic research and exchange in business and economics. The key components of the courses contain core language abilities, discipline-specific general knowledge, and academic norms for writing and presenting in international context.

As Figure 4 illustrates, the core language abilities refer to listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translating abilities for general and academic purposes. Discipline-specific general subject knowledge revolves around the basic terms and essential topics of business and economics, which might include but not limited to banking and finance, economic growth and business cycles, monetary and fiscal policies, accounting and regulation, international trade and policies, corporate governance and strategies, international economic organizations, etc. Academic norms pertain to the general rules in writing and presenting in English for the purpose of publication and presentation.

On the basis of EAP course description, we devise the construct model of EAP assessment for finance and economics majors that encompasses core language abilities, discipline-specific general knowledge, as well as academic literacy or rules in business and economics domains.

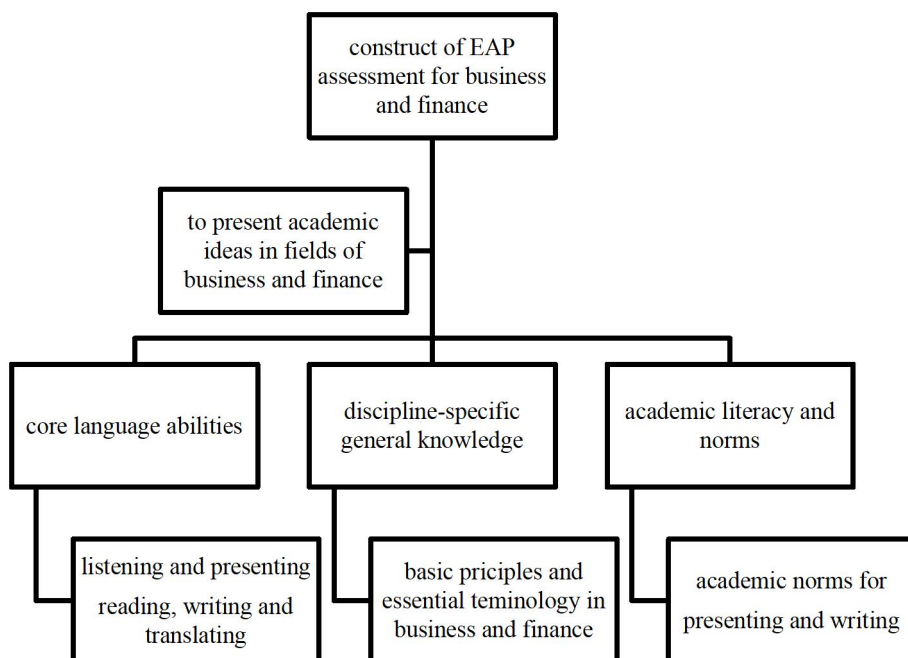


Figure 4. Construct of EAP assessment for finance and economics majors.

EAP Assessment Standards for Chinese EFL Learners

Test criteria of Bachman and Palmer (1996) are adopted to secure the assessment will test the construct of EAP in a fair and unbiased way, namely validity, reliability, authenticity, and impact.

