

EAP and success

Andy Gillett and Liz Wray, University of Hertfordshire

1. Introduction

The aim of EAP - English for Academic Purposes - is to help international students overcome some of the linguistic and cultural difficulties involved in studying through the medium of English. The objective of an EAP course, then, is for the students to learn the language and related skills to enable them to do this.

EAP is a branch of ESP in that the teaching content is explicitly matched to the language and study needs of the learners. It is also considered to be ESP if we take Robinson's (1991, pp. 2-5) features which are usually thought of as being typical defining characteristics of ESP courses.

- First, ESP is goal directed - the students are not learning the English language for the sake of it, but because they need to use English in their professional or academic lives. EAP students are usually current higher education students or they are hoping to go on to higher education after their EAP course. They need to learn English in order to succeed in their academic careers.
- Second, ESP courses are based on an analysis of needs, which aims to specify as closely as possible exactly what it is that the students have to do through the medium of English. One important feature of EAP courses is the close attention that is paid to students' aims and what they are studying or plan to study. The first stage in any EAP, and ESP, course, therefore, is to find out exactly why the students are learning English and what language and language skills they will need.
- Often there is a very clearly specified period for the ESP course. Most EAP students are doing fixed term courses in preparation for an academic course or they are studying English for a short time every week along with their academic courses.
- ESP learners tend to be adults rather than children. Most EAP students are over 18 and they will have made a difficult decision to study in an English medium university.

- Students may need specialist language, but this is not necessarily so. It is the linguistic tasks that the students will need to engage in that define the course. As with all ESP, an EAP lecturer would not take a text and ask, “What can I do with this text?” The starting point is always, “Why will my students need to read this text? What will my students need to do with this text and how can I help them to do it?”
- In some cases, a very high level of proficiency is not necessarily required, as long as the students can succeed in their aims. Students need to be able to understand their lectures, fellow students and textbooks and obtain good marks for assignments and examinations. The role of the EAP lecturer is to find ways to enable them to do this - getting their present tenses correct may not be as important as understanding the overall structure of the report they have to write.

The role of the EAP lecturer or course designer, then, is to find out what the students need, what they have to do in their academic courses, and help them to do this better in the time available. An adaptation of Bell (1981, p. 50) provides a useful model to do this (Figure 1).

