ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES: A BRIDGE TO THE UNIVERSITY

Ian Bruce
University of Waikato

Abstract

Because of current worldwide demand for academic English courses that prepare students for university education, many TESOL teachers are now being asked to take on the teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP), often with little background or training in this specialised branch of language teaching. In addressing this situation and seeking to raise awareness of EAP, this paper firstly outlines the field of EAP by defining what it is, providing a brief history and considering student need at the different levels at which EAP is offered. The paper then discusses practitioner-related issues, including the knowledge base that informs EAP, the requisite teacher competencies and the two ways in which EAP is conceptualised in tertiary contexts. The paper concludes by making recommendations relating to the ongoing support and development of EAP teachers.

Introduction and Overview

During the last three decades, there has been rapid growth in the numbers of *English for Academic Purposes* (hereafter EAP) courses around the world. These are courses that prepare students for English-medium academic study, or support students already enrolled in universities or some other branch of tertiary education. EAP has developed from general English language teaching, but it is now fair to say that it has emerged as a parallel discourse community with its own research literature, professional associations and conferences around the world. In addressing the theme of the CLESOL 2016 conference of *Learners in Context: Bridging the Gaps*, which relates to meeting student need, this paper considers meeting student need through EAP courses, and specifically student need in tertiary contexts.

The paper firstly traces the origins of EAP and provides a current definition of this branch of English language teaching. The next section considers the issue of student need as it is addressed by the different levels of EAP courses. Following that, there is a brief review of the knowledge base of EAP, which includes mention of the contributions of key research streams it draws upon. The paper then discusses the types of knowledge and expertise required by EAP practitioners, drawing upon the *Competency Framework for Teachers of English for Academic Purposes* (BALEAP, 2008). This framework was developed in the UK by the British EAP association (BALEAP) with input from practitioners in other countries including New Zealand. The paper then considers two current conceptualisations of EAP courses; that is, whether EAP is a support activity or an academic discipline in its own right along with the implications of these two quite different views of EAP. The paper concludes with some observations about ways in which the development of EAP can be supported in the New Zealand context.

Background: Origins and definitions of EAP

EAP developed from *English for Specific Purposes* (ESP) courses, which emerged in the 1970s. These were courses where the content and the aims of the teaching are determined by the needs of the learner. ESP courses were first developed for scientists and engineers working in the rapidly-developing oil industry in North Africa and the Middle East during this period. Robinson (1980) suggests that most of the early ESP courses were “post-experience” courses

for professionals, such as scientists and engineers, who had already studied or practised their subject area in their L1 contexts. They were taking ESP courses in order to relocate their existing knowledge and professional practice within English-medium contexts. On the other hand, she suggests that EAP courses were pre-experience courses, developed when, "[w]ithin the area of skills, either language skills or study skills, many students lack the required competence in their L1" (p. 25). EAP courses are taken before or during degree study while the early ESP courses were post-degree courses. The term *English for Academic Purposes* was first used as the title of the published proceedings of a conference held at the University of Birmingham in the UK in 1975. At that time, the focus of EAP was mainly on the development of study skills. However, now it is fair to say that the scope of EAP has broadened considerably, and the following definition of EAP is the one that is now most commonly used: "[it is] the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001, p. 8**).** Within EAP, two types of courses have emerged: *English for Specific Academic Purposes* (ESAP); these are courses where all of the students are preparing for study in one discipline; and, English for General *Academic Purposes* (EGAP); these courses will include students preparing to study in different disciplines.

Student need and EAP

EAP courses have always been a 'needs-driven' educational activity, focusing on students' present or future academic language needs. However, understanding student need in relation to academic competencies must be considered in relation to the stage or level of academic education at which the EAP course is located. EAP is essentially taught at three levels: pre-tertiary (often called *pre-sessional*) such as foundation studies courses, undergraduate level (*in-sessional*) and increasingly at postgraduate level. At each level, because of the different types of learner need, the focus of the course clearly will be different.

