

International Students are Always Ready for ESAP

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Many factors that affect the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom in a foundation year program may lie beyond the control of the teacher: the incoming proficiency level, the contact time available with students, and various demands from subject departments in the university. Nevertheless, EAP instructors in international universities must consider additional factors: Should they adopt a 'back to basics' approach to English teaching to help low proficiency students? Should instructors choose class topics only in their students' major subjects or from across the curriculum? How subject-specific should the content be when teaching EAP?

Conventional wisdom has suggested that lower proficiency students must be instructed in General English before moving to Academic English. Certainly, some have argued, students must delay instruction in subject-specific Academic English until they have mastered the basics (Alexander, 2012). "Walk before you run" might be the mantra of the generalists. Indeed, reality often intrudes into curriculum design, and the limited time available for classes may prevent students from learning a wide range of lexis on a variety of topics.

However, such a 'back to basics' approach is not universally accepted by practitioners (Hyland, 2007; Bruce, 2011) and the 'general versus specific English' debate cannot even begin until instructors decide whether a common core of academic language and skills exist that are always transferable across disciplines. If they are not transferable, should EAP instructors instead focus on the texts, skills and language forms used by learners in their distinct academic departments and begin with English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)? This article will argue that, indeed, this is the case, and that an ESAP based approach is appropriate from the beginning.

General English, EAP or ESAP?

The traditional approach to a university foundation program has recommended beginning with General English instruction before attempting any EAP instruction (Cf. Alexander, 2012). Such traditionalists might argue even more strenuously for teaching General English to low proficiency students before allowing them to study Academic English. Once the general tenets of Academic English are mastered, the argument continues, students are now ready for subject-specific Academic English.

Such an approach should raise several concerns in the mind of an instructor. First, teachers must consider whether Academic English is too difficult for lower level learners. Second, the existence of a "common core" of Academic English must be accepted or rejected. Finally, the extent of the transferability of any generic academic skills and practices across different subjects should be considered. These topics will be addressed in turn.

Is Academic English too difficult to begin with?

Proponents of General English first may argue that ESAP is too difficult for low proficiency learners to comprehend. These learners, the argument continues, instead need a solid foundation of basic English before attempting to use English in an academic context.

This call for a gradual approach is not supported by current research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). SLA research indicates that students acquire language features, including lexis, as needed, rather than in the order instructors teach them (Hyland, 2002; Cook, 2011; Alexander, 2012). A student's "interlanguage" does not conform to a syllabus; instead students adapt as they are challenged. In a sense, new lexis is new lexis,

regardless of whether it is general or specific. While authentic discipline texts (journal articles, etc.) may be beyond the reading comprehension of a foundation year student, properly scaffolded subject-specific texts are both comprehensible and more relevant for learners than general interest material (Alexander & Argent, 2010). Indeed, the purpose of teaching EAP arguably fails when the goal of preparation for disciplinary study is abandoned.

Is there a common core of Academic English?

Like their concern regarding General English, critics of an early focus on ESAP also stress that students need a foundation in Academic English before attempting discipline specific EAP:

Attempts to teach a 'restricted' language ("English for Engineers") too often ignore the danger in so doing of trying to climb a ladder which is sinking in the mud; it is no use trying to approach a point on the upper rungs if there is no foundation (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985, p. 29).

The notion of a common core of academic lexis is, however, contested by some scholars (Hyland & Tse, 2007). In several studies, they note that words on the Academic Word List (AWL) often vary by academic department. For example, "volume" can mean "book" in Applied Linguistics and "quantity" in Biology, whereas "abstract" can mean "remove" in Engineering and "theoretical" in the social sciences. Thus, Hyland and Tse (2007, 2009) recommend the use of subject-specific corpora as opposed to "general" lists like the AWL.

Similarly, attempting to avoid discipline specific vocabulary artificially constrains and retards learners from acquiring the lexis needed for their majors. As Bloor and Bloor (1986) have noted:

There is no common core of language preexisting to varieties. The core is, rather, an essential part of any one of the innumerable varieties of the language (p. 28).

General English is thus a part of specific Academic English. As Gillett (2010) has noted, there is no need to master the common core of English before EAP, as any "common core" would preexist in EAP. By definition, what is common is in the specific, whereas differing specificities may not overlap. Therefore, by focusing on the specific, an EAP tutor meets the needs of the learner without neglecting some "common core." Moreover, by focusing on one specific discipline (e.g. law), the tutor avoids teaching irrelevantly specific material that is necessary for a different discipline (e.g. chemical engineering) but not the learner's discipline (Hyland, 2009).