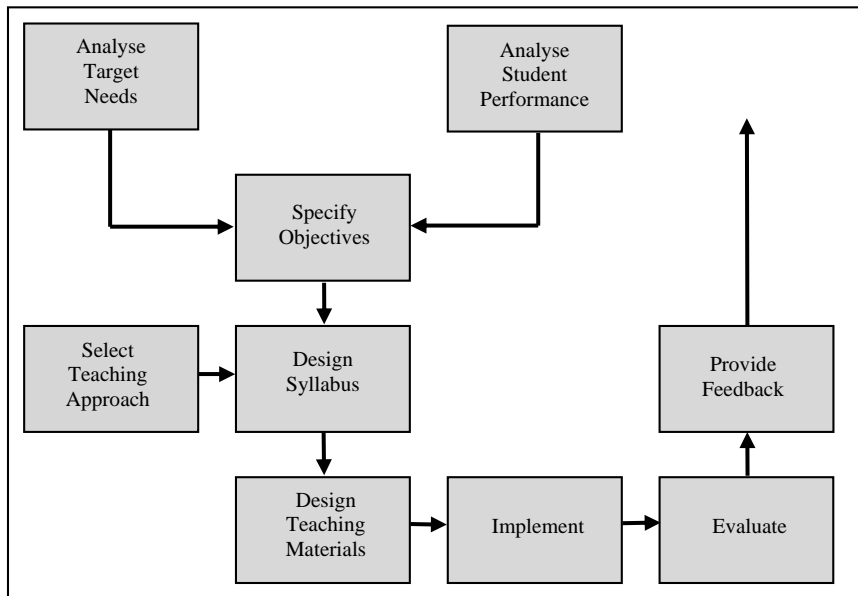


Figure 1: Course design model

2. Target Needs Analysis

The starting point is to analyse the students' target needs. This includes the language and related skills that they will need when they embark on their academic courses. They need to be clearly researched as different subjects at different levels in different institutions may have different needs (Hyland, 2000). However, some general statements can be made. The recent QAA benchmarking statement for languages (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2002) identifies four key elements that characterise language programme outcomes: use of the target language; explicit knowledge of the language; knowledge of aspects of the target cultures and intercultural awareness. This is a useful framework in which to examine typical target needs.

2.1. Use of the target language

Typically, a student needs to use language in the following situations: lectures, seminars, tutorials, group projects, practical sessions, private study and examinations. In these situations, the language skills needed would include reading, writing, speaking and listening. Examples of the kinds of tasks that students would carry out are as follows. In lectures, they would, among other things, need to listen for general understanding, listen for specific points to remember, ask for clarification, read handouts and take notes. In seminars, they would listen and take notes, ask for more information, agree and disagree, and discuss, for instance. In practical sessions, it is necessary to listen to instructions, ask for information and clarification, read handouts and follow instructions, and write notes and reports (see Gillett, 1989, for more details).

The most problematic use of English in higher education is probably writing. Writing tasks vary from writing short answers in examinations to writing dissertations and theses. EAP courses often concentrate on the process of writing - planning, organising, presenting, re-writing, and proof-reading. Typical writing skills include research and using sources, writing different text types as well as different genres, and using an appropriate style. Students also need to do a large amount of reading, listening and note-taking. This must be done flexibly and involves surveying the text, skimming for gist or general impression, scanning to locate specifically required information as well as intensive study of specific sections of the text. Listening involves following a lecture or discussion, which means recognising lecture organisation and extracting relevant points to summarise. In both reading and listening, language skills such as understanding important points, distinguishing the main ideas from supporting detail, recognising unsupported claims and claims supported by evidence and following an argument are essential as are recognising known

words and deducing the meaning of unfamiliar words and word groups from the context. Speaking is becoming increasingly important as teaching methods change to involve more group work. Making presentations involves producing and using notes, planning and presenting. Discussion includes interrupting politely, asking questions, agreeing and disagreeing. More recently, in addition, use of on-line discussion facilities of VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) is becoming important (Gillett & Weetman, 2005).

2.2. Knowledge of language

More importantly, as well as teaching these skills, knowledge of the language that is used in these skills in the students' specific subject areas is necessary and forms an essential component of EAP courses. Recent research has provided us with useful data on academic language, both grammatical (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999) and lexical (Coxhead, 1998). This includes knowledge of different text types (oral and written) and features of different genres, linking words, signposting expressions, and appropriate style. Students also need knowledge of various strategies that they can use in comprehending written and oral texts and producing essays and oral presentations. As examinations and other forms of assessment are so important, knowledge of the format and language of exam questions is also necessary.

2.3. Culture and intercultural awareness

The culture where the language is used in EAP is higher education, usually, but not necessarily, in an English speaking country. Therefore, knowledge of the academic culture is necessarily part of an EAP course and students need to be aware of differences between their own academic cultures and the culture where they are studying. Writing conventions, such as organisation and use of sources, for example, can vary from country to country. While in the UK, students need to develop a willingness to accept responsibility for their own learning and to be reflective and critical. Other areas of difficulty include use of names between lecturers and students, how and when to ask questions and how to deal with lateness and privacy. As well as knowledge of the higher education culture in the UK, there are subject specific cultures (Hyland, 2000) that students and lecturers need to be aware of.

This information can be obtained in many ways: for example, looking at course documentation, looking at typical academic texts in the students' fields, talking to course leaders, talking to subject lecturers, talking to students, looking at students' work and looking at test and examination results. This is all part of the necessary preparation for any English for Academic Purposes course.

