

Theme 1: Conceptions and controversies

INTRODUCTION

The applied nature of EAP, and its emergence from ESP, originally produced an agenda concerned with curriculum and instruction rather than with theory and analysis. Responding to changes in higher education, however, EAP has developed a more sophisticated appreciation of its field. From its place at the intersection of applied linguistics and education, and following a more reflective and research-oriented perspective, EAP has come to highlight some of the key features of modern academic life. Among them are that:

- Students have to take on new roles and to engage with knowledge in new ways when they enter higher education.
- Communication practices are not uniform across academic disciplines but reflect different ways of constructing knowledge and engaging in teaching and learning.
- These practices are underpinned with power and authority which work to advantage or marginalize different groups and to complicate teaching and learning.
- The growth of English as a world language of academic communication has resulted in the loss of scholarly writing in many national cultures.

These features raise interesting issues and controversies in conceptualizing EAP and determining its nature and role. In engaging with these issues EAP has matured as a field, and practitioners have come to see themselves as not simply preparing learners for study in English but as developing new kinds of literacy which will equip students to participate in new academic and cultural contexts. But these issues are by no means resolved and debates continue concerning what they mean for EAP and how we should respond to them. These issues and challenges are the topic of Theme 1.



Task A1

- Do you agree with the four points listed above? What do you think they might mean for teaching and learning in EAP? Select one of them and consider what you believe to be its implications for the field of EAP.

Unit A1

Specific or general academic purposes?

One key issue surrounding the ways we understand and practise EAP is that of *specificity*, or the distinction between what has been called English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP).

Following an EGAP approach, teachers attempt to isolate the skills, language forms and study activities thought to be common to all disciplines. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 41), for instance, include the following activities among such a core:

- Listening to lectures.
- Participating in supervisions, seminars and tutorials.
- Reading textbooks, articles and other material.
- Writing essays, examination answers, dissertations and reports.

This approach might encourage us to see *such activities as questioning, note taking, summary writing, giving prepared presentations and so on* as generic academic practices. ESAP, on the other hand, reflects the idea that, while some generalizations can be made, *the differences among these skills and conventions across distinct disciplines may be greater than the similarities*. ESAP therefore concerns the teaching of skills and language which are related to the demands of a particular discipline or department.

The issue of specificity therefore challenges EAP teachers to take a stance on *how they view language and learning and to examine their courses* in the light of this stance. It forces us to ask the question *whether there are skills and features of language that are transferable across different disciplines or whether we should focus on the texts, skills and forms needed by learners in distinct disciplines*.

Task A1.1



- Spend a few minutes to reflect on your own view of this issue. Based on your experiences as a teacher (or a student), do you think there are generic skills and language forms/functions that are useful across different fields? Or is learning more effective if it is based on the specific conventions and skills used in the student's target discipline? Is there a middle way?

This debate is not new. The idea of specificity was central to Halliday *et al.*'s (1964) original conception of ESP over forty years ago when they characterized it as centred on the language and activities appropriate to particular disciplines and occupations. They distinguished ESP from general English and set an agenda for the future development of the field. Matters are perhaps more complex now as university courses become more interdisciplinary and we learn more about the demands these courses make on students. There is, however, still a need to stress students' target goals and to prioritize the competences we want them to develop and these often relate to the particular fields in which they will mainly operate. But not everyone agrees with this view. Some EAP writers, such as Hutchison and Waters (1987), Blue (1988) and Spack (1988), argue against subject-specific teaching on the grounds that our emphasis should be on learners and learning rather than on target texts and practices. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), on the other hand, suggest that teachers should first help students develop core academic skills with more specific work to be accomplished later.

REASONS FOR GENERAL EAP

Six main reasons have been given for taking an EGAP approach:

- Language teachers are said to lack the training, expertise and confidence to teach subject-specific conventions. Ruth Spack (1988), for instance (Text B1.1), argues that even if subject-specific conventions could be readily identified, they should be left to those who know them best, the subject teachers themselves. In other words, EAP teachers 'lack control' over specialist content and do a disservice to the disciplines and mislead students when they attempt to teach their genres.
- EAP is said to be just too hard for students with limited English proficiency. Weaker students are not ready for discipline-specific language and learning tasks and need preparatory classes to give them a good understanding of 'general English' first.
- Teaching subject-specific skills relegates EAP to a low-status service role by simply supporting academic departments rather than developing its own independent subject knowledge and skills. This leads to what Raimes (1991) calls 'the butler's stance' on the part of EAP, which acts to deprofessionalize teachers and allows universities to marginalize EAP units.
- Closely related to this is the view that by basing course content on the communicative demands of particular courses and disciplines, EAP does not prepare students for unpredictable assignments and encourages unimaginative and formulaic essays. Widdowson (1983) argues that developing skills and familiarity with specific schemata amounts to a *training* exercise. He sees this as a more restricted and mundane activity than *education*, which involves assisting learners to understand and cope with a wider range of needs. Following a similar argument, Raimes (1991) argues that academic writing at university should be part of a liberal arts curriculum teaching grammar,

literary texts and culture to add a humanities dimension to students' experience and elevate the status of the field.

