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ELF and its Role in EAP: Lessons from Academic Literacies

By Stuart Perrin

Introduction

Over the last ten years or so, there has been a noticeable change in higher education (HE) globally, with the 2000s being characterised by the rise of the phenomenon of Transnational Education (TNE), which is predominantly associated with English speaking education (and educational models) being exported overseas. McBurnie and Ziguras (2007) describe TNE as education delivered by an institution which is based in one country to students who are located in another country. As education becomes more globalized, higher education systems have gone through restructuring processes to enable themselves to be positioned both within their local and regional contexts, and also in the global market. Asia, and especially China, has been particularly active in TNE (Huang, 2007), with the British Council (2013) identifying China as a country with TNE opportunity. As TNE is associated with English speaking education, the importance of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) becomes clear (Graddol, 2006). This creates a real demand for English language support at HE institutions globally in the form of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) provision, but one key question that needs to be addressed is what is the (language) standard that this provision should be aiming for. This paper argues that the traditional reliance on English native speaker norms as the target language that EAP provision should be aiming for is now redundant and that an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006) better meets the needs of today's TNE HE students.

English as a Lingua Franca in academic settings

Classifications of types of English speakers and the English language variety being used need to be treated with some caution, as they often fail to take into account the complex multiple identities of the language user (Norton, 2013). This is especially true in TNE situations where the majority of English speakers are not likely to be English first language speakers. Whilst classifications are often used in attempting to identify the perceived language requirements of the language users, who can be assumed to be students in this article, they may not take into account the requirements of the students' various 'communities of practices' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the power invested in certain forms of English. However, some discussion is important in order to get a fuller understanding of how English may be used in (global) academic settings.

Graddol (1997, p. 10) identifies three types of English speakers: first language speakers or what are often called 'native speakers (NSs)', second or additional language speakers, and foreign language speakers. First language speakers usually live in countries where the main culture is predominantly English, though as Graddol does highlight, these countries are themselves becoming increasingly multilingual. Second language speakers "have English as a second or additional language, placing English in a repertoire of languages where each is used in different contexts" (Graddol, 1997, p. 10). The third type is the increasing numbers learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These

second two groups are also often referred to as 'non-native speakers (NNSs)'. Kachru (1985) uses these three categories in his three circles of English theory, placing first language speakers as the 'inner circle', second language speakers as the 'outer circle', and foreign language speakers as the 'expanding circle'. This model does show quite nicely the relationship between the three different types of speakers of English, being conceived as a way of showing the (chronological) geographical spread of the language away from the initial native speaker core. Brumfit (2001) suggested that "the English language no longer belongs numerically to speakers of English as a mother tongue," suggesting that responsibility for "language change, language maintenance, and the ideologies and beliefs associated with the language" (p. 116) now rests with speakers of English as an additional language.

The growth of globalisation has changed the way that English is perceived (Graddol, 2006), highlighted by the decline of EFL and native speaker proficiency as the dominant model for language learning; educational reforms in NNSs countries, especially with regard to young learners and English medium degrees at university; and the loss of a separate identity of English as a discipline, which Graddol (2006) suggests have all contributed to what he calls "the era of Global English" (p. 106). Jenkins (2000, p. 9) adds to the debate by raising the issue of not only who learns English, but also what form of English is being learnt. English is increasingly the main language in business meetings, conferences, political and educational settings. Communication is taking place in English between speakers from different first languages, or putting it another way, English is acting as a lingua franca (ELF) between these speakers.

Seidlhofer (2011) defined ELF as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (p. 7). The native speaker is not excluded from ELF communication, but as Jenkins (2013) highlights they participate as equals, not as norm providers. Phillipson (2008) recognises the importance of English for learning in HE in referring to "English as a lingua academica" (p. 250). Referring specifically to TNE contexts, Mauranen (2007, cited in Jenkins, 2013) in a letter to the Times Higher Education Supplement, highlighted that international academic communities communicate in largely non-native groups, where clarity, effectiveness and contextual appropriateness of communication are required to high academic standards, but not to high, native-like English standards.

Unpacking English for Academic Purposes

With the growth of English as the lingua franca in TNE institutions, and questions being raised as to what English is the standard to aim for, there is a need to unpack what should be delivered in an EAP classroom within these institutions. EAP can be defined as "teaching English with the aim of facilitating learners' study or research in that language" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p. 8). Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) suggest that EAP "refers to language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts" (p. 2). EAP is not just about learning English, rather it aids learners in equipping them with the communicative (both written and spoken) skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts. However, EAP provision in many institutions around the world shows a heavy reliance on native speaker standards being the target to attain, and can often be one of the main marking criteria when grading is involved. EAP provision varies between institutions and countries, but typically is likely to be either through in-sessional courses, or part of pre-university courses such as foundation/access programmes, or summer pre-sessional courses, usually provided by the university writing centre or (English) language centre. A cursory glance at many UK institutions' websites shows that there is a relationship between assessment levels for EAP courses and IELTS or other internationally recognized exams, which is not surprising as the entry requirements for academic study, and by implication the exit levels of many EAP (pre-sessional) courses for study are benchmarked to these exams. Turner (2011) summarises rather well academia's approach to English as "the relentlessly remedial representation of language issues in the institutional discourse of higher education" (p. 3) forefronting clearly how language related discourse uses deficit language (see Wang's article, this issue) in

relation to attainment of native speaker levels.