Pre-sessional EAP courses, such as foundation studies or other pre-tertiary English courses usually cannot meet student target needs in terms of a single discipline-specific focus. For example, they cannot just focus on the texts and practices of business, or of the humanities or of science - unless of course it is known that all of the students within a class group will be studying in only one of those subject areas. In relation to their language development and the performance of certain types of task, students at this level need to be gaining generic, procedural knowledge, and in particular in relation to academic literacy and especially writing. Rather than topic-connected knowledge, they need to be developing what Widdowson (1983) refers to as *capacity*.

The next level is that of in-sessional EAP courses, such as undergraduate courses. Here, meeting the students' target needs usually involves further addressing the language needs (and, again, the writing needs) of students at this level. In New Zealand, these students will usually have gained entry to tertiary education on the basis of an overall average IELTS Academic Module score of 6.0. However, it is important to realise the limitations of this proficiency level. The IELTS testing organisation recommends that an overall average IELTS score of 6.0 is probably suitable as an entry level to "linguistically less demanding training courses" (IELTS Guide for Educational Institutions, 2015, p. 13). Therefore, students entering undergraduate university courses with this English proficiency level will still face a range of language problems. At this level, the most pressing need of these students is to develop the means to interrogate and respond to the requirements of undergraduate assignment genres**,** which is not a straightforward issue. As Johns (1997) says, these assignment genres are difficult to pin down and almost casually named. Also, according to theorists in the academic literacies movement, they vary greatly in their expectations because they are shaped by the particular epistemologies

of different subject areas (Lea & Street, 1998). Students at this level, therefore, need to begin to understand the types of *identity*, *orientation* and *discursive resource*s that the assignments of particular disciplines require. This issue is multiplied in the case of undergraduates taking interdisciplinary degrees, facing courses and assignments in a variety of subject areas.

The third level of EAP is that of postgraduate courses. These will usually focus on academic tasks requiring students to engage with primary reports of research. These tasks may typically include summaries of readings, reviews, extended essays, annotated bibliographies, and actual research writing, such as for masters dissertations or PhD theses – including literature reviews, methodology sections, reporting findings, writing discussions. In some ways this area of EAP is the one that is informed by the most extensive body of research. However, at this level, the EAP courses will still often be interdisciplinary – that is, taken by students from different subject areas. Therefore, the EAP course at this level will still need to provide opportunities to examine disciplinary differences in the academic and research-reporting genres.

The knowledge base of EAP

In addressing student need at the different levels of EAP, course designers and teachers over the years have drawn upon theory and research from a variety of sources. Brief mention is made here of five research streams that have become part of the knowledge base of EAP: systemic functional linguistics, genre theory, corpus linguistics, academic literacies and critical EAP. This sections serves to illustrate the multi-facetted and complex nature of EAP and how its knowledge base differs somewhat from that drawn upon in regular TESOL practice.

Systemic functional linguistics

Systemic functional linguistics (hereafter SFL) research is concerned with what is called *register*, which links the analysis of social or academic contexts with their use of specific linguistic features in their spoken or written texts. An example is Halliday's analysis of scientific texts (1990/2002, pp. 169-173), in which he found a predominance of nominalisations and causal relations. Another example is Woodward-Kron's (2008) research of student texts, where she found technicality expressed by elaborating nominal groups or non-defining relative clauses. Essentially SFL studies link linguistic elements to their use in specific contexts. This type of knowledge can potentially inform EAP courses as part of developing students' textual competence.

Genre theory

Genre theory refers to the different approaches that have been used to categorise and analyze texts. Relevant genre studies have focused on the types of spoken and written text that EAP students are typically required to produce, such as essays, lab reports, literature reviews, dissertations and oral presentations. Two streams of genre research have contributed to EAP; these are the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach to genre, based on Swales' work (1990, 2004) and the approach to genre influenced by SFL (Martin, 1984; Martin & Rose, 2008). Of the two, it is Swales' approach to genre that is best known and has had the largest influence on EAP and classroom practitioner knowledge. However, in terms of pedagogy, genre-based instruction using the teaching/learning cycle developed by teachers influenced by SFL is widely used.