Such logic applies to the teaching of the varieties of English. General English is common to general EAP. General EAP is common to specific EAP. Hence, with limited time and resources at hand, tutors should begin and end with discipline specific EAP.

Are there generic academic skills and practices that are transferable across different subjects?

Instructors following an English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) model will likely focus on the skills and study activities thought to be common to all disciplines studied by their students (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Spack, 1988). One assumption necessary to sustain an EGAP approach is therefore the existence of generic academic practices that can be applied anywhere on campus. While some general academic activities are certainly practiced on any campus, when examined closely the conventions of research and writing are rarely generalizable or neutrally applicable (Hyland, 2006).

Jordan (1997) notes that some generic academic skills – skimming, scanning, paraphrasing, summarizing, library internet research, lecture note-taking, oral presentations, and participating in seminars – differ very little across disciplines. These general skills needed by all students are supplemented in a discipline with more specific skills common to that field. No reason exists, however, not to practice these *generic* and *specific* skills with *subject-specific* content. For example, foundation year business students who will begin a three-year-long course of

study within the business department can begin applying strategies for reading or attending to lectures when reading accessible business texts or while listening to discourse on business topics. Why use precious time in discussing topics such as dating or marriage if they do not include a business related aspect?

Some might contend that students should be entertained by studying interesting content and not “bored” by a focus on subject-specific material. Aside from the fact that students chose their discipline, and can be expected to have an interest in their subject, having fun should not be the primary goal of an EAP lesson (Alexander, 2012). Levity certainly has its place in the classroom. Even the dullest material can be enlivened with some panache or energy from the teacher. But university tutors should ask themselves what best serves the students, momentary laughs or a deep foundation of preparation for what will be a difficult course of study?

Additional arguments for general EAP (EGAP)

Spack (1988) argues that language teachers lack the expertise and confidence to teach subject conventions, arguing:

...we should leave the teaching of writing in the disciplines to the teachers of those disciplines. (p. 30)

EAP (writing) courses should therefore focus on the process of writing which is common across a range of disciplines (Spack, 1988, pp. 44–45). This generalist approach again ignores that the common core of academic skills or lexis, as noted above, either already exists within the specific or fails to truly be common.

Nevertheless, students would likely benefit from the experience of subject instructors who have a solid grounding in the writing of their discipline *if* subject professors were willing to teach composition in their discipline. In reality, subject teachers spend little if any time in their classes teaching writing. EAP tutors must therefore guide students in their disciplinary discourse practices, including writing, or no one will.

Spack (1988) worries that ESAP writing instructors will be doing their students a disservice by passing themselves off as experts in the writing of a specific discipline, when, in fact, they are not (p. 38). Raising such a concern misses the central point. Subject faculty are not teaching literacy skills because they lack the interest, and likely the expertise, to teach writing in a way comprehensible to their students (Hyland, 2006). Writing in their discipline is now a largely unconscious activity for the subject instructor and, not having conspicuously attended to the process of writing, they could not explain it well to a novice (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002).

An EAP tutor can more easily delineate the subject-specific skills and lexis of a discipline as an outsider (rather than attempt to condense generic forms from across the academy). Indeed, the structure of common formats (e.g. lab report or dissertation) can differ completely across disciplines (Hyland, 2006). For example, a specific writing approach, then, will avoid misleading students to think that science report writing is appropriate for their economics professor.

Another concern raised against specificity is that ESAP does not prepare students for the unpredictable, real world or for study in other disciplines (Hyland, 2006). This concern is misplaced, as foundation year programs need not consult crystal balls. Tutors already know what lies in the immediate future of their students: study in their chosen discipline. Duty demands that tutors prepare them for the realities of university study, not worry about the unknown.

The argument for ESAP

The ESAP model marries the teaching of skills and language related to the demands of a particular discipline or academic department. Alexander (2012) argues that EAP should:

...follow a deep end strategy, teaching toward the target academic performance and scaffolding tasks ... thus supporting students to acquire procedural knowledge about discourse practices which they can reapply in the context of their own academic

disciplines (p. 108).

This model generally requires cooperation between EAP instructors and the subject department and faculty. Such coordination is necessary to uncover the specific features needed in an academic discipline, especially where EAP instructors are not well versed in the subjects their students will study (Hyland, 2002). A genre-based approach to teaching writing may work well in an ESAP context, as instructors can focus on texts identified by the department.