2.4. EAP/Study skills

There is often discussion whether these two terms - EAP and study skills - mean the same. We find it useful to make a distinction between general study skills that are not concerned with language and language study skills that will probably form part of an EAP course. There are many study skills books available and they usually concentrate on matters such as where to study, when to study, time management, remembering, developing study habits, filing and organising books, how to spend leisure time and so on, although they do often deal with aspects of study skills that involve language such as planning essays and taking notes. These general study skills are obviously important to our students in higher education, but they are not usually the main objective of EAP courses. The main objective of EAP courses is to teach the language, both general academic language and subject specific language as well as language related skills such as summarising and writing introductions. The language of the students' academic subject and language related study skills will form the main component of the EAP skills classes.

3. Student performance

After EAP lecturers and course designers have some knowledge of what the student will eventually need, they need to look at where the student is now, they have to analyse the students' present performance and knowledge. There are various ways in which this can be done. Most well-known are the commercial tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. Although, not EAP tests in the narrow sense, they are very widely used and provide some useful information.

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is jointly managed by the British Council, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate and the International Development Program of Australian Universities and Colleges. It provides a systematic and continuously available system of assessing the English-language proficiency of non-native speakers who intend to study in the medium of English. The IELTS test is divided into four sub-tests: reading, writing, listening and speaking. A test report form gives details of the results of the test. Each sub-test is reported separately in the form of a band score. The individual sub-test band scores are added together and averaged to obtain an overall band score. Each band corresponds to a descriptive statement, which gives a summary of the English of a candidate classified at this level. The scale of bands increases from 1 to 9. This qualification is accepted by most British universities, who ask for levels of between 5.5 and 7 depending on subject and level of study. An intensive EAP course of around three months

EAP and success

would normally be necessary to improve the students' IELTS scores by one band.

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a single subject examination recognised in most countries of the world as an indication of English proficiency for placement of students in colleges and universities. At the moment, there are three versions of the test, depending on which part of the world the test is taken in:

1. The traditional Paper-Based TOEFL test (PBT)
2. The Computer-Based TOEFL test. (CBT)
3. The Internet-Based TOEFL test (iBT)

Students are usually asked for at least 580 on the PBT, 233 on the CBT, or 90 on the iBT. These requirements are often increased to 600/250/100 or above for linguistically more demanding courses such as linguistics, literature or law.

As well as the commercial tests, there are many other kinds of tests available, many produced by university departments for their own use. Information about student performance can also be obtained, though, by talking to subject lecturers, examining student work, reading examiners reports or looking at exam marks, for example.

Furthermore, it is often felt that it is necessary to re-test the students once they arrive in the UK to obtain more detailed information about the students that broad-based test such as IELTS and TOEFL cannot provide.

4. Select teaching approach

Selecting the teaching approach requires knowledge of educational policies and practices and how people learn. There is a large amount of research available in this area, the largest amount being in the area of writing, especially the distinction between the product and process approaches to teaching writing (see Badger & White, 2000, Robinson, 1988). Most EAP teaching is task based, using the types of academic task commonly found in higher education and writing classes are usually based on some kind of extended writing task that the students do, with the help of in-class teaching and individual tutorial support. Listening to lectures, and other students in seminar situations, is difficult for students. It is especially difficult for students to listen and take relevant notes. A typical approach to teaching listening for academic purposes would involve doing large amounts of in-class listening, probably pre-recorded, helping the

students to be more aware of typical language used in lectures as well as strategies for dealing with difficulties (see, for example, Flowerdew, 1994). Reading is similar with students doing large amounts of in-class and out of class reading, as well as the lecturer helping the students to be more aware of typical language used in academic texts, text structure and strategies for reading critically and dealing with difficulties (Clark, 1993; Cobb & Horst, 2001). Teaching speaking has received the least amount of published research (but see Weissberg, 1993), but a typical approach to teaching spoken English for academic purposes would again be tasked based with students taking part in seminar discussions and giving presentations, both supported by class teaching and individual tutorials.

