

*Achieving Desired Learner Outcomes in EAP Reading: Tertiary Students' Perceptions of Effectiveness in Active Reading Assessment Tasks.*

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**Abstract**

The research conducted investigated the effectiveness of two subject-specific 'Active Reading Tasks', designed using the criterion referenced goals of a newly revised EAP syllabus at a Sino-British college in Shanghai, which recommended the use of subject-specific content texts. Following the completion of both tasks a survey was given to learners, who were asked through both open- and closed-ended questions to assess their attainment of the various learner outcomes detailed in the new syllabus. The results indicate that perceived difficulty does not necessarily equate with perceived usefulness, and that learners exhibit a preference for more authentic materials. Whilst improvement of reading strategy skills were reported, summary writing, assignment timing and usability of work for subject purposes were all highlighted as areas of concern for the learners, which indicates that learners see the content of texts, as well as more general reading strategy and skill development, as being important. The findings form a basis for discussion regarding how such EAP and ESP integrated reading tasks and their implementation could be improved to benefit learners more in the future.

**Key Words:**

EAP, ESP, active reading, criterion-referenced assessment, learner outcome, self- assessment

**1. Background**

At a Sino-British college in Shanghai a new curriculum was introduced in the EAP department in the International Foundation Year (IFY) 2012/13, which aimed to ensure that students enter UK universities with both the English language and study skills required. The new syllabus provided detailed intended Learning Outcomes (LOs) for each of the four core academic skills. The college was afforded some choice of which of the new Continuous Assessments (CAs) to implement, which were required to be used alongside the pre-existing end-of-semester exam structure. All of the new CAs were designed with both formative and summative evaluation elements and the different levels of feedback depicted were aimed at improving future performance. Along with LOs and a CA task description, the level of student attainment and development were outlined and to be assessed using the prescribed grading criteria for each task. Liaison between subject and EAP teachers was encouraged so that counterparts could understand how students were assessed in other course modules, what tasks and assessments they were working on and the materials and resources they used to achieve these goals. Authentic academic texts were favoured and it was recommended that the appropriacy of materials should be judged

on the maximisation of the optimal LOs potential. For the reading category, as one of the four Course Developers at the college at the time, it was decided that EAP IFY students were to complete one Active Reading Task (ART) per semester. The task description as well as the scope of the LOs and Assessment Criteria are provided in in Table 1, 2 and 3 and reflected in the questionnaire content (Appendix 1). In order to optimise the learners understanding potential questions were paraphrased and simplified when it was deemed that learners' metacognitive understanding may be affected by the original syllabuses wording.

## **2. Literature Review**

Although reading is commonly cited by learners of being the academic skills they are least concerned about, in university EFL situations, the greatest need of students is the ability to read academic materials (Jordan, 1997). The exponential growth of second language reading research has resulted in many new insights and research avenues, with some scholars going so far as to call it the most important language learner skill in academic contexts (Carrell, 1989; Eskey, 1973; Lynch and Hudson, 1991; Oller, 1972, as cited in Anderson, 1994). It is widely agreed in the field that strengthened reading skills enable EFL learners to make more progress and obtain greater development in all academic domains (Anderson, 1999). More and more joint-venture universities are appearing in non-native speaking countries, which practice in an English-only teaching and learning environment and offer possibilities of completing degrees in member universities' flagship locations. As a consequence learners, such as those at the college where the research was carried out, need to be able to read specialised English language material as part of their university coursework in an array of subject fields (Munteanu, 2014). Evidence suggests that such linguistic competence can be achieved if students use language to learn as well as learn how to use the language in a variety of situations (Coyle, 2008).

Where English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) emphasises and isolates the teaching of skills, language forms and study activities believed common to all disciplines, English for Specific Academic Purposes ESAP is concerned with teaching of skills and language which are related to the demands of a particular discipline or department. It is the assumption that course and assessment at the level of content should be directly linked that forms much of the current discussion surrounding EAP assessment (Fulcher, 1999). Some, such as Spack (1988) have argued that English teachers may be ill-equipped to teach outside their own discipline, and that in any case academic genres across disciplines share certain features which require more specialized knowledge and skills than the teaching of the subject matter does itself (as cited in Hyland, 2006). Spack also points to practical issues with such collaboration projects such as misaligned timing of assignments with the subject discipline and different assessment criteria being applied by different teachers (Spack, 1988, as cited in Hyland, 2006, p.110). Proponents of the 'real life approach', however, put content at the centre-stage of EAP testing and focus on how representative test tasks are in relation to learners' target domains (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). As this approach relates to test format as well as test content, considerable research has been conducted in regard to how to integrate authentic reading materials with pedagogically designed tasks (Brandl, 2002). This 'ESP approach' supposes that in language teaching all decisions as to content and method should be based on the learner's reason for learning (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, as cited in Hyland 2006, p.218).

What is widely agreed is that assessment criteria and standards influence the quality of students learning (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Within Higher Education there has consequently been an

increasing acceptance of the need for greater transparency in assessment processes, and moves have been made to make methods clearer to all participants (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003). New procedures and transparency alone however do not ensure appropriateness of assignments or criteria quality and Bloxham and Boyd (2007) point out that "The traditional range of assessment tasks in higher education does not cope well with a wide range of learning outcomes – for example, those involving professional, subject-specific or key skills" (p.45). Consequently a more 'transformative approach' which enables educators' voices and realises the role of second order changes has been called for by some (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). Hyland (2006) draws upon broad principles from the findings of researchers such as Bachman (1990), Bachman and Palmer (1996), Douglas (2000) and Weigle (2002), and uses them as a guide to good practice in language assessment. Under these principles it is proposed that assessment is validated by the direct relationship it has to the genres students have studied.

It is believed that a focus on learning outcomes, through criteria-referenced scales will enable a focus on what students can do, rather than methods of teaching. Such criterion-referenced assessment, as opposed to Norm-referenced assessment, examines the extent to which instructional goals have been reached both formatively and summatively. The feedback this approach enables gives learners opportunity to practice, and teachers the means to modify and take further action (Hinkel, 2011). It is proposed that assessment criteria should be made explicit to students in understandable terms early as possible and that these should in turn support students and become target outcomes for the course (Hyland, 2006). It is also considered good practice in language assessment for teachers to explain to learners the assessment methods and conditions under which they will be assessed (Hyland, 2006). Gosling and Moon (2002) contend that student awareness of expectations through defined Learning Outcomes will make learning assessment fairer (as cited in Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). In addition to the obvious benefits this has for policy makers, course designers and educational staff, it is believed that participation and insights into evaluation processes may also help learners themselves "gain better understanding of the goals of education, stimulating them to think more in a more metacognitive about their own learning, and encouraging them to accept responsibility for their learning." (McKeachie and Kaplan (n.d.) as cited in Belluigi, 2013, p.19). Benesch (2001) also states that going beyond institution or expert expectations and allowing for a curriculum where learners' confidence in their rights and ability to challenge arrangements which are inequitable and unreasonable to them is desirable.

