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EAP: issues and directions

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Abstract

The field of English for Academic Purposes has developed rapidly in the past 25 years to become a major force in English language teaching and research. Drawing its strength from broad theoretical foundations and a commitment to research-based language education, EAP has begun to reveal some of the constraints of social contexts on language use and to develop ways for learners to gain control over these. In this first issue of a new journal devoted to developments and understandings in this field, the editors briefly sketch the context within which the journal has emerged and point to some of the issues which currently influence and confront our discipline. In so doing we raise a number of questions which are likely to pre-occupy *JEAP*'s readers and contributors into the near future. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. EAP, ESP and JEAP

The growth of English as the leading language for the dissemination of academic knowledge has transformed the educational experiences of countless students, who must now gain fluency in the conventions of English language academic discourses to understand their disciplines and to successfully navigate their learning. The response of the language teaching profession to these demands has been the development over the past 25 years of a new field in the teaching of English as a Second/Foreign Language in universities and other academic settings: the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). This development has taken a number of different forms and directions, but together these have reshaped the ways that English language teaching and research are conducted in higher education.

Programmes designed to prepare nonnative users of English for English-medium academic settings have grown into a multi-million dollar enterprise around the

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world. But EAP is not only a commercial endeavour: for college and university students in many countries, mastering enough English, and the right English, to succeed in learning their subjects through the medium of English in textbooks, lectures, study groups, and so on, is a matter of great urgency. Equally, for countries that are trying to lift themselves into economic prominence, or to remain major players on the world economic stage, producing an annual crop of graduates who can function in employment through English is a major issue.

This rapid expansion in the number of learners of English for Academic Purposes has led to a similar expansion in the number of EAP teachers. And this means that many—probably most—of the teachers of EAP around the world are not native speakers of English. The needs of these nonnative teachers are different from those of native speakers, and this recognition has led to new developments in EAP materials and teacher training courses. Teachers have also come to acknowledge that teaching those who are using English for their studies differs from teaching those who are learning English for general purposes only. It is also different from teaching those who are learning for occupational purposes, which is the field known as ESP, English for Specific Purposes.

The appearance of a journal devoted to the issues and directions of EAP seems almost inevitable given the developments in English language teaching in the last decade. The growth of English as the leading language for the dissemination of academic knowledge has had a major impact around the world, binding the careers of thousands of scholars to their competence in a foreign language and elevating this competence to a professional imperative.

2. What is EAP?

English for Academic Purposes is generally defined quite simply as teaching English with the aim of facilitating learners' study or research in that language (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001: p. 8; Jordan, 1997: p. 1). But while EAP encompasses different domains and practices, such definitions conceal as much as they reveal, including not only study-skills teaching but also a great deal of what might be seen as general English as well. In fact, we need to keep in mind that EAP has emerged out of the broader field of ESP, a theoretically and pedagogically eclectic parent, but one committed to tailoring instruction to specific rather than general purposes. English for Academic Purposes refers to language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts. It means grounding instruction in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines. This takes practitioners beyond preparing learners for study in English to developing new kinds of literacy: equipping students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts.

This genesis has meant that EAP has tended to reflect many of its parent's strengths and weaknesses. On one hand, it is characterised by the same emphasis on strong interdisciplinary research as a means of illuminating the constraints of social

contexts on language use and the ways learners can gain control over these. It has also followed the same clear commitments to linguistic analysis, to contextual relevance, and to the classroom replication of community-specific communicative events. Along with these assets, however, it has also inherited some of ESP's much discussed limitations, in particular: a tendency to work *for* rather than *with* subject specialists, a vulnerability to claims that it ignores students' cultures, and a reluctance to critically engage with the values of institutional goals and practices.

3. The growth of English for Academic Purposes

EAP and ESP were both fledgling fields only 20 years ago (see the article by Jordan in this issue). When the *English for Specific Purposes* journal was begun by Grace Stovall Mancill of the American University in Washington in 1980, it was a gamble to start even **one** journal concerned with ESP, EAP, and related areas. For some years, it was a struggle to fill the pages of two issues a year. But the author and reader base grew steadily, and in the last 10 years, *ESPJ* has really taken off, growing from 3 issues totaling 250 pages in 1991 to quarterly publication and 320 pages in 1997, and to over 500 pages in 2001 (including a fifth, supplementary issue dedicated to EAP).