Corpus linguistics

Corpus linguistics is not a theory of language as such, but refers to analytical methods whereby large samples of naturally-occurring language (corpora), in the form of written texts or transcriptions of spoken language, are subjected to computer-mediated analysis. Corpus

based enquiries can reveal information about the frequency of occurrence of particular linguistic items in a corpus through creating a *wordlist*. *Concordance* searches of specific words (from the wordlist) can reveal information about the use of a linguistic item in patterns and phrases. An important contribution of corpus linguistics to EAP has been research that identifies the vocabulary necessary to function in academic contexts in the form of word lists, such as Coxhead's *Academic Wordlist* (2006), and Gardner and Davies' *Academic Vocabulary List* (2014). Corpus methods have proven a useful tool for EAP by providing empirical linguistic data, specifically information about vocabulary.

Academic literacies

Academic literacies theorists and researchers aim to expose and challenge the types of institutional power relations and gatekeeping practices faced by novice or second language writers in academic contexts. Studies have included investigations of ideologies, power relations, hierarchies and preferred behaviours of the academic environments within which students are required to write (Ivanic, 1998; Lea & Stierer, 2000). Work by academic literacies researchers contributes to EAP by raising teacher awareness of the types of ideological, institutional and political issues that the student writer must navigate when trying to enter an academic discourse community. The approach also encourages EAP practitioners themselves to be aware of the institutional and ideological constraints that relate to their own role in the academic world.

Critical EAP

Critical EAP is largely a North American theoretical approach and its leading proponent, Benesch (1993), proposes that EAP classes should "embrace an ideology of resistance . . . and a pedagogy of critical academic ESL" (p. 716). In expounding this position, Benesch (2001) proposes that the EAP classes "should offer flexibility about topic selection, leaving room for a variety of possibilities: teacher choice, student choice and whole-class choice" (p. 84). She proposes that EAP classes, as well as being based on needs analysis, should also take account of *rights analysis*, to provide a "framework for understanding and responding to the power relations" that students will encounter in academic courses (p. 108). As the result of the 'rights analysis' of an educational context, EAP teachers will assist students to acquire the capacity to question and resist both the content and method of delivery of courses. Following such an approach, the classroom is seen as a site of struggle where students are involved in shaping what takes place by their active participation.

As a result of the complexity of EAP and the different research streams that have been drawn upon to support the discipline, there is now a considerable research literature of EAP reported in journals, including: *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, Journal of Pragmatics, Ibérica, System, Applied Linguistics* and *ELT Journal*. There is also a range of practitioner-focused book publications that provide an overview of practice in the field (Alexander, Argent & Spence, 2008; Bruce, 2011; Charles & Pecorari, 2015; de Chazal, 2014; Hyland, 2006). Becoming aware of and drawing upon this extensive (and growing) knowledge base of EAP is important for practitioners entering the field as well as for more experienced practitioners.

EAP teacher competencies: Four areas of practitioner knowledge

In this section, four areas of knowledge and expertise are proposed as necessary to an EAP teacher's formative development and ongoing practice. The four areas are: *academic practice, EAP students, curriculum development* and *programme delivery*. The discussion here draws on

the *Competency Framework for Teachers of English for Academic Purposes* (hereafter CFTEAP) produced by BALEAP (2008).

The first area of teacher knowledge relates to *academic practice.* In this area, the CFTEAP identifies teacher competencies relating to: academic contexts, disciplinary differences, academic discourse and personal development. In the area of academic practice, EAP teachers' knowledge and expertise should include: *experience* of participating in a university community. (For example, if you are teaching about research writing, it is helpful to have had experience of doing research writing yourself.) It includes knowledge of theories of community and of the research methods used to investigate disciplinary discourses and texts (such as, ethnography, genre analysis and corpus methods). Being able to apply a theoretical model and perform research on academic environments enables EAP practitioners to carry out *target situation analyses* of academic communities. Potentially this type of research could focus on how an academic community organises itself, aspects of its discipline-specific knowledge, the genres that community members use to communicate with each other, and the meta-knowledge of a particular subject community, such as its course organisation and methods of teaching, communication and assessment.

The second area of teacher knowledge relates to students. In this area, the CFTEAP document identifies teacher competencies relating to student need, student critical thinking and student autonomy. In this area, the EAP teacher's knowledge and expertise should include the tools necessary to understand students' prior cognitive training, their previous educational experiences, and their current expectations of educational institutions. It is important that the teacher knows how to undertake student profiling, language testing and course evaluation. This area also includes understanding the need for students to develop the two key dispositions of *critical thinking* and *autonomy* in order to participate effectively in future academic courses. These dispositions can only be developed gradually over time, and need to be embedded within the syllabus, materials and methodology of an EAP course.