It is commonly acknowledged nowadays that learning involves active construction of meanings through both individual acts of cognition and social interaction (Richardson, 1997). However, Wette (2010) highlights the fact that the task of ensuring that learning occurs is problematic as learning processes are not directly observable, and their connection with instructional processes is neither assured nor direct. Siegel (2013) further remarks that test scores and assignment grades do not always reflect real learning and that the results of strategy instruction may not manifest themselves in the short term. He therefore highlights the value learner perspectives in providing insights into internal cognitive and metacognitive changes needed for effective classroom pedagogy to continue its evolution (Siegel, 2013). Such a learner-centered approach to language teaching devolves from the sixties and seventies humanistic and adult learning movements and the growth and spread of communicative approaches to language teaching (Nunan, 1990). This integration of information about the subjective needs of learners, relating to their perceptions of what they want to learn and how they want to learn it into curriculum development has been said

to have added an important dimension to needs analysis and deterred some of the earlier criticisms made of more mechanistic approaches (Nunan, 1990). In the approach, relational aspects of language teaching are stressed and they comprise of the need for learners to be consulted regarding curriculum goals, content and processes (Wette, 2010).

### **3. Research Aims**

Due to a lack of prior investigation in the field into the pedagogical benefits of utilising L2 learners' perceptions about the effectiveness of stated syllabus goals, the research seeks to uncover the extent to which learners perceived the new syllabuses' ESAP learning outcomes to be achieved. It will also offer further discussion as to whether such learning outcomes are feasible and offer insight into how future CA tasks could be handled and implemented. Research observations will be provided in a critically reflexive manner, drawing upon both the learners' survey responses and a subsequent analysis and discussion of these. Comparisons are drawn between ART 1 and 2 in the hope of locating and highlighting areas which were successful and those which perhaps require more focus in the future. It is hoped that as well as already being used as an 'assessment of learning' (Earl, 2003), the two continuous reading assessments and the results of the survey can also provide a basis for a formative and diagnostic 'assessment for learning' which recognises the benefit that feedback can have and can lead to a change in learning activities, based on the needs of the learner (Black and Wiliam, 1998). It is believed that as a consequence of the research, practitioners at the college and indeed those in similarly structured EAP departments will be able to better conceive and implement strategic action plans which ensure sufficient evolution and development of assessment tasks to fit with both learner and syllabus requirements (O'Leary, 2004).

### **4. Procedure/Method**

#### ***4.1 ESAP, ART Design and Research Participants***

In the college there are two streams of IFY students; Business and Engineering. The data collected for this research project was from Business majors (the largest stream) who were studying one of its key components: Economics. This subject features predominantly in IFY students' timetables and was deemed to be the subject which had the most suitable and aligned syllabus to meet the requirements of the EAP departmentally implemented ARTs, in terms of assessment format and structuring, intended LOs and assignment hand-in times.

Both ARTs were planned around the subject course's 'Scheme of Work' (SOW), provided at the start of each semester by the Economics Department. Topics covered and assessment submission deadlines were then designed by the EAP Course Developers to align so that each ART's activities were linked to, and would preclude the completion of the student's related economics assignment. In ART 1 the learners' core economics textbook was used, which was a two-page transcript about sports and leisure market distribution, which correlated to the subject's SOW topic for the course and assignment at that time: the distribution of market resources. In ART 2 a newspaper article from the BBC about global food shortages was adapted by the Course Developers. It related to the corresponding semester two Economics course content and assignment which was concerned with the effectiveness of quantitative easing measures. For both texts additional suggested reading lists were provided by the EAP Department, which added some scaffolding, as did the use of a 'sample' ART by the Course Developers and based on an article from the EAP Department's core textbook.

As Criterion-referenced assessment supporters espouse (Rust, Price and O'Donovan, 2003) and the new syllabus encouraged, all students were provided with the CA task description (Table 1) and assessment criteria (Table 2) to ensure transparency and clarity as to how their work would be assessed.

**Table 1**

<b>Student Task Guide: Active Reading Task</b>	
<b>Task description</b>	<p>You will be given a text by your teacher which links to a subject related assignment or topic. You need to read the text and then:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On the text, make notes, add questions, make links within the text and to other texts, identify key points and supporting arguments</li> <li>• Produce a summary sheet for the text which includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ A correct reference</li> <li>○ A summary of the text which paraphrases main points with supporting evidence</li> <li>○ A discussion of the value of the text in relation to the assignment/topic</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>A list of 10 key vocabulary items from the text, with words from the Academic Word list highlighted and using appropriate recording methods (e.g. usage, example, collocation, grammatical structure).</p>

Source: NCUK (2012)

**Table 2**

<b>Active Reading Assessment: Grading Criteria</b>			
	<b>Understanding</b>	<b>Critical Reading Skills</b>	<b>Vocabulary</b>
A* 80+%	Work at A* level has addressed all the criteria of an A grade and, in addition, is characterised by an outstanding level of accuracy and an original, critical perspective.		
A 70-79%	Annotations identify key points and supporting arguments accurately. The summaries demonstrate highly detailed understanding. Paraphrasing is accurate.	Linking and questions demonstrate a high level of critical engagement with the text. Excellent judgements are made on the value of the source and demonstrate a critical awareness (e.g. awareness of bias, relevance or author's stance)	An appropriate amount of relevant lexical items, including phrases and collocations have been recorded. Full information about each item has been recorded. The method of recording is highly detailed and useful.
B 60-69%	Annotations identify key points and supporting arguments accurately. The summaries demonstrate excellent understanding.	Linking and questions demonstrate a good level of critical engagement with the text. Good judgements are made on the value of the source	An appropriate amount of relevant lexical items, including phrases and collocations have been recorded. Full information about each item has been

	Paraphrasing is generally accurate.	and there is evidence of critical awareness (e.g. awareness of bias, relevance or author's stance).	recorded. The method of recording is detailed and useful.
C 50-59%	Annotations identify key points and supporting arguments with minor inaccuracies. The summaries demonstrate good understanding but minor points may be misunderstood. Paraphrasing may rely on word swaps and lexical chunking from the text.	Linking and questions demonstrate some aspects of critical engagement with the text. Some relevant judgements are made on the value of the source and there is some evidence of critical awareness (e.g. awareness of bias, relevance or author's stance).	A generally appropriate amount of mostly relevant lexical items have been recorded. Reasonably full information about each item has been recorded. The method of recording is generally good and mostly useful.
D 40-49%	Annotations identify some key points and some supporting arguments with some inaccuracies. The summaries demonstrate satisfactory understanding but contain misunderstandings. Paraphrasing relies heavily on original text.	Linking and questions demonstrate little critical engagement with the text. Some judgements are made on the value of the source but they may be inaccurate.	The items recorded are generally relevant and there is an adequate amount. Some important information about the words may not have been recorded. The method of recording is satisfactory but may lack useful detail.
E 35-39%	Annotations are mostly inaccurate. The summaries demonstrate limited understanding of main points. Paraphrasing is limited with parts of text copied.	There is some engagement with the text but it is limited and uncritical.	The items recorded may not be relevant and there may be an insufficient amount. Important information about the words may be missing and the method of recording lacks detail contains inaccuracies and misunderstandings and has limited use.
U <35%	Little or no understanding of text is demonstrated.	No evidence of critical engagement.	Items are irrelevant and/or insufficient. Only very minimal information about the words has been recorded. The method of recording has little use.

Source: NCUK (2012)

ART 1 and 2 were designed to try and ensure that the eight specified reading LOs and five related vocabulary LOs were met upon completion of each task (Table 3).

