On a sunny autumn weekend recently, I was helping my younger son ride his ‘big boy’ bike, and I was reminded just how complicated an activity cycling is. In order to make a bicycle move forwards without toppling over, you need to push on the pedals, manage your speed, steer with the handlebars, and look ahead for turns and obstacles, all while maintaining balance on an oddly shaped seat. Inevitably, just as soon as my son figured out which direction the pedals should rotate, he would forget to steer and career off onto a neighbor’s lawn.

In this respect at least, learning a language for academic purposes is much like riding a bike: a complex task requiring coordination of multiple senses, skills and body parts with fairly frequent bumps and scrapes. And that’s before you add in gears, road signs and a bike lock. Without straining the metaphor too far, as students approach and enter academic programmes in English, they can no longer afford to practise pedalling, steering and road safety separately: they have to learn to do it all together. For this reason, EAP programmes need to find flexible ways to integrate language skills.

Research into the language needs of ESL students in English-medium university degrees supports this position. Writing, for instance, rarely occurs in the absence of reading: summarising, synthesising and responding to sources are hallmarks of academic writing (Sullivan and Tinberg, 2006). This is consistent with the progression of written genres in education from everyday experiences through abstractions to critical interpretations and knowledge creation (Feez, 1998). At the highest levels of academia, all research writing starts with literature review (Feak and Swales, 2009). Listening, meanwhile, may be yoked with speaking in many language curricula, but in the university lecture hall, it is most closely integrated with the challenging writing task of note-taking.

In our needs analysis of the linguistic skills needed for undergraduate and MBA students at the University of Delaware, we found the same pattern. Class and group discussions, for example, emerged as among the most important and challenging activities for international students. But, unlike in many EAP classes, discussions in this context involve more than sharing opinions, experiences and intercultural comparisons; they incorporate responses to reading, planning for group projects or preparation for writing, drawing on all linguistic domains. A widespread teaching technique in MBA programmes is known as the Harvard case study, in which students read a description of a business dilemma, sometimes work in groups to present the case, always discuss solutions, listen to classmate’s opinions, answer the professor’s questions, and finally (or sometimes as a preparatory step) write an analysis (Forman and Rymer, 1999). Discrete skill instruction simply cannot prepare students for this complex task chain.
Our undergraduate needs analysis revealed one very simple but important result: everything is important. We gave both faculty and international students a list of 22 skills and activities that we predicted undergraduates would encounter based on previous research. More than two-thirds of students ranked all 22 as important or very important, and more than half the faculty ranked all but one skill as important or very important. There was no statistical difference between faculty from different disciplines in their rating of skills like note-taking, writing from sources, synthesis and group discussions. These activities, which draw on multiple language domains, were judged to be important by almost all the students and faculty in our survey.

Although each university is different, and understanding the needs of the local context is critical in designing EAP courses (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002), our findings closely mirror those of a recent large-scale study of almost 30,000 students at 80 US universities (Anderson et al, 2015). More than 75% of students reported discussing ideas for writing assignments before beginning a draft; eight out of 10 had to write summaries of their reading; a full 90% were asked to analyse or evaluate their reading, research or observations; and around half had to read and give feedback on peers’ writing. Furthermore, these all ranked high among the practices that were found to lead to the most learning during the college experience. Therefore, even when the product is something as individual as a written assignment, the process often integrates all the other skill domains.

Ideally, perhaps, EAP classes would approximate the university experience by adopting an integrated-skills instructional model. The revised EAP Pathways programme that we will launch at Delaware in 2016 does exactly this by pairing thematic reading materials with related video lectures, to which students will respond in writing, discussion, and individual and group presentations. Development in grammar, vocabulary and oral intelligibility will be stressed throughout the semester, and students will produce a portfolio of work that demonstrates academic readiness.

However, this approach may not be possible everywhere, so here are some less radical solutions I’ve tried that encourage meaningful integration of skills even within traditionally discrete-skill curricula:

1. In my reading/writing classes, I hold a reading seminar. Each student has to locate an article relevant to the course theme and lead a class or group discussion. All students are responsible for reading the article (I give them a quick comprehension quiz!), and they are graded on the quality of their contributions to the discussion. I tell my students that at the university level, they may have understood every word of their reading, but if they can’t participate in a discussion about it, they are missing the most valuable learning opportunity.

2. In my listening/speaking classes, I assign a moderated class debate. Students work in pairs to research a controversial topic from the website www.procon.org. One member of the pair takes the ‘pro’ side, the other the ‘con’, and they then hold to their positions as they engage their classmates in an informed debate. Since everyone has read the summary of key arguments and watched the videos posted on this well-researched site, all students have sufficient background knowledge with which to participate. The debate thus integrates reading and listening (to the videos and to each other) with speaking. It could easily be followed up with a synthesis writing assignment.

3. Online discussion boards represent an exciting opportunity to integrate skills, engage in an increasingly important academic practice, and learn language. For example, at the start of each unit in Q: Skills for Success, a textbook series for which I am a co-author (Caplan and Douglas, 2015), students listen to a recorded discussion, talk together about the questions and images they see, and then go online to write about their opinions, read their classmates’ ideas and post replies. Online discussion boards promote equal participation, give students time to think deeply about their ideas and develop digital literacy.

4. The speaking-writing connection is often under-appreciated in ESL teaching (Weissberg, 2006). In Q, for example, after students have read two texts and watched a video that all take different perspectives on the unit question, they discuss questions that encourage them to synthesise these three sources. Finally, they reflect on their discussion in a short writing task that both wraps up the readings and also serves as brainstorming for the major writing assignment to come. Task chains like these are good academic preparation since they start with texts as a source for a group discussion in which ideas can be tested, challenged and defended; the writing that follows is likely to be more sophisticated and developed.

5. A powerful model for teaching writing that works precisely because it extends across multiple domains is the Teaching/Learning Cycle...
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In this approach, students first analyse model texts in the target genre, interrogating them for organisation, purpose and language use. Then, students work together or with the teacher to jointly construct a new text. This stage of collaborative writing is critical because it makes the thinking processes that underlie writing visible and the object of discussion. This complex speaking/listening activity reinforces the organisation of the genre and generates highly productive talk about grammar and vocabulary choices. Students have shared ownership in the collaboratively written text, which serves as an additional model of the target genre. Now that they have analysed sample writing and produced a text together, they are ready to write individually, following a process of drafting, revising, peer and self review, and editing. The principle of the Teaching/Learning Cycle is ‘guidance through interaction in the context of shared experience’ (Martin, 2009): that is, writing is best learned not only through writing, but also through focused and guided discussions about the models students have read and the one they produce together. You can see this pedagogy in action in Inside Writing (e.g. Bixby and Caplan, 2014).

Integrating skills in the EAP classroom requires some planning, but the reward is seeing skills reinforce each other. Reading acquires a new sense of purpose when students are accountable to their peers; discussions are more thoughtful when they draw on multiple reading and listening sources; and writing benefits from meaningful interaction such as schema-building groupwork, collaborative writing and peer review. As EAP tasks move closer to the ways in which language skills are integrated in university life, students become more motivated and better prepared for the next step in their academic careers.