The third area of teacher knowledge relates to curriculum development. In this area, the CFTEAP document identifies teacher competencies relating to syllabus and programme development, text processing and text creation. Here, EAP teachers' knowledge and expertise should include knowing how to relate needs analysis findings, theories of discourse and theories of learning to the development of syllabus goals and objectives. Teacher expertise in this area involves a complex synthesis that includes knowledge of discourse analysis, approaches to syllabus design and materials development as well as theories of learning. Furthermore, all of this will be driven by insights from needs analyses.

The fourth area of knowledge is that of programme implementation. In this area, the CFTEAP identifies teacher competencies relating to teaching practice and assessment practice. In this area, EAP teachers need to have knowledge of appropriate methodologies for delivering and assessing EAP courses. The practical elements of teaching methodology and creating and implementing achievement testing are important areas of knowledge in EAP just as much as in other areas of English language teaching. In relation to methodology, EAP units of instruction will tend to have larger textual and discursive outcomes than general English language teaching, which again requires appropriate pedagogical approaches. Similarly, the testing of speaking and writing in ways that involve the production of larger texts requires appropriate theoretical knowledge.

Current conceptualisation of EAP courses and the implications for practitioner roles

As I see it, there are now two ways of conceptualising EAP courses: the first is EAP as a support activity, such as is the case with health services, counselling or learning support; and the second is EAP as an academic discipline. The support activity approach still treats EAP as language acquisition for general proficiency development**,** and practitioners in such contexts are seen as developing students' linguistic knowledge and communicative skills. On the other hand, taking an academic discipline approach, practitioners are teaching language as it is embedded in the practices, discourses and texts of the academic world, a world that EAP students aspire to enter, or which they are already trying to negotiate their way through. Here, the focus is not just on language as the linguistic trace of a discourse process, rather it is the whole discourse process itself that is under consideration, including the language**.** Those taking the support-activity approach are focused on developing the overall communicative competence of the student. However, the academic discipline approach addresses students' capacity for language use as it is shaped by particular disciplines, their epistemologies and the particular genres they use for communicating knowledge. In addition, the support activity approach sees EAP as taking place within limited (and often quite unrealistic) time frames, whereas the academic discipline approach sees the development of students' discourse competence as a longer term enterprise. Finally, the support-activity approach sees EAP as a commodified subject, teachable from finite commercial courses, while the academic discipline approach sees it as drawing upon a wide range of resources. Certainly the commercially produced materials are a vital, core element, but so too is the teacher's own ongoing and developing knowledge of EAP research.

Where EAP is conceptualised as a support activity, the practitioner's role is primarily seen as teaching language – the four skills – for proficiency development, although employing materials and tasks that have a more academic focus. It involves teaching "study skills", such as accessing, organising, presenting and referencing knowledge, but not necessarily developing what Waters and Waters (2001) call *study competence* because of the decontextualised nature of the tasks and activities employed. It involves teaching critical thinking as the application of logic to propositions or problem-solving, in the belief that once acquired, this ability is transferable and can be used in different academic contexts in the future. However, where EAP is seen as an academic discipline, the practitioner's focus is rather on developing the student's capacity to understand and use language in different contexts and, in particular, develop awareness of the discursive influences on language that arise from context. It involves developing students' ability as discourse analysts so that they can unravel and participate in the discourses of the particular academic community that they aspire to join; and, it involves developing awareness of critical thinking as an evaluative judgment shaped by the epistemology, research methods and communicative values and genres of the particular discipline within which it occurs.