EAP has emerged from the larger field of English for *Specific Purposes* as the academic 'home' of scholars who do not research in or teach other 'SPs', but whose focus is wholly on academic contexts (although we must not forget that there are also scholars and teachers who continue to engage in both ESP and EAP). The modern-day field of EAP addresses the teaching of English in the academy at all age and proficiency levels, and it draws on a range of interdisciplinary influences for its research methods, theories and practices. It seeks to provide insights into the structures and meanings of academic texts, into the demands placed by academic contexts on communicative behaviours, and into the pedagogic practices by which these behaviours can be developed. In the rest of this paper, by way of an extended first editorial, we seek to show that the breadth and depth of work done and to be done in EAP is more than sufficient to fill the pages of a quarterly journal, as *JEAP* will be by 2003. We do this by raising and responding to some of these issues, and in the hope of encouraging debate and scholarship.

4. Users of 'academic' English

EAP has traditionally been associated with university-level learning—indeed, the retrospective paper by Bob Jordan in this first issue makes clear the genesis of the first EAP association, SELMOUS (latterly BALEAP) in British university language centres. While this traditional base has grown and strengthened, EAP approaches have expanded. It is increasingly understood that children entering schooling can be helped to learn more effectively and to integrate better into the educational structure if they are taught specific academic skills and language as well as the language nee-

ded for social communication. At the same time, assumptions which could previously have been made about the educational and economic backgrounds of EAP learners are increasingly unfounded. With the rapid rise in refugee populations around the world, it is common to receive nonnative users of English into high school classrooms who are illiterate in their own language, and for whom the concept of ‘academic language’ in any language is an unfamiliar one.

This expanding role for EAP has been accompanied, however, by our growing sense of disquiet concerning the sociopolitical implications of such an ‘accommodationist’ view of language learning (see Canagarajah this issue). As we briefly discuss below, we can expect that there will be significant debate over the appropriacy and implications of English for Academic Purposes at pre-tertiary (college) levels as well as its role in university contexts. In counterpoint to the probable increase in attention to EAP in early schooling, advanced EAP is also receiving more attention at present. The knowledge base that has built up around traditional, university-based, academic needs has led to the understanding that academic language needs neither begin nor end in upper high school/undergraduate education, but span formal schooling at every level. Thus, for example, there is a rapid expansion in materials for and research into thesis writing and dissertation supervision (see Braine, 2002; Johns & Swales, 2002, this issue).

Going still further, a related development is a concern with the English language skills of nonnative English speaking academics, especially those teaching and researching in non-English language countries where English is used as the medium of university instruction, such as Hong Kong and Singapore. The institutions’ expectations of these academics are closely aligned with the ‘international norm’—that is, whether the academic is a native or nonnative user of English is seen to be irrelevant. Effective classroom delivery through English, presentation through good lecture notes and slides; the ability to carry out the administrative work of the institution in English, to attend meetings, to engage in email debate; and above all, to conduct research and publish the results and discussion of that research **in English**—are all demanded. This group’s needs are beginning to be noticed and analyzed; training for academic staff in teaching through English and conducting research through English; specific support to academics in preparing their work for publication in English—initiatives to provide specific help are emerging (Sengupta, Forey, & Hamp-Lyons, 1999). At the same time, research into the English language behaviours and patterns of nonnative academics is beginning to appear (Flowerdew, 2000).

5. ‘Academic literacy’

In recent years, the term ‘academic literacy’ has come to be applied to the complex set of skills (not necessarily only those relating to the mastery of reading and writing) which are increasingly argued to be vital underpinnings or cultural knowledge required for success in academic communities, from elementary school onward. The discourse of academic literacy is more usually found outside English language

teaching. In the USA it is found in work relating to students from ethnically and dialectally diverse backgrounds (e.g. Fox, 1994), and in highly politicized terms (e.g. Freire, 1993; Girouz, 1994). In the UK it is associated with the Lancaster critical linguistics group (e.g. Fairclough, 1992; Ivanič, 1998), and in Australia with the critical genre group (e.g. Cope, 1993; Luke, 1996).