**Table 3**

<b>Intended Learning Outcomes: Active Reading Task</b>	
<b>Reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read a range of extended, academic, subject-related texts with speed and understanding.</li> <li>• Establish a specific purpose for reading a text.</li> <li>• Read for general meaning to assess relevance and evaluate text.</li> <li>• Employ effective reading strategies to understand detailed meaning: prediction, search reading followed by close reading of relevant sections, scanning, and inferring meaning.</li> <li>• Employ a range of critical reading strategies: distinguish fact from opinion, recognise author’s stance and purpose, distinguish key points and supporting evidence, question the author.</li> <li>• Follow the organisation and structure of an argument in texts through utilising general-to-specific and given-to-new structures in academic texts.</li> <li>• Make effective notes (e.g. use symbols, abbreviations, headings, cause and effect chain, table of comparisons, classification diagrams, flow charts) on an academic text and use notes to summarise texts.</li> <li>• Utilise a range of strategies for dealing with unknown words.</li> </ul>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use independent learning skills to select, record and use new vocabulary.</li> <li>• Use word lists to develop technical, academic and general vocabulary (e.g. the Academic Word List (AWL) and General Service List (GSL)).</li> <li>• Use formulaic language for a variety of academic functions (e.g. introducing the ideas of an author, describing cause and effect, comparing and contrasting, paraphrasing, transitioning from one paragraph to another).</li> <li>• Use a monolingual dictionary and other tools to develop vocabulary and understand the limitations of using translation tools for developing productive use of vocabulary.</li> <li>• Use word families and knowledge of grammatical patterns in which words occur to develop vocabulary and effective writing.</li> </ul>

Source: NCUK (2012)

#### **4.2 Standardization**

Reliability, consistency and comparability were regulated through standardization sessions conducted before each marking period. Before these sessions each teacher would be emailed with six sample ARTs and asked to grade them according to the assessment criteria. At the proceeding sessions a presentation was given by one of the Course Developers (in case of reading, myself), so as to remind teachers of the intended LOs, task breakdowns and ranges for each part of the grading criteria. Student samples were provided and broken down on PowerPoint so that teachers would be clear as to what would be expected in the different grade bands for the

criteria areas of *Understanding*, *Critical Reading Skills* and *Vocabulary* and how to differentiate between borderline grades. The teachers were then asked to get into groups of five and discuss the grading of the six samples sent to them via email. Each group then wrote their grades for each sample on the whiteboard. When this part of the session was completed the grade which the four Course Developers and Head of EAP (year 1) had already agreed upon was given and further slide explanations were used to support the grade given. Discussion was open and questions from the teachers encouraged. After the hand-in of the ARTs the Course Developers monitored a sample of papers of different grades from each EAP instructor and acted as second-marking filters. As Hyland, (2006) advocates, it was hoped that such rater training would lead to consistent scoring and agreement on the criteria and their application would make the assessments more reliable.

### **4.3 Survey**

Learner surveys, based on EAP students' "needs, preferences, perceptions, and lacks" have been highlighted in EAP research methodology for their use in guiding syllabus designers and curriculum developers (Jordan, 1997, as cited in Alavi and Dashtestani, 2014). The survey for this particular research had congruent goals was given to students after they had completed both ART 1 and 2. It was both qualitative and quantitative in nature, with a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. For the closed questions students were asked to either give yes/no judgements or to rate their attainment of syllabus specified goals on five point Likert-type scales, while the open questions asked why students felt a certain way about closed question responses and also asked for elaboration and suggestion as to why successes or failures were perceived. The survey questions were developed from the Task Description (Table 1), Assessment Criteria (Table 2) and prescribed LOs (Table 3) provided in the new syllabus and available to all learners. The language and terms had already been explained for each assessment task in targeted classes at the start of the semester and comprehension checked through tasks and activities in these classes. The ordering of survey questions followed the same order of the LOs laid out in the syllabus and in most cases, the wordings which formed the survey questions were taken directly taken from this document. In certain cases however, it was felt necessary to simplify language so as to ensure the learners understood the intended outcome that they were being asked to assess. To validate the content of the survey, it was submitted to the other three Course Developers at the time as well as the Deputy Head of the department. Revisions and simplification of terms were applied with regard to these experts' judgments. The questionnaire was handed out to students by their EAP teacher in their regular lessons. The same classes and students were asked to complete the questionnaires regarding both ARTs and were selected based on timetabling (ability to give the questionnaire out at the same or similar times on the same day) ease alone. Each teacher was asked to go through the survey questions before they were given out to ensure maximised comprehension of content. Students were then given time to complete the questionnaires in class and encouraged to ask questions if they were unsure about any of its content. A total of 203 students across 12 classes participated in this study and after the removal of incomplete questionnaires for either ART 1 or 2 (or both), 192 were utilized for statistical analysis.

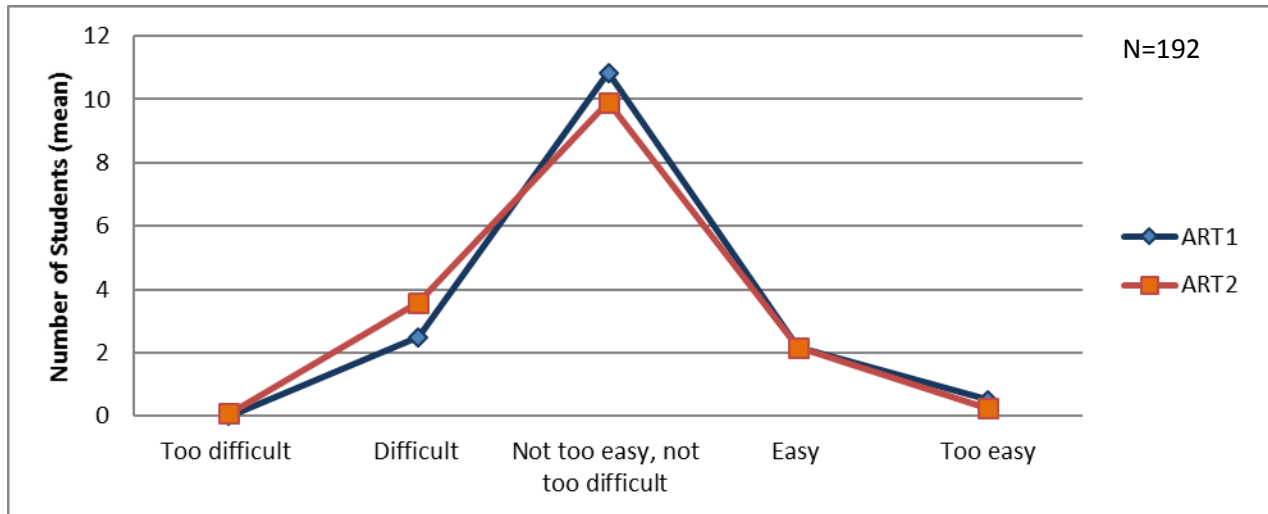
## **5. Results and Discussion**

### **5.1 Materials used**

Students were first asked about their perceptions of the text complexity for each respective ART.