Academic writing is one of the main focuses of EAP courses, and it is in the teaching and delivery of academic writing programmes that arguably the greatest challenges can be found. Writing needs to be understood as the crucial process by which students make sense of not only what they have been 'receiving' through their studies but also how they can make it mean something for themselves. However, when student writing as such is discussed, it is usually in the context of a student 'problem', something that needs to be fixed by a study skills centre, with lecturers viewing their role as divorced from language and only focusing on academic content (Street, 1999). In an ELF academic environment, it is perhaps too easy to see student writing as being a technical and surface level skill, and problems with student writing as being purely linguistic in nature. Boughey (2000) sees the change (in student writing) needed as being at the affective level, though acknowledges that this may be difficult to achieve as it requires the student to be comfortable in the academic discourse they are studying in. For a student to be comfortable they need to feel that they are accepted (in the discourse), which is unlikely to happen unless the student is shown or understands the values and rules in that field or genre. As Boughey (2000) highlights, the irony is that those best placed to provide enlightenment are often those who see student writing as problematical.

Subject teaching and knowledge must be embedded with writing about knowledge so that students can see how their own opinions form within their subject area. Lea and Street (1998, 1999) argue that EAP and academic writing be seen from one of three conceptual models, a 'study skills model' an 'academic socialisation model' and an 'academic literacies model'. The first assumes student writing as a technical/ cognitive skill. It focuses very much on the surface level, making the assumption that students can transfer skills learnt between courses or subjects, without problem. The second approach sees student writing as a transparent medium of representation. It assumes 'one' university culture and that students acquire how to talk and write in a subject area, and that once learnt they have no problem in reproducing these skills. The third (academic literacies) model sees literacies as social practice, and subsumes aspects of the other two models (Turner, 2012). It aims to facilitate reflexivity/language awareness and provides an alternative which considers the process of writing at the level of epistemology (or knowledge), social/disciplinary practices and discourses (Lea & Street, 2006; Street, 2007). The institution is seen as a site of discourse and power (Street, 2007) and students need a range of linguistic skills that may change with each different situation they encounter (in the place of learning). They also need to be comfortable with the "social meanings and identities that each situation provokes" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159), which may challenge students' own concepts of what academic writing means. Indeed one rationale for student writing related issues may be a mismatch between the expectations of academic (and by definition EAP) staff and what students think academic writing is (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998).

Implications for EAP in an ELF Environment

As highlighted in the preceding paragraph, an academic literacies model goes beyond EAP, subsuming elements of it and therefore providing a framework within which one can "embed a focus on the myriad processes and practices associated with reading and writing" (Turner, 2012, p. 18) within Higher Education. An academic literacies approach to writing at university can enhance an ELF academic learning environment. As is the case with any learning environment, each student has in common the need to learn the academic literacies within their individual institutional and discipline settings regardless of linguistic background. Students can usually master the process of writing, but they can struggle with the interplay between the process and subject knowledge. By changing the focus of writing away from the traditional 'technical skills' approach, an alternative embedded approach is therefore provided which means that it is possible to see how teaching academic knowledge and teaching writing integrates student writing within the course structure itself. Literacy is therefore seen as social practice, rather than just working at the textual level. This is a move away from the traditional study skills model of student writing, with its focus on surface skills such as spelling, punctuation and grammar and a feeling of going back to basics,

and where the students can feel that they are in remedial or deficit classes.

By taking an academic literacies approach to EAP support the student becomes empowered, as language distinction is refocused to disciplinary related discourse, with each student being able to draw on their own resources and beginning from the same initial position. With such a learning model, that empowers all students to develop their writing, there is a change in the role of the tutor or educator. Academic teaching staff need to re-evaluate their own role in the student learning process, as well as the role of the language professional, so that writing becomes an integral part of class time, making students comfortable in the discourses of the specific disciplines. The language professional also needs to look at the changing role, with a movement towards providing more support with (and within) the main student classes.

As Seidlhofer (2004) alludes, the conceptualization of ELF as a legitimate form of English, which is not tied to its native speakers and ideas of deficit if native speaker norms are not attained, empowers its users. An adoption of an academic literacies approach to student EAP learning only adds to that empowerment and offers new and exciting directions for teaching and research within ELF environments.

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