‘Academic literacy’ has its basis in educational marxism and critical linguistics/critical education, and so it argues from very different premises than traditional EAP. But despite arising from quite different sociopolitical contexts, proponents of academic literacy and those of EAP share a common desire to provide appropriate and effective education. The debate over motives and means in this area, in the pages of the *English for Specific Purposes* journal between Pennycook (1997) and Desmond Allison (in 1996 and 1998), provides fascinating insights into these issues. Part of this debate relates to the role of English in the modern and future world, and the evident dominance it now has in scholarly publication in most parts of the world.

6. Disciplinary variation or similarity

One of the strongest links between EAP and ESP is the emphasis that practitioners give to needs analysis as a systematic way of identifying the specific sets of skills, texts, linguistic forms and communicative practices that a particular group of learners must acquire (e.g. Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). While the occasional voice is raised to express the view that EAP should be concerned with a common core of universal skills or language forms, (e.g. Hutchison & Waters, 1987; Spack, 1988), there is now clear evidence that academic discourses represent a variety of specific literacies (Candlin & Plum, 1999; Hyland, 2000, 2002a; Johns, 1997; Prior, 1998).

Our involvement as teachers with students’ target communicative practices confronts us with the fact of discourse variation almost daily, and this is strongly reinforced by published research which shows that each community has different purposes and ways of seeing the world which are associated with distinct practices, genres, and communicative conventions. The large body of survey research carried out in universities during the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, has not only revealed the considerable variation of discourses across the curriculum (e.g. Horowitz, 1986), but also the differences in the structure of common genres employed by different disciplines (e.g. Braine, 1995). In addition, a growing body of text analysis research emphasises the extent to which successful communication depends on the projection of a shared context. Communication is effective to the extent that participants draw on knowledge of prior texts to frame messages in ways which appeal to appropriate cultural and institutional relationships (e.g. Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1990).

The fact of discourse specificity has obvious implications for the ways we organise our teaching, but there are obstacles to putting specificity into practice. Not least among these involves juggling institutional constraints such as achieving viable group size, bargaining time and learning priorities with content departments, and ensuring comparability across disciplines. The consolidation of the different IELTS

modules into a single test, for example, reveals the difficulties of ensuring reliably equivalent reading and writing tasks across fields in an EAP context. Issues in assessing English for specific and academic purposes have been explored in a recent issue of the journal *Language Testing* 18(2) guest edited by Hamp-Lyons and Lumley.

It is important for EAP to build on this research and establish practices that challenge the widely-held assumption that academic conventions are universal and independent of particular disciplines as this undermines our professional expertise and leads learners to believe that they simply need to master a set of transferable rules. By regarding academic literacy practices as something abstract and decontextualised, communication difficulties are too easily regarded as learners' own weaknesses and EAP becomes an exercise in language repair. An important role of this journal must be to strengthen the understandings which make EAP teaching a profession. Part of this involves disabusing administrators of the view that the acquisition of academic literacy involves a few hours of fixing up grammar in the language centre. Administrators must come to realise the complexities of this profession. This journal has a role to play in exploring these issues. Where, for example, is specificity feasible, and what does it consist of in different fields? Precisely what skills and genres can we reliably and usefully regard as transferable across disciplines? How do we satisfy students' demands for personal relevance in classes of students from a range of disciplines? How can research results which emphasise disciplinary specificity be effectively employed in heterogeneous classes?

7. The concept of 'community'

A concept closely related to specificity is that of community. The view that discursive and rhetorical features might reflect the cultural experiences of individuals has been enthusiastically taken up by EAP and considerable research has been devoted to revealing the discursive homogeneity of academic communities as a way to more accurately target instruction (e.g. Johns, 1997; Swales & Feak, 2001).

It is difficult to imagine EAP without some notion of community. It is central to our understanding of the ways individuals acquire and deploy the specialized discourse competencies that allow them to legitimate their professional identities and to effectively participate as group members. Moreover, the term has not only become a powerful metaphor in joining writers, texts and readers in a particular discursive space, it has also contributed to a movement in EAP away from an exclusive focus on texts to the practices which surround their use. Ethnographic, participant-oriented research, which draws on the conceptual frameworks of insiders themselves, has been used to complement discourse studies and round out our understanding of communities (e.g. Prior, 1998; Swales, 1998). Communities, then, are seen to differ from one another along both social and cognitive dimensions, offering contrasts not just in their fields of knowledge, but also in their ways of talking, their argument structures, aims, social behaviours, power relations, and political interests.