- There are generic skills which are said to differ very little across the disciplines. Among those most often mentioned in this regard include skimming and scanning texts for information, paraphrasing and summarizing arguments, conducting library and Internet searches for relevant texts and ideas, taking notes from lectures and written texts, giving oral presentations and contributing to seminars and tutorials (e.g. Jordan, 1997).
- EAP courses should focus on a *common core* – a set of language forms or skills that are found in all, or nearly all, varieties and which can be transferred across contexts. Most EAP and study-skills textbooks are based on this notion, and there are numerous courses organized around themes such as 'academic writing' and 'oral presentations', or general functions like 'expressing cause and effect' or 'presenting results', and so on. Hutchison and Waters (1987: 165), for example, claim that there are insufficient variations in the grammar, functions or discourse structures of different disciplines to justify a subject-specific approach. Instead, EAP teachers are encouraged to teach 'general principles of inquiry and rhetoric' (Spack, 1988) and the common features which 'characterise all good writing' (Zamel, 1993: 35).

Task A1.2



- Which of these arguments in support of the wide-angle approach do you find most persuasive and why? What research data could be used as evidence to support or refute these arguments?

REASONS FOR SPECIFIC EAP

In response, there are a number of objections to the EGAP position:

- EAP teachers cannot rely on subject specialists to teach disciplinary literacy skills as they generally have neither the expertise nor the desire to do so. Rarely do lecturers have a clear understanding of the role that language plays in their discipline or the time to develop this understanding in their students. They are often too busy to address language issues in any detail and rarely have the background, training or understanding to offer a great deal of assistance. Lea and Street (1999), for instance, found that subject tutors saw academic writing conventions as largely self-evident and universal, and did not usually even spell out their expectations when setting assignments.
- The argument that weak students need to control core forms before getting on to specific, and presumably more difficult, features of language is not supported by research in second language acquisition. Students do not learn in a step-by-step fashion according to some externally imposed sequence but acquire features of the language as they need them, rather than in the order that teachers

present them. So while students may need to attend more to sentence-level features at lower proficiencies, there is no need to ignore specific language uses at any stage.

- The issue of generic skills and language also raises the question of what it is that students are actually learning. EAP professionals are concerned not simply with teaching isolated words, structures, lexical phrases and so on, but with exploring the uses of language that carry clear disciplinary values as a result of their frequency and importance to the communities that employ them. An awareness of such associations can be developed only through familiarity with the actual communicative practices of particular disciplines.
- We can dispute the view that teaching specialist discourses relegates EAP to the bottom of the academic ladder. In fact the opposite is true. The notion of a common core assumes there is a single overarching literacy and that the language used in university study is only slightly different from that found in the home and school. From this perspective, then, academic literacy can be taught to students as a set of discrete, value-free rules and technical skills usable in any situation and taught by relatively unskilled staff in special units isolated from the teaching of disciplinary competences. It therefore implies that students' difficulties with 'academic English' are simply a deficit of literacy skills created by poor schooling or lazy students which can be rectified in a few English classes. EAP then becomes a Band-aid measure to fix up deficiencies. In contrast, an ESAP view recognizes the complexities of engaging in the specific literacies of the disciplines and the specialized professional competences of those who understand and teach those literacies.
- There are serious doubts over a 'common core' of language items. A major weakness is that it focuses on a formal system and ignores the fact that any form has many possible meanings depending on its context of use. Defining what is common is relatively easy if we are just dealing with grammatical forms that comprise a finite set, but becomes impossible when we introduce meaning and use. By incorporating meaning into the common core we are led to the notion of specific varieties of academic discourse, and to the consequence that learning should take place within these varieties. As Bhatia (2002: 27) observes: 'students interacting with different disciplines need to develop communication skills that may not be an extension of general literacy to handle academic discourse, but a range of literacies to handle disciplinary variation in academic discourse'.
- EAP classes don't just focus on forms but teach a range of subject-specific communicative skills as well. Participation in these activities rarely depends on students' full control of 'common core' grammar features and few EAP teachers would want to delay instruction in such urgently demanded skills while students perfected their command of, say, the article system or noun-verb agreement.

Unfortunately for teachers and materials designers, then, it is difficult to pin down exactly what *general* academic forms and skills, what Spack calls the 'general principles of inquiry and rhetoric', actually are. Ann Johns, a prominent EAP writer, puts it like this:

At one point we thought that we had the answers, based upon a composite of pre-course needs assessments and task analyses. After completing our needs assessments, we offered instruction in notetaking, summary writing, 'general reading skills' (such as 'comprehension'), and the research paper. But as we begin to re-examine each of these areas, we find that though some generalizations can be made about the conventions and skills in academia, the differences among them may be greater than the similarities; for discipline, audience, and context significantly influence the language required. Students must therefore readjust somewhat to each academic discipline they encounter.

(Johns, 1988: 55)

Nor is it clear even if we could identify a set of common core features how these might help address students' urgent needs to operate effectively in particular courses.