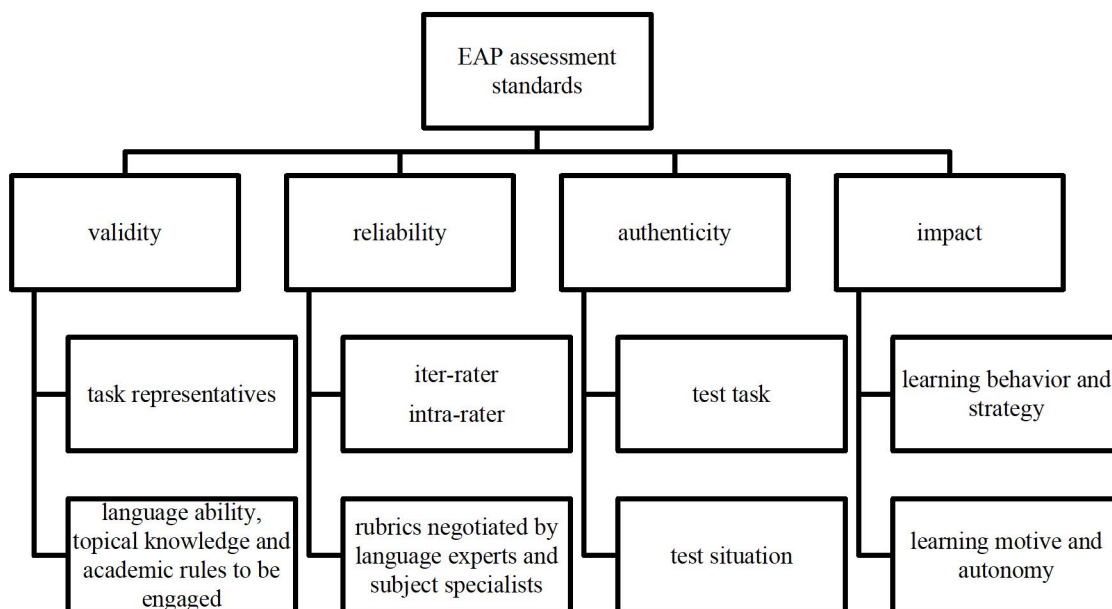


Figure 5. EAP assessment standards.

Figure 5 indicates the assessment standards for EAP practitioners to observe in designing and administering the tests, where an essential factor is the involvement of subject-specific knowledge in the

testing process.

Validity in localized EAP assessment for finance and economics majors is an essential dimension to guarantee the test will test what the construct has defined with wide representatives of the target language situation in international academic context. Valid test items will help elicit test takers language use behaviors in the academic setting by combining proper language abilities, applying to suitable subject-specific knowledge, and observing academic norms in the disciplines of finance and economics.

For writing assessment, integrated testing practice, specifically reading-into-writing, has been recognized as an effective way to assess writing skills, as has been explored by researchers in the fields of second language writing and writing assessment (Baba, 2009; Keck, 2006; Plakans & Gebril, 2013; Seviour, 2015).

With regard to reading-into-writing assessment of pre-sessional EAP, Westbrook and Holt (2015) compared the take-home writing with in-house exam-based writing in terms of the outside undermining factors to validity and reliability, concluding that combining the longer after-class reading assignments with limited time in-class writing examination is likely to minimize the outside factors which are detrimental to validity and reliability.

Reliability for EAP assessment is imperative in that it will ensure the agreement or consistency of the test results and score interpretation. Productive language skills to be assessed in the test including speaking, writing, and translating need additional consideration on reliability to guarantee marking rubrics will be consistently administrated between different raters and the same group of raters who mark on varying occasions.

Weigle and Friginal (2015) argued that discipline-specific writing assessment should be developed to elicit the specific linguistic features required in academic writing for corresponding disciplines instead of using a single general academic writing task to assess EFL learners from wide range of disciplines.

The involvement of discipline-specific language to be demonstrated in writing task might give rise to the disturbing factors for scoring reliability. Consequently, reliability allows for negotiation between language teachers and subject specialists over the marking rubric.

Authenticity in in-house EAP assessment for finance and economics is critical in that there are specified registers, genres, and styles in these disciplines used at different scenarios of academic presenting and writing. In the assessment process, limited resources and equipment may undermine the authenticity of test, which is always the case for large-scale test like CET Band 4 and Band 6 tests where the push from practicality considerably impedes the authenticity. Luckily, online based language tests satisfy the needs for large-scale and authentic testing environments supported by virtual reality technology.

Authentic test situations and assessment tasks calling for finance and economics specific subject knowledge are likely to invite authentic response from test takers for inference of test takers' language proficiency in specific domain of academic contexts.

Weigle and Friginal (2015, p. 37) argued that "timed impromptu essay is limited in terms of its generalizability to other academic genres"; therefore, multi-draft writing was recommended as an effective way for formatively assessing academic writing for EAP courses in different disciplines.

Impact from assessment of EAP will be worth consideration in that the test process makes more sense than providing a score for test takers. Since the test process and result interpretation will have an enduring impact on learners' learning behaviors and strategies adopted during the courses and beyond, the test of language skills and subject knowledge for academic settings is designed to facilitate the learners in acquiring EAP in finance and economics with heightened motives and learning autonomy.

