

English for Academic Purposes: Theory, Trends and
Practices
Manju Shree

Abstract:

English for academic purpose (EAP) emerged as a branch of English for specific purposes in the early 1980s. EAP grounds English language teaching in the linguistic demands of academic context, tailoring instruction to specific rather than general purposes. There is a growth of interest in EAP in the recent years. The interest in EAP developed in response to the growing need for intercultural awareness and of English as a lingua franca (ELF). EAP has become a major area of research in applied linguistics and focus of the courses studied worldwide by a large number of students preparing for study in colleges and universities. The increase in students' undertaking tertiary studies in English-speaking countries has led to a steady demand for the courses tailored to meet the immediate, specific vocational and professional needs. Thus, most universities in the present day world prioritize the role of academic skills. The aim of the paper is to examine the key approaches to the teaching of English for academic purposes, current trends in teaching EAP, and to argue the centrality and significance of EAP in the academia. The paper concludes by arguing that a greater emphasis needs to be placed on methodology in EAP.

Keywords: English for academic purpose; English for specific purpose; general English

Introduction

Over the past three decades, academic programmes designed to prepare nonnative users of English has grown into a multi-million-dollar enterprise around the world. Teaching those who use English for their study purposes differs from teaching English to those who learn English for general purposes and occupational purposes. For Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p. 34), English for academic purposes (EAP) refers to "any teaching that relates to a study purpose." In a similar vein, Flowerdew and Peacock (2001, p. 8) define EAP as "teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language." EAP encompasses different domains and practices including not only study-skills teaching but also a great deal of what might be seen as general English as well. In fact, "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".

(Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 2) The main goal of EAP is for students to communicate effectively in

academic environments. One key factor in reaching this goal is to know what the communicative requirements in these environments are. EAP stands for language research and instruction that lays emphasis on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts. This encourages practitioners to equipping students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts. EAP has come out from the larger field of English for Specific Purposes as the academic „home“ of scholars who do not research in or teach other „specific purposes“, but whose focus is wholly on academic contexts (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002). 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. EAP is considered to be one of two branches of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and the other being English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Each of these branches can be subdivided according to the disciplines or occupations with which it is concerned. Thus EAP may be separated into English for Mathematics, English for Business, English for Pilots, English for Economics, English for Bank Managers etc. EAP approach differs from general English. It begins with the learner and the situation, whereas general English starts with the language. Many EAP courses/ programmes give more emphasis on reading and writing, while most general English courses place more focus on speaking and listening. General English courses tend to teach learners conversational and social genres of the language, while EAP courses tend to teach formal, academic genres. The distinction between the two major branches of ESP is not clear cut. English for Business, designed to assist learners in their studies will clearly be EAP. At the same time, some university business courses like vocationally oriented courses, usually seek to prepare their students for business careers. English support for more vocationally- oriented aspects of the Business could perhaps be described as EOP as much as EAP. An English course designed to help students read economics textbooks would clearly be EAP, but a course designed to teach learners how to participate in business meetings or take phone calls has definitely an EOP dimension to it (Flowerdew and Peacock, 2001).

Theoretical underpinnings Some important theoretical underpinnings relevant in the discussions made on EAP discourses are briefly discussed under the themes given below.

Needs analysis

The centrality of need analysis in teaching and evaluation EAP has been acknowledged by several scholars and authors (Richterich and Chancerel, 1977; Munby, 1978; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Brindley, 1989; Johns, 1990; West, 1994, 1997; Seedhouse, 1995; Jordan, 1997; Dudley-Evans and St. John, 1998; Richards, 2001; Finney, 2002; Grier, 2005; Long, 2005). Need analysis as the technique for “collecting and assessing information relevant to course design” (Hyland, 2006, p. 73), need analysis regulates course design and teaching (Hyland, 2006). This is because need analysis