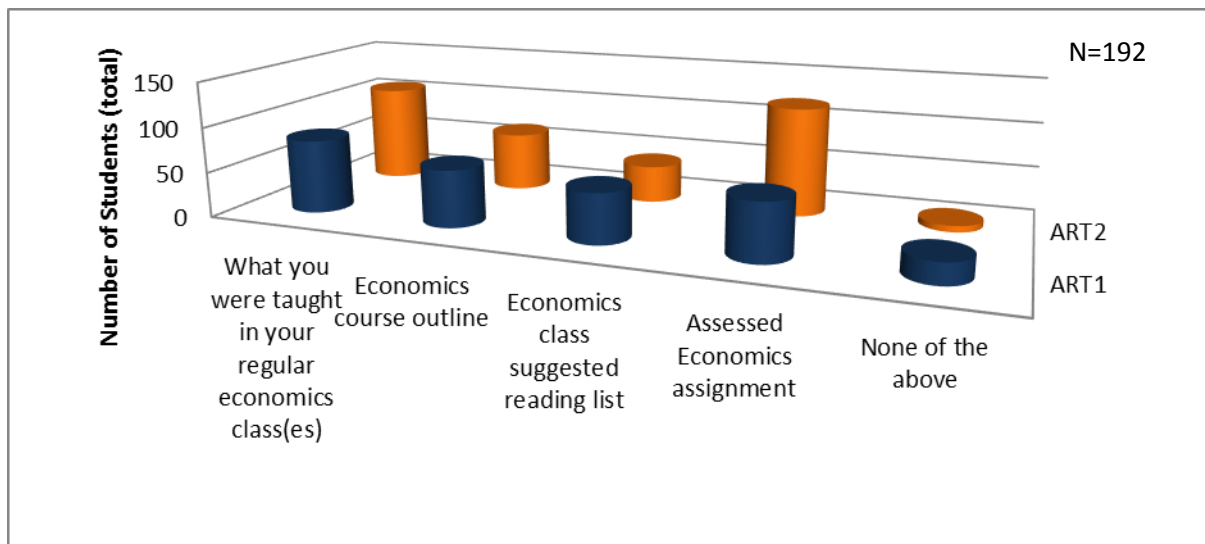


While the majority of learners believed it neither to be too easy or difficult, 19% more felt that ART 2 was ‘difficult’ or ‘too difficult’ than was the case in ART 1 (figure A.1).



**Figure A.1: Perceived Difficulty of Text Used for ART 1 and 2**

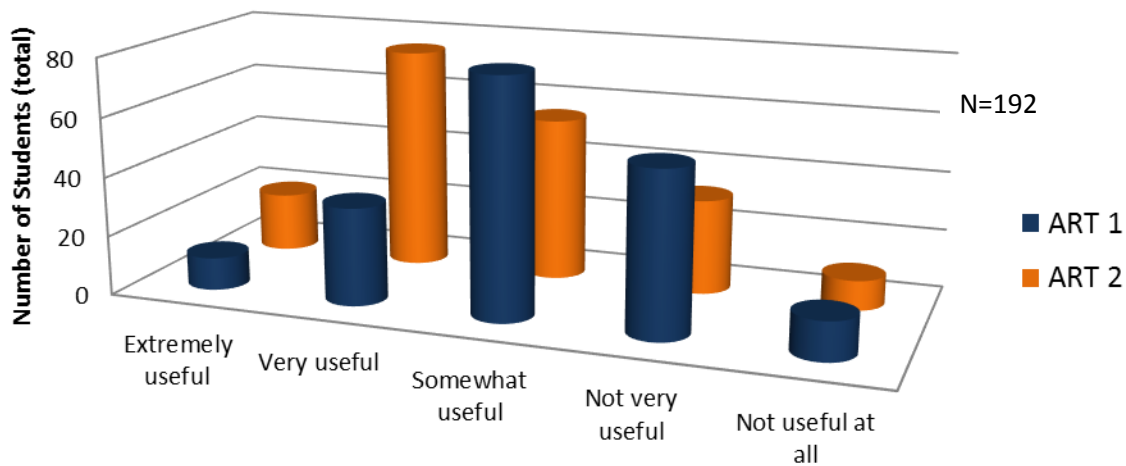
Whilst both ARTs were considered by the learners to be broadly related to their economics studies at the college (rising from an average of 81% in ART 1 to 93% in ART 2), 57% of students felt the assignments to be specifically related to their economic classes in ART 2, as opposed to 42% in ART 1. 30% more learners also reported feeling a correlation between the second ART’s content and the corresponding economics assignment than the first, rising from 33% to 63% (figure A.2).



**Figure A.2: Perceived Relation of ART to aspects of Economics Course**

Whereas in ART 1 23% of respondents found it to be ‘very’ or ‘extremely useful’ for their economic assignment, this number rose to 49% for ART 2, with 29% of learners considering it as

‘somewhat useful’ (figure A.3). In terms of perceived ability in understanding the relevance of a text to a subject assignment, the quantity rose from 52% in ART 1 to 78% in ART 2.



**Figure A.3: Perceived Usefulness of ART for Subject Assignment**

The overall favourability towards the text in ART 2, despite indications that the learners found the content more difficult may be attributed to a number of factors. First, it perhaps relates to the authenticity of the material used. Despite an absence of research into the importance of authenticity for such stakeholders, Lewkowicz’s (2000) findings exposed the need for further discussion about the impact such perceptions of materials can have on performance. According to Berardo (2006) the type of ‘real discourse’ contained in the newspaper article used in ART 2 may have exposed the learners to more ‘real language’ than the artificial language of the textbook transcript used in ART 1. He suggests that this exposure impacts motivation through both the interest level and confidence of the learner, and therefore the likelihood of them reading further in the field. It is therefore considered that this should be a key consideration for future ART implementation. Secondly, it seems that when the links between the task and the learners’ economics assignment were perceived to be more explicit in ART 2, the learners observed themselves more goal-directed actions and to be more engaged in the learning strategies used to mediate their own learning (Hall, 2001). These findings and further insight are provided by some of the learners’ open responses as to why they perceived either task as usual or not:

ART 1: *“The ART 1 task not really relevant to the assignment.”*  
*“Not an overlap between ART and economics assignment.”*  
*“There are less relationship between ART 1 and Econ CW [coursework].”*  
*“It is not related to the questions in the economics assignment.”*  
*“ART 1 not related much to my economics assignment.”*  
*“I can know more but I cannot use it in my assignment.”*

ART 2: *“Because the econ assignment use the same article as the ART 2 and ART 2 help us to understand the article.”*  
*“Know the policy used in the real world.”*

*“It is related to economy nowadays. It is up to date for me.”*

*“I can use the example in ART 2 test to support my opinion in economics assignment 2.”*