5. Implementation

EAP courses are very often Pre-Sessional courses. That is, they are taken before the students' main academic courses start. Most universities in the UK offer these Pre-Sessional courses, which vary in length from one year to two weeks. The EAP courses frequently take place at the institution where the students intend to take their main academic course but this need not be the case. These courses are intended to prepare students coming to study in higher education in the UK to study in English. They also allow students to familiarise themselves with the new environment and facilities of the institution before their main courses start. The students need to learn to adopt particular approaches to their study and learn strategies and skills that will enable them to succeed in the British higher education system. The purpose of the Pre-Sessional EAP course is to bring the students up to the level that is necessary to start a course. In this case, EAP lecturers and course organisers need to liaise with admissions tutors to find out what is necessary. Some longer Pre-Sessional courses of up to, perhaps, one academic year – usually called foundation courses - attempt to prepare lower level students for entry to higher education. Some of these courses also include a quantity of academic subject content.

EAP courses can also be In-Sessional courses. That is they are taken at the same time as the students' main academic course. In-Sessional courses can take one of two forms. They can be either integrated into the students' academic study or be more general. The general classes can be seen as language support classes - these are usually free drop-in classes held at lunch-times or Wednesday afternoons and students attend when they are able. More recently, though, EAP courses are becoming embedded in the students' academic courses with EAP lecturers actually attending the students' lectures and seminars, and looking at current assignments, in order to offer relevant language support. Increasingly it

is also becoming possible for international students to take credit-bearing EAP courses as part of their degree.

6. Evaluation

There is already much information and research published on target needs analysis. There is also a large amount of research available on testing and evaluation of students and of particular teaching methods. Much of this research is in EAP. In a survey of EAP, Hamp-Lyons (2001) mentions needs analysis, analysis of linguistic and discoursal structures of academic texts for creating materials, effectiveness of teaching approaches, and assessment in EAP. But there is no mention of success; to what extent do our EAP programmes help our students succeed in their chosen academic fields.

The BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes) Professional Issues Meeting (PIM) held at the University of Hertfordshire on 24th June 2006 attempted to start to try to fill that gap by looking at research that has attempted to provide evidence that EAP course are helpful and what can be done to improve it and encourage it. As well as this, methods and techniques to do this research were also looked at.

Discussing research methods for evaluating language programmes, Lynch (1996) distinguishes between positivistic, or quantitative, design and naturalistic, or qualitative, design. According to Lynch, positivistic design is appropriate for measuring the effect of different methods on the success of the language programme. With a naturalistic design, the most common methods for gathering and recording data are “observation, interviews, journals, questionnaires, and document analysis. The data that are recorded by these methods can come from a variety of sources: students, instructors, administrators, evaluators, and other persons who interact with the program” (p. 107).

The papers at the PIM used most of these methods, with data from a wide range of sources to assess the success of EAP programmes.

7. Summary of papers

The first four contributors to this volume use naturalistic, or qualitative, design in order to gather data for their research. For all of them, the Pre-Sessional English course was central to their assessment of the effectiveness of EAP.

In the first phase of a project commenced in 2005, Barbara Atherton addresses the theme of academic success of the Pre-Sessional course at Kingston

University. In order to establish how successful the course is, she examines students' entry and exit test scores and post-course questionnaires. She reviews comments both from students who did and did not undertake Pre-Sessional English as they pursue follow-on degree programmes and also considers feedback from course directors. The data gathered suggests that the Pre-Sessional course at Kingston can be deemed successful and Atherton looks ahead to the next phase of the project which will address the issue of the provision of additional support for international students.

Diana Ridley reports on research designed to track students' progress and achievement following the Pre-Sessional course at the Sheffield Hallam University. She considers the relationship between students' exit scores and the length of time taken to complete academic programmes and also looks at ways of strengthening support for international students. She gathers data for her research from questionnaires, interviews, discussion and observation from both a student and lecturer perspective. Her findings suggest that the Pre-Sessional exit test does have predictive validity.