integrates the goal of individuals with the rules and requirements of the institution, with the pedagogical implications. Hence, need analysis “naturalizes what is socially constructed, making externally imposed rules seem not just normal but also immutable” by merging tactically learner needs with the institutional requirements (Benesch, 2001, p. 61). This implies that it could be viewed as “learning goals bringing to bear the teacher’s values, beliefs and philosophies of teaching and learning” coconstructed by the teacher and his/her ELLs (Hyland, 2006, p. 74). Need analysis is a procedure to collect information about learners’ needs (Richards, 2001). The importance of NA is emphasized in English for Specific Purpose (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) and English for Academic Purposes (Jordan, 1997), and also in general language courses espousing learner-centered curricula (Nunan, 1988; Tudor, 1996), task-based curricula (Long and Crookes, 1992), as well as performance-assessment. Clearly, the role of need analysis in any language course is indisputable. For Johns (1990), need analysis is the first step in course design and it provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities. Need analysis generally refers to the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students. Pratt (1980, p. 79) states “needs assessment refers to an array of procedures for identifying and validating needs, and establishing priorities among them.” The key phrases that make this definition different from the others are „array of procedures“ and „validating needs“. The first phrase indicates that a variety of information gathering tools should be used. The second implies that needs are not absolute, that is, once they are identified, they continually need to be examined for validity to ensure that they remain real needs for the students involved. “The principal proponents of the use of need analysis were Richterich and Chancerel” (Nunan, 1988, p. 43). Need analysis, according to Richards (2001, p. 6), is “the

requirement for fact finding or the collection of data from various sources, for example, the data about learners, the materials and so on.” Need analysis procedures aim at determining what a particular group of learners expect to use English for and what their present level of competence is. Richards (2001, p. 5) suggests that need analysis serves three main purposes: it provides a means of obtaining wider input into the content, design and implementation of a language programme; it can be used in developing goals, objectives and content; and it can provide data for reviewing and evaluating an existing programme (as cited in Nunan, 1988, p. 43). In the field of applied linguistics, need analysis refers to “a number of means for identifying and validating the needs and establishes priorities among those needs” (Richards, 1990, pp.1-2).

English for specific purposes

English for specific purposes is an area of English language teaching which focuses on preparing learners „for chosen communicative environments“. It differs from general English as it is based on a close analysis of the learner’s communicative needs for a specific occupation or activity, as well as a detailed analysis of the language of that occupation or activity. As for a broader definition of ESP, Hutchinson and Waters theorize, “ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 19). ESP takes into account certain basic questions like: Who the learners are, what their linguistic background or level of competence is, what their necessities, wants and lacks are, what particular skills or subskills they need to develop, etc.

Sociocultural theory of learning

The sociocultural constructivist theory of learning contributes to the theoretical construct of EAP due to its recognition of the socially constructed knowledge and responsiveness to the “complexities of institutions, teaching, and learning in local contexts” (Benesch, 2001, p. 4). EAP has evolved from its modest roots in the 1960s to become an “emerging global phenomenon” by capitalizing on global challenges (de Chazal, 2014, p. 3). Grounded on the sociocultural constructivist theory of learning, University EAP opens more opportunities for integrating social activities and cultural practices as the source of critical thinking, the centrality of critical language pedagogy and praxis in students’ holistic development, and the “inseparability of the individual from the social” (Moll, 1990, p. 15).

Current trends in teaching English for Academic Purposes

Modern day EAP teaching encompasses three major approaches which focus on study skills, general purpose EAP and specific purpose EAP respectively. The study skills give emphasis on developing students’ control of a range of skills so that they can successfully participate in

their study. These skills are regarded as common to all students within the university context, and so are independent of discipline and content. Students who are learning English for

their study purposes need to know a wide range of skills namely; identifying main ideas in a text, distinguishing fact from opinion, guessing the meaning of words from context, note taking, summarizing, referring to source appropriately, recognizing the function of discourse markers, etc. In addition, EAP these days aims at developing an understanding of the discourse of academia and of the specific disciplines in students in which they are enrolled. They need to understand for example, types of questions that can be asked, the ways in which information is collected and analyzed, the purpose and form of common genres, the ways in which writers create a voice for themselves, and the use of appropriate forms of language.