Task A1.3



- What are the main text types and communication or learning strategies in which students are expected to engage in the course you are currently studying? Are they different from those of another discipline you have taught or know about?

ACADEMIC REGISTERS AND DISCIPLINE SPECIFICITY

This is not to say that there are *no* generalizable skills or language features of academic discourse. Most students will encounter lectures, seminars and exams, and be expected to make notes, give presentations and write assignments. In terms of language, the fact that we are able to talk about 'academic discourse' at all means that the disciplines share prominent features as a register distinct from those we are familiar with in the home or workplace. These concentrations of features, which connect language use with academic contexts, are useful for students to be aware of. One immediately obvious feature of an academic register, and one which students often find most intimidating, is what might be seen as the comparatively high degree of formality in academic texts. Essentially, this formality is achieved through the use of specialist vocabulary, impersonal voice and the ways that ideas get packed into relatively few words. These features of academic writing break down into three key areas:

- **High lexical density.** A high proportion of content words in relation to grammar words such as prepositions, articles and pronouns which makes academic writing more tightly packed with information. Halliday (1989: 61), for example, compares a written sentence (a) (with three – italicized – grammatical words) with a conversational version (b) (with thirteen grammatical words):

- (a) Investment *in* a rail facility implies *a* long-term commitment.
- (b) *If you invest in a rail facility this implies that you are going to be committed for a long term.*
- **High nominal style.** Actions and events are presented as nouns rather than verbs to package complex phenomena as a single element of a clause. This freezes an event, such as ‘The train leaves at 5.00 p.m.’ and repackages it as an object: ‘The train’s 5.00 p.m. departure’. Turning processes into objects in this way expresses scientific perspectives that seek to show relationships between entities.
 - **Impersonal constructions.** Students are often advised to keep their academic prose as impersonal as possible, avoiding the use of ‘I’ and expressions of feeling. First-person pronouns are often replaced by passives (‘the solution was heated’), dummy ‘it’ subjects (‘it was possible to interview the subjects by phone’), and what are called ‘abstract rhetors’, where agency is attributed to things rather than people (‘the data suggest’, ‘Table 2 shows’).

The extent to which disciplines conform to these features or subject teachers expect students to use them will vary enormously. But raising students’ awareness of such features helps them to see how academic fields are broadly linked and how language both helps construct, and is constructed by, features of its context.

IMPORTANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

Debates about specificity have an important impact on how practitioners in EAP see the field and carry out their work, influencing both teaching and research. Putting specificity into practice in the classroom, for instance, often involves the EAP practitioner working closely with subject specialists to gain an understanding of students’ target discourses and courses. This collaboration can take various forms and can involve drawing on the subject specialist’s expertise as an informant to discuss textbooks, topics and course assignments, or extend to ‘linking’ an EAP course with a content course (cf. Unit 10).

In classes where students are more heterogeneous in terms of discipline, specificity can be usefully exploited to highlight disciplinary differences in writing through rhetorical consciousness raising (cf. Swales and Feak, 2000). By encouraging students to explore the ways meanings are expressed in texts and compare similarities and differences, teachers can help satisfy students’ demands for personal relevance while revealing to them the multi-literate nature of the academy. This helps students to understand that communication involves making choices based on the ways texts work in specific contexts and that the discourses of the academy are not based on a single set of rules. This undermines a deficit view which sees difficulties of writing and speaking in an academic register as learner weaknesses and which misrepresents these as universal, naturalized and non-contestable ways of participating in academic courses.

Equally important, the idea of specificity has encouraged EAP to adopt a strong research orientation which highlights the importance of communicative practices in particular contexts. In fact, while EAP has tended to emphasize texts, its remit is much larger, including the three dimensions underlying communication discussed by Candlin and Hyland (1999). These are the description and analysis of relevant target texts; the interpretation of the processes involved in creating and using these texts; and the connections between disciplinary texts and the institutional practices which are sustained and changed through them.

The need to inform classroom decisions with knowledge of the target language features, tasks and practices of students has led analysts to sharpen concepts and develop research methodologies to understand what is going on in particular courses and disciplines. Johns (1997: 154), for instance, urges EAP teachers to use their 'abilities to explore academic worlds: their language, their values, their genres, and their literacies, remembering at all times that these worlds are complex and evolving, conflicted and messy'. Swales (1990) shares this view that EAP should help students to become aware of the centrality of discourse and has championed a genre-based EAP, encouraging a commitment to linguistic analysis, contextual relevance, and community-relevant events in the classroom.

Moving beyond the classroom, specificity is also critical to how EAP is perceived and how it moves forward as a field of inquiry and practice. For example, placing specificity at the heart of EAP's role means that teachers are less likely to focus on decontextualized forms, less likely to see genres as concrete artefacts rather than interactive processes and less likely to emphasize a one-best-way approach to instruction.

Task A1.4



- Which of the pros and cons given in this unit do you see as the most persuasive? What do you see as the main challenges of discipline-specific teaching to you as an EAP teacher?