*“It is a true example about output, I used it in my economics assignment.”*

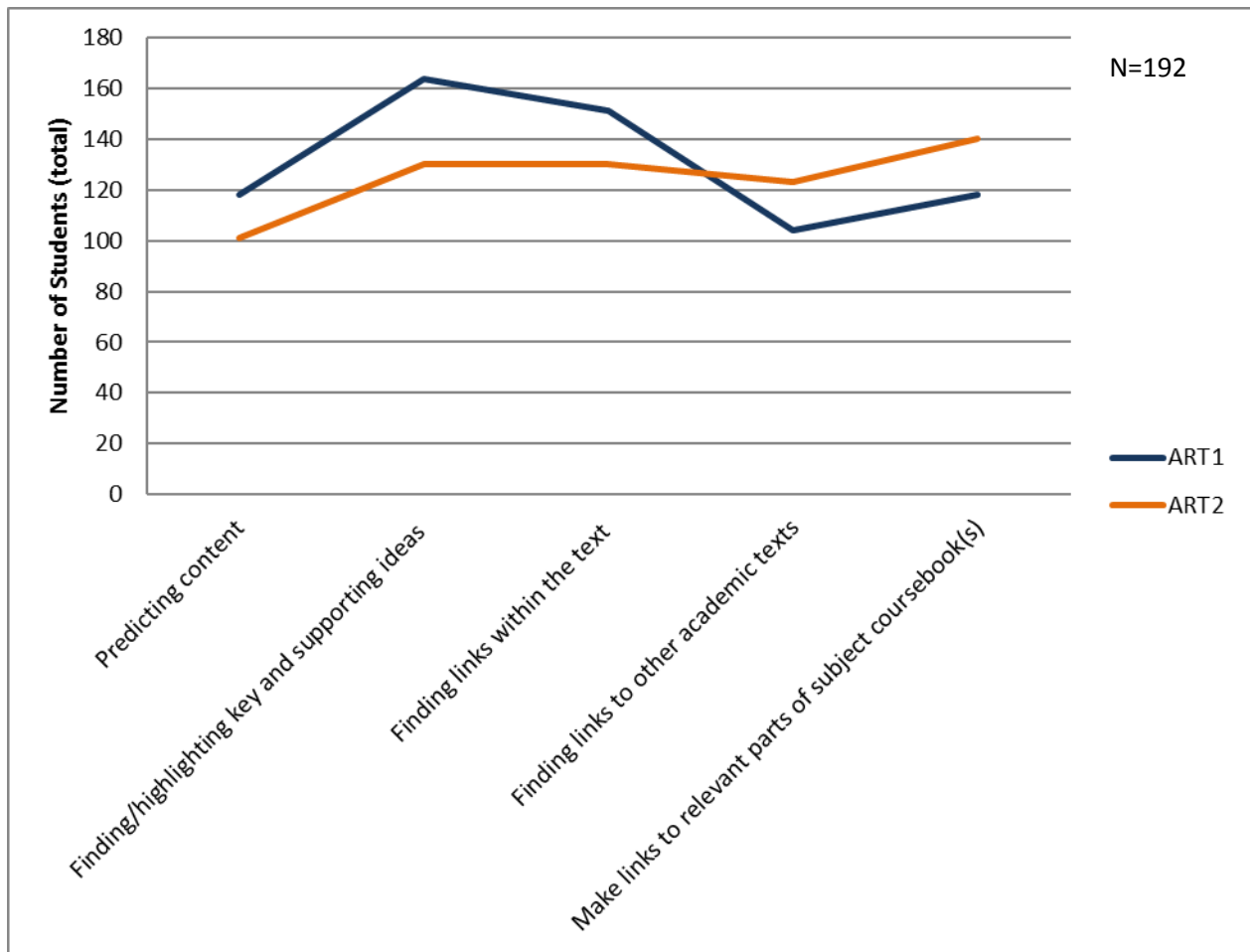
*“ART 2 helps me understand the article and make it easier for me to finish my economics assignment in semester 2.”*

The combined open and closed responses suggest that Course Developers and Curriculum Designers might benefit from recognising that they are not always best positioned to know what interests and motivates their learners, and may consequently profit from allowing learners a voice in content selection (Belcher, 2006).

### ***5.2 Reading Strategies Within and Between Texts***

Whilst following the syllabus recommendation for learners to read a variety of subject-related genres, the style of the articles given for each respective task does seem to have negatively influenced the proficiency levels learners perceived in the areas of: predicting content (falling from 61% to 53%), finding/highlighting key and supporting ideas within the articles (falling from 85% to 68%), and finding links within the text (down to 68% from 79%) (Figure A.4). Although the declines were not large, the fact that fewer students perceived matriculation in these strategies in ART 2 could relate to the less desired possible outcomes of using the more ‘authentic’ newspaper text in ART 2. As outlined by Richards (2001, p.253), such materials often contain “difficult language, unneeded vocabulary items and complex language structures”.

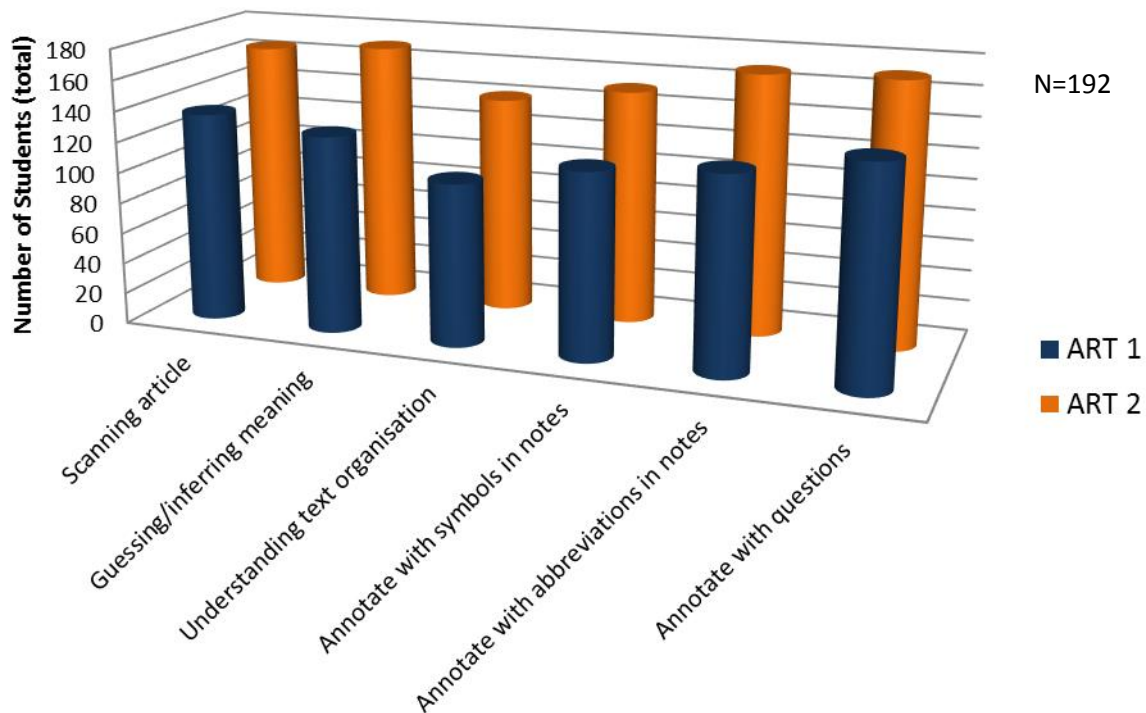
It may be pertinent to note that although students felt less able to find links within the ART 2 text, they did feel more confident in finding links to other academic texts (a rise from 54% to 64%) and their subject coursebooks (which rose to 73% from 61%). (Figure A.4). Such results indicate that learners may not have been as aware or as confident identifying the organizational devices used within texts, as they were with identifying the content meaning of the texts. As such, it may be pertinent for EAP teachers to pay more attention to the former type of cognitive reading strategies to address the self-effacing perceptions shown by the learners (Li and Wang, 2010). While it seems that the use of the individual texts may have caused some difficulty, overall the findings suggest that such complexity did not necessarily equate with perceptions of usefulness or have a ‘Krashenite’ de-motivating effect that some would suggest it might (Berardo, 2006), which will be also be useful to note when future such tasks are designed and applied.