Mary Martala's case study questions the effectiveness of the writing component of the Pre-Sessional course at the University of Hertfordshire in preparing Chinese students for postgraduate study. Using data gathered from students' writing and responses to feedback questionnaires she concludes that the writing strand of the course does seem to equip students well for their further studies. A connection is made between assessment grades and learner attitude with the suggestion that a positive attitude to study plays a major part in educational success.

Chinese postgraduate students at Heriot-Watt University are the subject of the first stage of Nick Pilcher's research. Comments regarding the perceived effectiveness of EAP were gathered by interviewing a group of 21 students whilst undertaking dissertations in 2005. Although participants were generally positive about EAP provision, there is recognition that the complexity of the situation requires further data collection. It is acknowledged that tutors and departments need to work more closely together not only to gather additional data but also to develop the effectiveness of EAP.

The next two contributors take a positivistic, or quantitative, approach in assessing the effectiveness of EAP. The unreliability of band descriptors and the variability of a speaker's production prompt John Morley of the University of Manchester to examine alternative means for measuring oral proficiency gains over short Pre-Sessional courses. He considers the variables of fluency, accuracy and complexity and suggests that it may be possible to use certain of

the measures he describes in order to gauge changes in oral proficiency over short periods.

Simon Kinzley of the University of Lancaster suggests that innovation theory may be combined with the appropriate collection and interpretation of data in assessing whether students are able to adopt the academic writing practices learned on Pre-Sessional courses as they proceed onto their degree programmes and whether adoption of these practices is linked to academic success. He claims that the methods he describes may be useful not only for other researchers, but also in establishing evidence surrounding the teaching of EAP.

Finally, Sonya Saunders presents a personal view of whether EAP works. She looks at many of the problems touched on in earlier papers and suggests ways forward for the future.

8. Conclusion

The PIM in June, with the title “Does EAP work?”, therefore, provided a start to try to answer the question by looking at research that provided feedback that EAP succeeds. There is some evidence that it does, but there are still many methodological problems before we can really answer the question. We hope this will be a start and the publication of these papers will encourage more people to do the same.

References

- Badger, R. & White, G. (2000). A process genre approach to teaching writing. *ELT Journal*, 54, 153-160.
- Bell, R. (1981). *An introduction to applied linguistics: Approaches and methods in language teaching*. London: Batsford.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow: Longman.
- Clark, R. J. (1993). Developing practices of resistance: Critical reading for students of politics. In D. Graddol, L. Thompson, & M. Byram (Eds.), *Language and culture* (pp. 113-122). Clevedon, Avon: BAAL and Multilingual Matters.
- Cobb, T. & Horst, M. (2001). Reading academic English: Carrying learners across the lexical threshold. In J. Flowerdew & M. Peacock (Eds.), *Research perspectives on English for academic purposes* (pp. 315-329). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coxhead, A. (1998). *An academic word list*. Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington.

- Flowerdew, J. (Ed.). (1994). *Academic listening: Research perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gillett, A. J. (1989). Designing an EAP course: English language support for further and higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 13(2), 92-104.
- Gillett, A. J. & Weetman, C. (2005). Investigation of the perceived usefulness of a StudyNet group discussion facility by students in higher education. *Journal for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching*, 2, 36-43.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (2001). English for academic purposes. In R. Carter & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages* (pp. 126-130). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses*. Harlow: Longman.
- Lynch, B. K. (1996). *Language program evaluation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2002). *Subject benchmark statements: Languages and related studies*. Available from; <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/>
- Robinson, P. (1991). *ESP today: A practitioner's guide*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Robinson, P. C. (Ed.). (1988). *Academic writing: Process and product* (ELT Documents 129). London: Modern English Publications.
- Weissberg, B. (1993). The graduate seminar: Another research process genre. *English for Specific Purposes*, 12, 23-36.