EAP Assessment Framework for Chinese EFL Learners

In terms of the language skills of priority and inadequacy, the needs analysis indicated that the most frequently needed language skills were productive skills in speaking, writing, and translating. Therefore, more weight is suggested to the assessment of productive skills in the assessment framework.

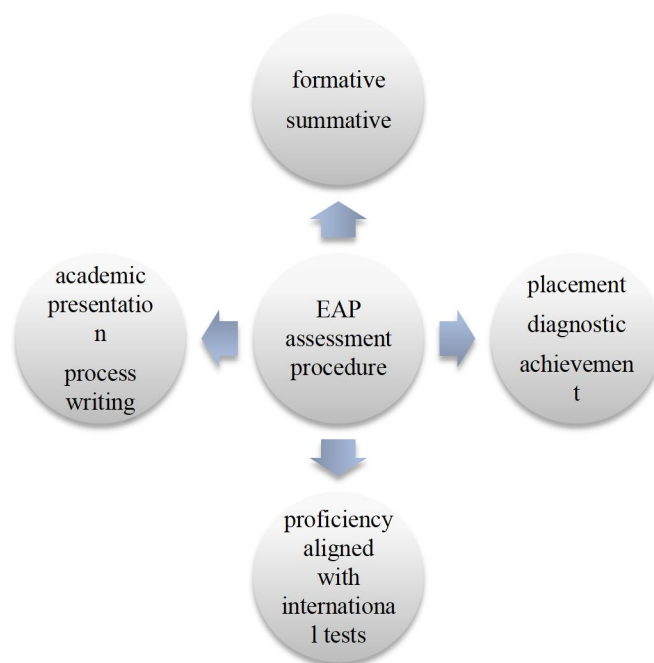


Figure 6. EAP assessment framework.

As illustrated in Figure 6, the devised EAP assessment framework consists of four aspects of language tests in which formative and summative assessment will be adopted to provide prompt feedback to learning periodically so that EFL learners can identify the progress made during the courses and the weak aspects that need more attention.

Local standards of scoring need to be aligned with the international standards of well-known international tests such as IELTS Academic for the purpose that the EFL learners can evaluate their EAP proficiency against the in-house university standards as well as international standards.

EAP assessment of specific courses can function as achievement test of the courses covered, proficiency test of the EFL learners' level of academic capabilities, and diagnostic test to identify the aspects in which the EFL learners are proficient as well as inadequate.

Faculty of finance and economics are required as advisory for the assessment of EAP for finance and economics disciplines in an attempt to guarantee the construct validity of the assessment process while devising and adopting discipline-specific test items. Additionally, the rating descriptors and marking process should be consulted with faculty of finance and economics expertise in order to accurately assess the subject-specific knowledge beside the language abilities demonstrated by EFL test takers.

Conclusions

In designing EAP assessment for Chinese EFL learners, international standards proposed by international

well-known tests are worth referring to, but localized university-specific and fit-for-purpose assessment standards and process need to be planned and administered.

This study attempts to propose construct of EAP assessment for finance and economics majors in China's university, and summarize the issues of concern and interest for EAP assessment.

By doing so, this study responds to two essential issues of concern for EAP assessment while devising localized and discipline-specific academic English test in China's context: what to test and how to test?

EAP assessment in specific disciplines is designed to collect information on students' reading, listening, speaking, writing and translating abilities that are demonstrated and are needed in the process of academic presenting and writing, and on students' command of the rules in international academic presenting and writing scenarios.

EAP assessment results will be referred to as evidence for making decision on students' abilities to access and analyze academic literature in specific disciplines, to write academic papers in line with academic writing rules and codes and to present research finding in academic conferences.

With regard to topical knowledge involved in EAP assessment in finance and economics, EAP assessment intends to measure test takers' capacity in using accurate technical terms and applying basic principles in these disciplines to academic writing and presenting, which are assisted by proper methods of data collection and analysis.

Changes to testing practices, however, need an evidence-based approach, which should be supported by a systemic and validation-based research agenda. The current study explored how international standards were reconciled with localized standards in EAP assessment from the theoretical perspectives, and further empirical studies are to be conducted for devising and delivering academic English tests in a local and global context.

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