**Figure A.4: Perceived ability in Predicting Content, Making and Finding Links**

### ***5.3 Improvement between Tasks***

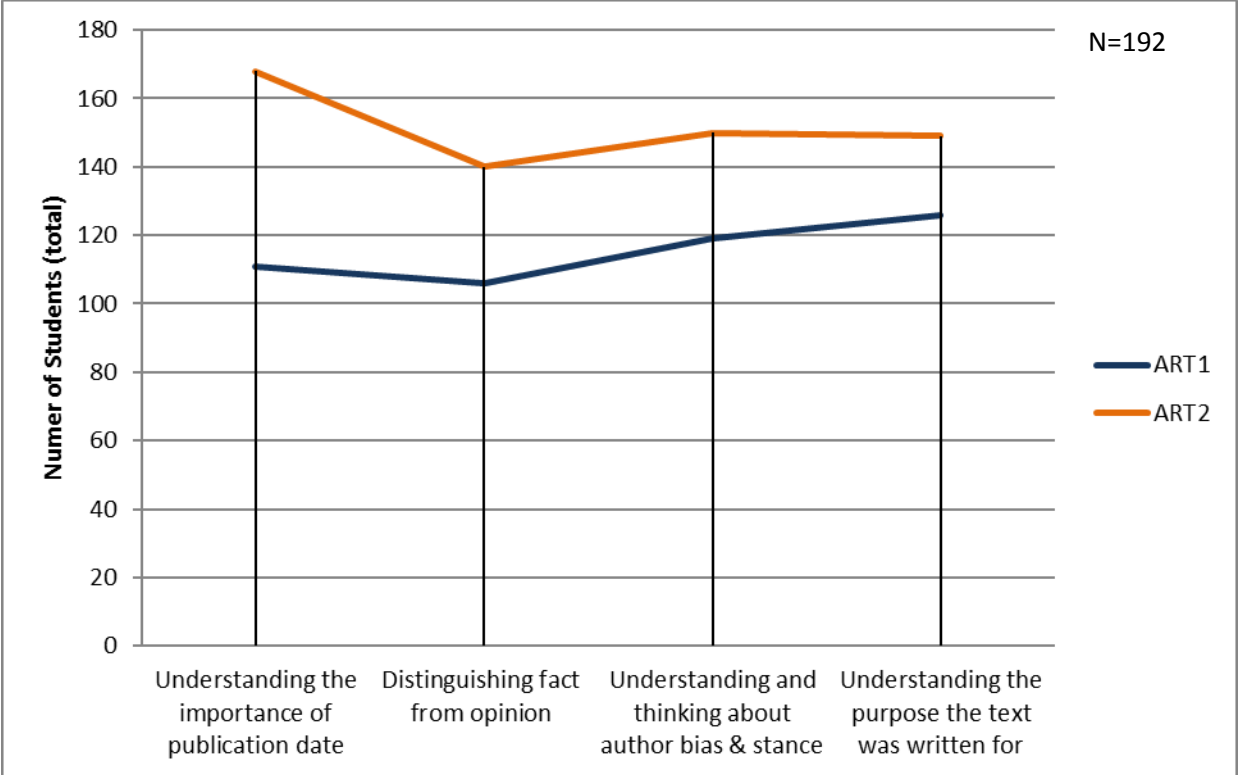
Indeed, the results show general increases in perceptions of ability in the majority of syllabus targeted reading strategies, which could suggest that the newly implemented criterion referenced ART assessments were largely successful in both semesters. It might also indicate that teaching reading strategies explicitly produced the positive effect on student production and transfer to subject-related texts, as Rust, Price and O’Donovan’s (2003) research project suggested it might. Whilst the majority of students felt they had learned to scan; infer meaning; understand organisational and structural devices used to achieve a specific purpose; annotate with symbols, notes and questions, more felt that they had utilised these skills in ART 2 than ART 1 (figure A.5) This seems to validate what several reading researchers have already suggested: that reading skills are enhanced when prior knowledge is activated (Carrell, 1985; Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983; Clarke and Silberstein, 1977; Coady, 1979; Pritchard, 1990 as cited in Anderson, 1994). It is conceivable therefore, that by choosing the same task in both semesters the students were able to build on previously learned skills and feel more confident in their use, despite feeling that the content itself might have become more difficult.



**Figure A.5: Perceived Reading Strategy Skills**

#### ***5.4 Analysing and Using the Text(s)***

From the learner’s perspectives, two sizeable improvements were in understanding the importance of publication date (rising from 58% to 88%) and distinguishing fact from opinion (rising from 55% to 73%). There were also encouraging upsurges in learner perceptions of being able to understand and think about author bias and stance (a rise from 62% to 78%), and understanding the purpose the text was written for (a rise from 66% to 78%) (figure A.6). Such results indicate that through practice, students felt improved understanding of reading strategies required at university level and developed a clearer purpose for reading, which was a key syllabus aim. These findings suggest that after formative feedback was provided in ART 1, learners’ consciousness and thinking processes regarding these items were stirred, allowing them to monitor their comprehension and apply more appropriate strategies in ART 2 (Brown, 1978; Pressley and Afflerbach, 1995).



**Figure A.6: Critical Thinking Skills**

**5.5 Summarising Text(s)**

Whilst improvements were felt in the skills above, summarising seemed to be an aspect which learners felt weaker in. The second ART in fact yielded less feelings of comfort with mini-summary annotations than the first (falling from 73% to 70%). Whilst these figures may not be too perturbing, the fact that 43% of students felt unable to write full summaries of both the ART 1 and 2 texts does indicate a clear area of concern for students and therefore one which future task design and teacher instruction should focus more on (Figure A.7). Kirkland and Saunders, 1991 and Du (forthcoming) assert that summarising is vital in academic settings for both explicit summary assignments and more implicit incorporation of source material into learners own original writings. If these scholars’ ideas are followed, one of the reasons learners had lower perceptions of ability in this area may have been due to ‘cognitive overload’. Unlike many of the other listed reading strategies that were metacognitively deemed to have been achieved by the learners, it may be important to note that summarising is a reading-writing activity, one which is “late developing” (Kirkland and Saunders, 1991). The ‘overload’ felt by the learners may therefore have been determined by a number of interacting internal and external constraints. As well as the nature of the materials, other external constraints that students may have experienced include difficulties with understanding purpose, audience and being limited by time constraints (Horwitz, 1988 as cited in Kirkland and Saunders, 1991). Learners could perceivably have felt conflict between the expectations their EAP teacher had of them to fulfil the criterion-referenced language goals and the content and meaning they were being instructed to focus on in their subject assignments. The time provided for and between the EAP and content assignments may also have been too short to allow learners the ‘cognitive space’ to focus on improving their skills in this area (Kirkland and Saunders, 1991). Internal constraints may have also been present in the

form of learners' L2 proficiency, their cognitive and metacognitive skills and the formal and content schemata (Kirkland and Saunders, 1991). When ARTs and similar tasks are implemented in the future therefore, it may be pertinent to consider these constraints and conduct strategy training with the learners, as well as allow them time to superordinate texts and complete top-down in addition to bottom up processing (Kirkland and Saunders, 1991).