Instructors in ESAP can also strengthen their credibility by avoiding a deficit model of teaching and thereby increase EAP's status in the academy. The particulars of academic vocabulary and academic communication skills needed at university are quite different from the everyday language taught by General English teachers. EAP professionals may therefore be seen as more highly skilled than other English instructors, having to incorporate the language of a discipline and the academic skills needed for success at university. Recognition of such competence will raise EAP instructors' profiles amongst university faculty in general. With such an understanding in mind, EAP will not be seen as a mere bandage to cover the language defects in students but instead be considered part of a specialized academic community (Hyland, 2006).

Student progress

How fast can students be reasonably expected to progress in EAP? One attempt at answering this question by the Association of Language Testers of Europe (ALTE) notes that approximately 200 hours of direct, in-class instruction are necessary for a student to progress from the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) level B1 to B2. ALTE estimates that approximately an additional 200 hours of instruction are also needed to progress from B2 to C1, with C1 being the generally accepted target in the United Kingdom as a sufficient level for independent university study. This time estimate is necessarily dependent on a number of factors, including the age and motivation of the learners, their study backgrounds, the amount of time spent in self-study and any prior learning experiences. The

ALTE estimate nevertheless provides a helpful reference point.

Should students be considered low level only when they have low proficiency in English? Sometimes students will have significant background knowledge of the subject they will study at university, but often they will not. For example, learners in science may have a relatively high level of subject knowledge but low English proficiency. Other students may have little experience with the subject and low proficiency in English. Such factors may also affect the speed of student progress in an ESAP course.

As an example, assume a year-long foundation program, with about 200 contact hours between tutor and student. If a significant percentage of these students enter at the B1 level, they cannot reasonably progress beyond CEFR B2 (even if all goes perfectly well according to ALTE's estimate). Students would require an additional year of 200 contact hours before even approaching CEFR level C1, but in their second year at university such students must already begin to take classes in their major subject. Neglecting specific content in the earliest days makes little sense unless students are willing to devote years to an EAP program before they start to study subject content.

Prepare students for their subject

How soon and how far should instructors go toward ESAP? Calls for early adoption of subject specific content can be found originating from a number of sources. Hyland advocates early subject specificity in EAP, as he notes:

Effective language teaching involves taking specificity seriously (2002, p. 117).

Instructors can also hear a plea for early ESAP coming from students themselves. Research indicates that, when asked, students identify subject specificity as very important to them.

In an interview-based longitudinal study of 28 undergraduates at Hong Kong University (HKU), and a questionnaire survey of 3,009 first-year students at HKU, students reported academic writing (style, cohesion, grammar) to be the most problematic skill to attain. They

also indicated that a lack of knowledge of specific vocabulary hindered their studies:

The survey results have clear implications for EAP practitioners (Evans & Morrison, 2010, p. 395).

Students recognize that they need to write in the genre appropriate for their particular audience and follow the conventions of their academic departments. The need to address these student concerns is paramount. According to Evans and Morrison:

*EAP courses based exclusively on survey findings of this kind may overlook what seems to be the central challenge confronting freshmen namely **the need to understand and appropriate the discourse practices of the disciplinary community they have chosen to enter*** (2010, p. 395)[emphasis added].

Therefore, instructors who adopt an ESAP approach from the start will best prepare students for what they need, specific writing and lexis acquisition for their major subject of study.

Motivation

Research has shown, through genre analysis as well as by other means, that the more content-specific the course, the more students will find it useful and be motivated (Jordan, 1997, p. 252). Subject-specific topics, vocabulary and activities are more important to tertiary learners and will increase their motivation. This becomes apparent when instructors acknowledge that academic genres only take on meaning when they are situated in a context. Students communicate effectively by using a discipline's particular conventions, and they will be motivated when they see the usefulness of what they learn in a foundation year. Low proficiency learners will similarly be more motivated by topics in their subject as they will see the practical application of the lessons to their future work.

Conclusion

EAP teachers do not need to be subject specialist experts but instead should possess

“the ability to ask intelligent questions” about the topic (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, as cited in Jordan, 1997). More specificity in subject vocabulary earlier in a foundation program will aid lexical development, save time by being more efficient, and allow for more recycling of subject-specific vocabulary and more retention of that knowledge. Using subject-specific genre for writing opportunities will also increase the transferability of skill practice and may increase student motivation, as students will be able to see the usefulness of their work. Students also will have more opportunities to practice writing (and reading) in genres specific to their discipline. Finally, more specificity might be a way to balance mixed ability classes so that higher level students do not lose interest, while lower-level students are supported.

When students do not study across disciplines in a “liberal arts” curriculum, the argument for specificity is even stronger. A focus on discipline specificity prepares them for their real world academic life while general EAP may waste valuable time teaching irrelevant practices. Therefore, international university students are best set on their academic career by bringing ESAP into their foundation program as early as possible.

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