Practices

English for academic purposes is a practical affair which focuses on investigating needs, preparing teaching materials, and devising appropriate teaching methodologies. It therefore provides informed and focused instructions based on need analysis.

Methods in EAP

The prime concern of the language teaching profession in the twenty first century was to find out the more effective method of language teaching. There are a number of reasons for the decline of the methods syndrome in contemporary discussions of language teaching. For Brown (2011), the term „method“ is replaced by the term „pedagogy“. The „method“ implies a static set of procedures while pedagogy suggests the dynamic interplay between teachers, learners, and instructional materials during the process of teaching and learning. Despite the fact that historically EAP came out at about the same time as the search for the „best“ method of teaching English was at its height, it seems that the macro-level of method has had very little influence on the teaching of EAP. This may be due in part to the restrictive nature of most methods, which prescribe how teachers should teach, whereas most EAP teachers are professionals who feel confident about their own ability to make decisions concerning teaching.

Approaches in EAP

A substantial amount of work related to approaches in teaching EAP has been investigated. There are lists of principles that guide EAP teaching. For example, in discussing the whole of ESP, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) list eight principles including: language learning is an active process, language learning is an emotional experience, and language learning is not systematic. There are also global teaching and learning practices from which principles can be drawn. The first set of common practices that seems widespread in teaching EAP involves

inductive learning. Practitioners prefer inductive learning to more teacher-centred deductive approaches. The widespread use of concordancing in EAP (Jordan, 1997; Stevens, 1991), the teaching of reading focusing on text analysis (Holme, 1996; Paltridge, 2002), and approaches where students are encouraged to act as researchers investigating academic communities (Johns, 1997) all place a particular emphasis on induction. The teaching EAP also makes use of process syllabuses (Widdowson, 1990) involving task-based and project-based learning. Both the approaches are quite common in English for general purposes, much of the initial impetus for task-based and project-based learning came from EAP teaching (Halland Kenny, 1988) where they are still frequently used. Other approaches like self-access learning (Jordan, 1997; Lynch, 2001), the use of negotiated syllabuses (Martyn, 2000), and the self and peer assessment and feedback are also in practice in teaching EAP. All of these aim to promote learner autonomy.

Techniques in EAP

Techniques are more specific than approaches and are often equated with activities (although techniques may also include such things as a specific way of giving an explanation which would not normally be categorised as an activity. As specific teaching/learning practices, techniques may be specific to a certain objective and thus lack generalisability. A few techniques such as brainstorming, however, can be applied to a wide range of objectives and situations. An example of a technique specific to EAP is asking students to create algorithms to show their understanding of the process of using contents and indexes to search for information in books.

Design and Methodology in EAP

There are several ways in which methodology can be incorporated into programme design. First, methodology can be given precedence over content. This is frequently the case in process syllabuses such as the course length project of Hall and Kenny (1988), and can also be seen in some more traditional syllabuses. For example, controlled practices, communicative relevance, linguistic rationales and problem solving can be priorities in designing an EAP speaking course (James, 1983). Second, methodology can be dictated by content. For example, in an interesting comparison of published advice on thesis writing and actual practice, having identified certain course objectives, Paltridge (2002) then turns to the classroom implications of these objectives.

Conclusion

EAP is a branch of ESP, tailored to the needs of the learners at various levels. It is one of the key courses taught in many English-medium universities to facilitate the acquisition of academic literacy skills. The teaching of EAP begins with the analysis of the students' linguistic

background, what they have known and what they need to know. So, need analysis is the departure point of EAP courses. EAP now become a fully developed branch of applied linguistics which entails a significant body of researches into effective teaching and assessment approaches. EAP is a thriving and significant aspect of TESOL that has so far received less attention from researcher than it deserves. The goal of EAP is to empower the students with an analytical framework which assists them to reflect on both their own language practices and practices they encounter in their disciplinary studies.

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