### 5.6 Vocabulary

Whilst there was an 8% rise in students who felt able to produce detailed vocabulary work related to the article, the second ART still only had a just over 50% perceived ability rate. It is interesting that though students did not deem their skills in using English to English dictionaries, locating definitions; the correct part of speech; synonyms or antonyms; phrases or collocations as varying greatly, respondents believed they had improved in producing their own example sentences in context and giving their own definitions (figure A.7). In these areas at least then syllabus aims appear to have been met and learners' vocabulary knowledge seems to have been brought into communicative use (Laufer and Nation, 1995). The results are interesting as well, in that they do not align with Laufer's (1998) research findings on the relationships among passive and active production of vocabulary items. Students seem to have felt some degree of fossilisation with the tasks involving passive vocabulary use, but more confident and able in using vocabulary actively through controlled productive knowledge.

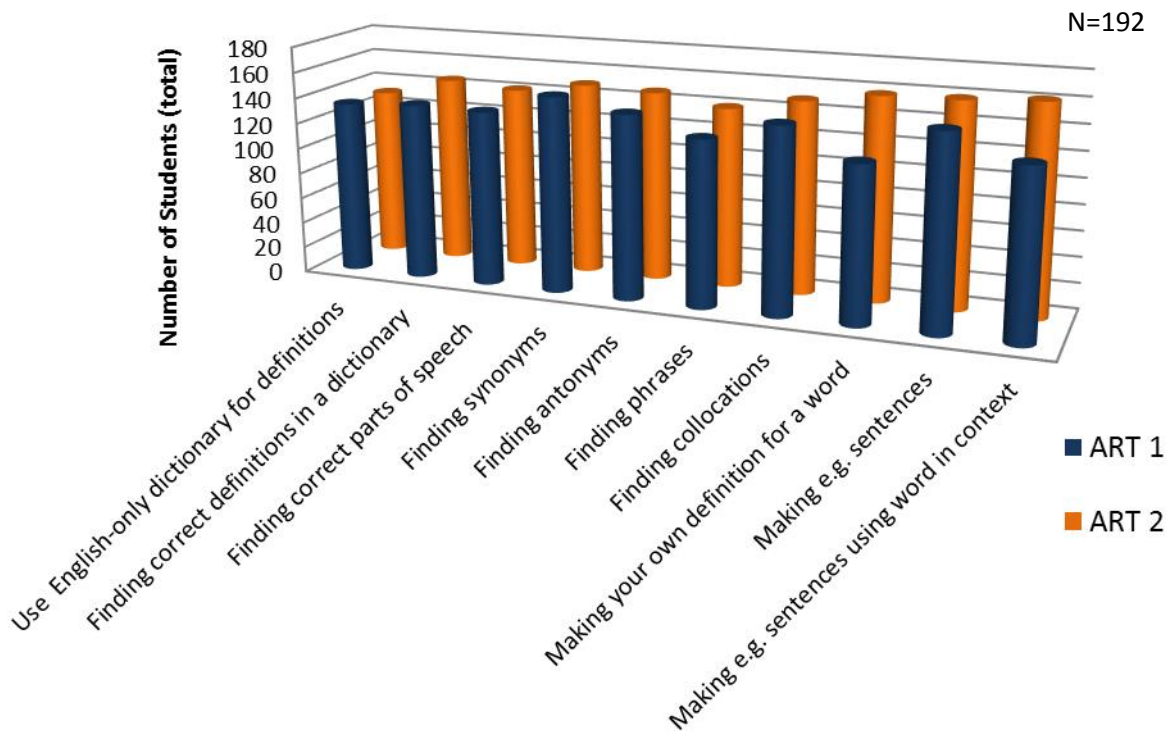


Figure A.7: Perceived Vocabulary Skills

Whilst learners who stated that they felt able to locate word families rose by 30%, from 43% to 73% in ART 2, a low percentage of students across both tasks felt able to use the General Service List to guide their vocabulary work (41% and 47% respectively). The fact that 65% and 66% did feel able to use the Academic Word List in such a way lends credence to Levine and Reves' (1990, p.37) claim that "it is easier for the reader of academic texts to cope with special terminology than with general vocabulary." In the future therefore, as well as focusing more on vocabulary acquisition techniques and strategies, it may also be prudent for the ART task designers provide supplementary materials and stress to teachers the need for instruction that builds general and basic vocabulary as well as subject specific and/or academic items.

### ***5.7 Lack of Improvement between Tasks***

Although there were overall positive results about the two tasks' successes, there are still a few important points to bear in mind. The decision to choose the same task in both semesters was intended to allow the formative feedback from ART 1, along with continued focus on the strategies used, to try and achieve the intended learner outcomes. The attainment of this goal is questionable as many of the students did not perceive sizeable improvement in their abilities between the two tasks. This could be due to a number of factors: their perceptions of improvement may not correlate exactly to the actuality of their acquisition; there may have been a delay in conscious acquisition of skills; or the continuous assessment tasks may have failed to achieve their desired outcomes and learners' study and language skills were not developed in the way the syllabus prescribed they would be. The explanations left by learners regarding the obtainment of active reading skills seem to offer support to the former two scenarios, with many students commenting of improvement on their active reading skills, which they believed in turn helped them understand their economics assignments more easily. The responses indicate as well that in the learners' minds the tasks successfully combined language and content information in a number of ways:

*ART 2: "I can find many reference from ART to support my ideas in my assignment."*

*"Task enable us to read the economic text actively and get the main idea which is useful to get a good stance when writing an essay about the text."*

*"Improve reading skills."*

*"The brainstorm can help me have clear thinking of the economics assignment."*

*"With good understanding it is easier to complete the assignment,"*

*"At first I cannot find links between some ideas, but I understand after the ART [2]."*

### ***5.8 Lessons Learned***

It seems that the Course Developer's decision to steer away from the syllabus recommended authentic text type outlined in the new syllabus was misguided, and that more authentic materials with clear links to the Economics Department's course and assessment content might be more successfully implemented in the future. Learners appear to have responded well to articles about current policies, but more detailed analysis will be required on this point, as well as sampling to ascertain the most successful types of texts within this broad 'authentic' umbrella. The results also suggest that more coordination might be useful between the ART task implementers in the EAP Department and their respective counterparts in the Economics Department. In the open comments left by the survey participants it seems that the correlation between what students were being taught in their subject classes, as well as the timing of assignments, may have



affected their perceptions of relevance and need, which in turn may have altered their motivation to follow syllabus outlined strategies for EAP at least.

ART 1: *“I think the topic is not very related to my economic study.”*

*“I can understand the economic concept by the text example.”*

ART 2: *“Problems with timing - rather than task - Because we finish the economics assignment before we start the ART task (class 2).”*

Such comments bring up issues with inter-departmental collaboration and suggest that the respective departments would benefit from aligning their Schemes of Works further, to ensure that learners both perceive and receive the optimal conditions to utilise their gained reading skills gained for their Active Reading Task and their subject lessons and assignments as well.