Conclusion: Supporting the development of EAP in New Zealand

With the increased demand for English-medium university education worldwide, the profile of students seeking to undertake English language study in the New Zealand context has changed in recent years. While many students formerly required general English language proficiency, such as for residency, there is now a growing demand for EAP courses in order to enter tertiary education. Because of the demand for this type of course, TESOL teachers are often being asked to make the shift into teaching EAP, often without suitable training or professional development support. However, as this paper points out, EAP is a specialist branch of English language teaching with its own literature, pedagogy and practice frameworks;

moreover, it requires specialist teacher education in addition to that offered for more general English language teaching. *Initial teacher education* (ITE) for teachers of English language, therefore, now needs to include courses that focus on ESP and EAP practice, courses that provide novice teachers with a clear sense of this scope of this branch of English language teaching along with the commitment to scholarship and research that it involves. However, ITE leads to the much longer process of *teacher development*, something that occurs over time as practitioners are engaged in practice, undertake professional development and connect with the workshops and symposia of their particular academic community. Campion's (2016) study that examined the experiences of British TESOL teachers moving into EAP emphasises the importance for new practitioners to connect regularly with a community of experienced teachers as part of the knowledge-building process in this field. Campion's findings, therefore, raise the issue of the need for symposia and conferences in the New Zealand context that include a focus on EAP. Furthermore, ongoing teacher development also involves regular engagement with the professional and research literature of EAP, which requires access to the books and academic journals of the field. While we need to embrace and become involved in EAP in the New Zealand context, we also need to ensure that it is supported by appropriate teacher education, access to the resources of its knowledge base and ongoing teacher development and mutual exchange through the meetings and activities of an active EAP community.

References

Alexander, O., Argent, S., & Spencer, J. (2008). *EAP essentials: A teacher's guide to principles and practice*. Reading, England: Garnet.

BALEAP. (2008). Competency framework for teachers of English for academic purposes: Retrieved from http://www.baleap.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/teap-competency-framework.pdf.

Benesch, S. (1993). ESL, ideology, and the politics of pragmatism. *TESOL Quarterly, 27*(4), 705-717.

Benesch, S. (2001). *Critical English for academic purposes: Theory, politics, and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bruce, I. (2011). *Theory and Concepts of English for Academic Purposes*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Campion, G. C. (2016). 'The learning never ends': Exploring teachers' views on the transition from General English to EAP. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 23*, 59-70.

Charles, M., & Pecorari, D. (2015). *Introducing English for Academic Purposes*. Abingdon, England: Routledge.

Coxhead, A. (2006). *Essentials of Teaching Academic Vocabulary*: Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

De Chazal, E. (2014). *English for Academic Purposes*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Flowerdew, J., & Peacock, M. (2001). *Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes*: Cambridge, England: University Press.

Gardner, D., & Davies, M. (2014). A New Academic Vocabulary List. *Applied Linguistics, 35*(3), 305-327. doi: 10.1093/applin/amt015

Halliday, M. A. K. (1990/2002). The construction of knowledge and value in grammar of scientific discourse, with reference to Charles Darwin's The Origin of species. In J. Webster (Ed.), *The collected works of M. A. K. Halliday, Volume 2: Linguistic studies of text and discourse* (pp. 168-196). London, England: Continuum.

Hyland, K. (2006). *English for Academic Purposes: An Advanced Resource Book*. Abingdon, England: Routledge.

IELTS. (2015). *IELTS: Guide for educational institutions, governments, professional bodies and commercial organisations.* Retrieved from www.IELTS.org.

Ivanic, R. (1998). *Writing and Identity*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Johns, A. M. (1997). *Text, role, and context: Developing academic literacies*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Lea, M. R., & Stierer, B. (2000). *Student Writing in Higher Education: New Contexts*. Buckingham, England: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

Lea, M. R., & Street, B. V. (1998). Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education, 23*(2), 157-172.

Martin, J. R. (1984). Language, register and genre. In F. Christie (Ed.), *Language Studies: Children Writing. Reader* (pp. 21-30). Geelong, Australia: Deakin University.

Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2008). *Genre Relations: Mapping Culture*. London, England: Equinox Pub.

Robinson, P. C. (1980). *ESP (English for specific purposes): The present position*. Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Waters, A., & Waters, M. (2001). Designing tasks for developing study competence and study skills in English. In J. Flowerdew & M. Peacock (Eds.), *Research perspectives on English for academic purposes* (pp. 375-389). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Widdowson, H. G. (1983). *Learning purpose and language use*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Woodward-Kron, R. (2008). More than just jargon – the nature and role of specialist language in learning disciplinary knowledge. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 7*(4), 234-249.