The concept of Discourse Community is, therefore, now an important organising principle in EAP: it sets us a research agenda focused on revealing the genres and

communicative conventions of academic disciplines, and a pedagogic agenda focused on using this knowledge to assist learners to critique and participate in such communities. Unfortunately, as Bazerman (1994: p. 128) notes, “most definitions of discourse community get ragged around the edges rapidly” and it has not been easy to agree on exactly what the term means. Are they disciplines, with their enormous diversity of competing and tangential theories, directions and allegiances? Or are they university departments? Or users of an internet list? Should we see them as Becher’s (1989) ‘invisible colleges’ of specialists working on similar problems? As Swales’ (1998) ‘place discourse communities’, identified by their typical genre sets? As Porter’s (1992) participants in approved forums of discourse? Or as Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice, cohering through their engagement in some situated activity?

Clearly, we need to avoid framing discourse communities as determinate, static, autonomous, and predictable arenas of shared and agreed upon values and conventions, steering clear of the idea of “discursive utopias” (Harris, 1989). But nor do we want to denude the concept of its explanatory and predictive value by reducing communities to aggregates of competing and indeterminate voices. One way forward is offered by the increasing sophistication of our understandings of genre, intertextuality and the processes by which texts and events are mediated through relationships with other texts. This helps us to understand the ways that texts cluster to constitute particular social and cultural practices while large text corpora and concordancing programmes mean we can now collect and analyze representative samples of texts differentiated by both genre and field. This not only provides more targeted and more plausible linguistic descriptions but also an increasingly important way of conceptualising communities. However, while recent research has tended to adopt models of community which replace the idea of monolithic and unitary structures with systems of multiply overlapping and intersecting beliefs and practices (Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1998), EAP continues to struggle with this invaluable but problematic concept.

8. New genres and new technologies

Another crucial issue facing EAP is that of the expansion of genres and the increase in the use of electronic discourses. Swales (forthcoming) talks of the increasing *generification* of academic existence and the proliferation of written genres into ever more areas of our professional lives. Hirings, promotions, student selections, grant applications, annual appraisals and triennial plans come with their own new sets of genre constraints and expectations while routine practices such as lectures, correspondence with colleagues and interactions with students are increasingly dominated by new genres such as Powerpoint, email, ICQ and postings on electronic lists. Using these genres effectively can pose considerable communicative challenges to all professionals, but for EAP teachers they often demand a pedagogical response as well. For the increasing numbers of practitioners working with non-native English speaking faculty, identifying, understanding and teaching these

genres and the networks of which they form an integral part have become a growing element of their professional expertise.

More centrally, we are not only called upon to interpret these new genres and their contexts for learners, but are also increasingly required to understand and translate the progressively more complex interactions between verbal and non-verbal features of academic texts. Visual elements have grown in both size and importance over the years, particularly in science textbooks and research papers (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995), such that Kress (1998) characterises the change as a ‘tectonic shift’ in semiotic practices which “offer fundamentally distinct possibilities for engagement with the world” (ibid, 67). The ability to produce and understand text-visual interrelations is now an essential component of an academic literacy, and EAP research is struggling to understand and detail these meanings (e.g. Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

As if the growth of new genres, radical developments in how they are constructed, and changes in the ways they interact with each other were not enough to keep EAP teachers and researchers busy, we also find ourselves increasingly involved in the far-reaching changes brought to academic life by the advent of electronic communication technologies. It is, of course, difficult to ignore the considerable impact of computer-mediated interaction on academic and professional life. For many of us in the developed world, this has transformed the ways we write, the genres we create, the ways we get and send information and, increasingly, the ways we teach. We are also becoming aware of some of the effects of technological exclusion. With access to computers largely restricted to the privileged elites of the west and less than 2% of the world’s population hooked up to the internet, it seems probable that divisions in computer use may work to deepen existing divisions and further exacerbate the marginalisation of L2 students and academics from developing countries.

In terms of computer-mediated instruction, it is easy to get the impression that opportunities are being missed in programmes which simply automate and liven-up the delivery of traditional paper-based material. More interesting are the possibilities technology opens up for language analysis and human interaction. Programmes based on concordance analysis, text retrieval technology and principles of autonomous learning, for example, offer students more active roles and more exciting learning possibilities than traditional drill-and-kill CALL in EAP (e.g. Milton, 1999). Similarly, there is growing interest in the use of computer networks to increase interaction between students, both locally and at remote sites (e.g. Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Warschauer, this issue), and to utilise on-line information as resources for academic writing (Taylor & Ward, 1998).