## **6. Limitations**

Whilst it is felt that the survey findings offer valuable insight into the perceived effectiveness of the newly implemented Continuous Assessment Tasks, it is also conceded that the limitations of the assessment tool and process may have masked the failures (Bloxham and Boyd, 2007). All of the results provided had a full response rate of 192 students, but this may not be fully representative of the 203 learners in the study. In terms of the stakeholders upon which this research focussed, and the questions and connections that students were asked to make, it is possible that the questions in the survey assessed learners’ metacognitive strategy awareness more than the actual cognitive processes that occurred. The assessment tasks themselves may not have necessarily measured the intended outcomes as was intended, but instead have assessed a lower-level understanding of the material. Dörnyei and Taguchi (2010) further warn that “trying to present ourselves in a good light is a natural human tendency, and this is very bad news for the survey researcher” (p.10). It is also possible that, due to the summative element of the assessments, learners may have merely negotiated the type of outcome rewarded in ART 1 and that as a result the formative nature of actively reading through taking risks may have been compromised (Brown and Knight, 1994).

## **7. Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations**

It is hoped that the learners’ voice has been, at least to some extent ‘enabled’ (Belluigi, 2013) and that the research may have enhanced learners’ metacognitive strategies. Whilst it is not suggested that such questionnaires can probe completely into an issue (Dörnyei and Taguchi, 2010), the results show that on some level at least, the participants perceived the intended outcomes of the ARTs to have been achieved in many aspects within their EAP classroom environments. It is encouraging that such perceptions were at the level of the learners, for, as Gregory and Chapman (2013) posit that “For students to succeed, they need to believe that they can learn and that what they are learning is useful, relevant, and meaningful for them.” (p.13). Despite its successes however, when considering the student survey itself, the results suggest that it might have been better to provide a survey immediately after each respective ART, instead of giving one combined survey after the completion of both tasks. It is felt that this might have better ensured that perceptions were at their freshest for both tasks and that responses would be less likely to have been altered by external factors. Failing to do this may also have neglected the potential realisation of improved learning opportunities during the academic year (Belluigi, 2013).

The divergent learner perceptions regarding different elements of the tasks may arch back to the way in which the tasks were designed and applied, with more authentic materials appearing to have been received more preferably and to have had a more intrinsically motivating effect. Although subject-specific vocabulary was felt to have been addressed, there was a plateau in perceived ability for many of the other vocabulary skills. Ability to use the GSL to achieve intended vocabulary outcomes stood out as an area which requires more consideration in ART task design in the future. With most LO areas receiving more than an average of 50% perceived achievement for both ARTs, summary writing, both in annotation and full paragraph form, was an area of clear concern for the participants, and thus one which needs to be further addressed in future tasks. Another key consideration for the task designers may be the “the complexity of a course-related assignment in terms of its unclear and inexplicit expectations perceived by students” (Yang and Shi, 2003, p.165).

In terms of producing tasks that adhered to both subject and EAP goals, the results reveal mixed messages and may further highlight issues with language-content assignments. Whilst the goal of the new CA tasks heed to de Bot’s (2002, as cited in Coyle, 2008, p.3) notion that “... language teachers and subject teachers need to work together ... [to] formulate the new didactics needed for a real integration of form and function in language teaching”, the actuality of the ARTs implementation was discrepant with this, and seems to have negatively influenced some learners’ perceptions of the tasks’ successes. The timing and links to the subject assignment presented themselves as being an important need in the learners’ minds which was not deemed to have been fully met in either ART 1 or 2. Another possible explanation (and concern) arising from the results and responses in this area is the fact that unlike the ARTs themselves, the materials chosen for the corresponding economics assignments by the Economics Department were not discussed with the EAP Department.

A future research avenue may consequently be to conduct research concerning the perceived attainment of the learners’ subject syllabus outline and materials, and then use this for comparative purposes with those from the EAP Department. To avoid the “considerable fossilisation potential” artificial separation of content and language can have (Dudley-Evans and Green, 2007), cooperation between subject and EAP departments could be explored even further, and if hand-in date timings permitted, a trialling of using the same texts for the subject assignment as the EAP ARTs could be initiated. It is foreseen that such a move could further increase teachers’ ability to improve the execution of a number of professional skills, such as the skill to motivate, establish and maintain contact, to control the learning process and to simulate and activate. (Vygotsky, 1978).

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- 8) How useful do you think the ART 2 task was in helping you complete the economics assignment in semester 2?
- a. Extremely useful
  - b. Very useful
  - c. Somewhat useful
  - d. Not very useful
  - e. Not useful at all

Say why:

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- 9) Do you think that you will use the type of text used in ART 1 (textbook article) when doing research for your economics studies in the future?

Yes                      No

If yes, say when you think you will use this kind of text:

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- 10) Do you think that you will use the type of text used in ART 1 (textbook article) for research for any other of your studies in the future?

Yes                      No

If yes, say when you think you will use this kind of text:

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- 11) Do you think that you will use the type of text used in ART 2 (newspaper article) when doing research for your economics studies in the future?

Yes                      No

If yes, say when you think you will use this kind of text:

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- 12) Do you think that you will use the type of text used in ART 2 (newspaper article) for research for any other of your studies in the future?

Yes                      No

If yes, say when you think you will use this kind of text:

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13) Which of the following skills do you think you have learned from ART 1 and ART 2?  
(you can check/tick both boxes or neither)

	ART1	ART2
a. Finding/highlighting key and supporting ideas in an article		
b. Using the following reading strategies:		
I. Predicting content of article		
II. Scanning article		
III. Guessing/infering meaning		
c. Understand how organisation and structure of a text are used to achieve a specific purpose		
d. Annotating (write notes on) the texts with:		
I. Symbols in notes		
II. Abbreviations in notes		
III. Mini-Summaries		
IV. Questions		
V. Links within the text		
e. Effective notes		
f. Summarising the content of an article		
I. Paraphrasing information that you have read		
II. Writing the summary in academic paragraphed format		
III. Giving a reference for this summary		
g. Finding links to other academic texts		
I. Find relevant academic texts in a library, online or on a database		
h. Make links to and read relevant parts of subject coursebook(s)		
i. Discussing the value of a text		
I. Understanding the relevance of an article to a subject-assignment		
II. Understanding and thinking about author bias & stance		
III. Understanding the purpose the text was written for		
IV. Understanding the importance of publication date		
V. Distinguishing fact from opinion		
j. Using the Academic Word List (AWL) to help guide vocabulary work		
k. Using the General Service List (GSL) to help guide vocabulary work		
l. Producing detailed vocabulary work related to the article		
I. Finding correct definitions in a dictionary		



i. Use an English-only dictionary to find definitions		
II. Finding correct parts of speech		
III. Making your own definition for a word		
IV. Making example sentences		
V. Making example sentences using word in the correct context		
VI. Finding synonyms		
VII. Finding antonyms		
VIII. Finding word families		
IX. Finding collocations		
X. Finding phrases		
XI. Finding out if the word is on the Academic Word List		

14) In your opinion, what were the strengths of the ART 1 assignment?

15) In your opinion, what were the weaknesses of the ART 1 assignment?

16) In your opinion, what were the strengths of the text of the ART 2 assignment?

17) In your opinion, what were the weaknesses of the ART 2 assignment?