However, the full implications of this communications revolution are not yet apparent or completely understood, and we still have a long way to go before we can be sure we are using its potential most effectively in our teaching. What, for instance, are the implications of computer-mediated interactions for the authorial identities we assume on-line and the ways we engage with readers? What are the effects of on-line instruction or networked interactions on language learning? What are the best ways to employ these technologies in EAP classrooms? How can we ensure these

resources are used to provide greater opportunities for wider participation in academic forums? What is clear is that we need to understand the changes that these new genres imply for academic literacy practices and to either address them or be left behind by them (Hyland, 2002b).

9. Accommodation or critique

A final, and central issue, we must mention here concerns the extent to which EAP is a pragmatic or a critical discipline. Do we see our role as developing students' academic literacy skills to facilitate their effective participation in academic communities? Or do we have a responsibility to interrogate our theoretical and pedagogic assumptions and provide learners with ways of examining the academic socio-political status quo to critique these cultural and linguistic resources? Put simply, is the EAP teacher's job to replicate and reproduce existing forms of discourse (and thus power relations) or to develop an understanding of them so they can be challenged?

The EAP agenda has always been to help learners gain access to ways of communicating that have accrued cultural capital in particular communities, demystifying academic discourses to provide learners with control over the resources that might enhance their career opportunities. This has involved moving away from an exclusive focus on text features to ways of understanding the social processes in which academic discourses are sited. As a result, we have developed increasingly sophisticated and diverse methods of pragmatic and rhetorical analyses which has begun to provide evidence for the view that language use is always socially situated and indicative of broader social practices. In turn, this more socially informed approach is having an increasing impact on the ways we understand and practice our profession.

In terms of EAP research, a major effect has been to fuel the growing sense that a social-theoretical stance is needed to fully understand what happens in institutions to make discourses the way they are. Increasingly, studies have turned to examining the ideological impact of expert discourses, the social distribution of valued literacies, the access non-native and novice members have to prestigious genres, and the ways that control of specialized discourses are related to status and credibility (Hyland, 2000). The distribution of particular features in texts and the ways texts are used are seen as expressing the values, beliefs and ideologies of speakers and writers, and are now increasingly taken into account when seeking to explain discourse practices. Issues such as individual competitiveness, alliances among particular groups, the role of gatekeepers, and vested interests in institutional reward systems have therefore become legitimate areas of EAP research.

In terms of teaching, this more critical awareness reminds us that EAP instruction itself is not a politically neutral activity. Canagarajah (1999), for instance, argues that the growth of English as a global commodity is essentially ideological as it perpetuates the dependence of Third World countries and works to maintain socio-political elites. He also points out, however, that dominant ideologies are always

mediated by culture. Students negotiate and refashion what they learn and critical pedagogies in EAP can encourage this reflexive attitude to the foreign academic culture. Pennycook (1997) also believes that EAP must engage with issues of power and suggests that we should help learners develop a critical awareness of how language works to support institutional inequalities. Benesch (2001) has recently discussed one way in which this might be accomplished, introducing the term *rights analysis* to refer to a framework for studying power relations in classrooms and institutions to modify target context arrangements rather than reinforcing conformity.

But in many ways these are still voices on the margins, and EAP has yet to seriously confront these issues. While there is greater awareness of the relationships between language and power and of the inequalities which support the prestigious literacy practices we teach, effective classroom responses are often constrained by the institutional contexts in which we work. EAP teachers are frequently employed as vulnerable, short-term instructors in marginalized ‘service units’ and ways of facilitating change in such environments remain to be explored.

10. Conclusions

This brief overview has been necessarily selective, as limitations of space prevent a fuller coverage. We have, however, raised some of the, to us, most critical and most obvious issues that confront teachers, researchers and learners of EAP in the “post post-modern” world; we expect—and hope—that readers of this first issue of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* will have critical issues of their own to raise, and important scholarly discussion and significant empirical research to contribute, as we collectively seek to define the kind of academic and pedagogic endeavour which our profession is becoming. EAP offers the possibility of making even greater contributions to our understanding of the varied ways language is used in academic communities to provide ever more strongly informed foundations for pedagogic materials. We can expect this to be a fruitful and controversial area of research and debate, and we hope to publish much of that research—and the debate—in the pages of *JEAP*.

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