The growth of EAP in Britain

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Abstract

This paper is a personal reflection on the development of the British Association of Lecturers in EAP (formerly SELMOUS), which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. It describes and exemplifies the tremendous growth in scope and sophistication in EAP teaching and research in these 30 years. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The year 2002 is a propitious time to introduce a journal devoted to EAP. June 2002 marks the 30th anniversary of the foundation of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP). In autumn 2001, it had members from 73 British universities which offer pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP courses for students. EAP is also taught in 80 of the 97 British Association of State English Language Teaching (BASELT) member institutions (some universities are members of both Associations), and by many of the 210 Association of Recognised English Language Services (ARELS) language schools.

However, Britain is only one of the many countries around the world where the demand and need for EAP has increased immensely over the last few decades. As English has become an even more widespread international language, for business and higher education, so the need for more specialised teaching has expanded. One small example illustrates this. Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman, was founded in 1982, with its first students enrolling in 1986. Its Language Centre now has more than 3000 students a year on its English language courses. In March 2001, it organised its first annual national conference on the theme “Excellence in Academic English”.

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2. Early language support for international students at British universities

In the 1960s, language support that was provided to international students tended to be on an ad hoc, part-time basis. As problems occurred or developed during studies, some kind of part-time help may have become available, often linked to ELT teacher-training courses in Departments of Education. This sometimes led to the development of short courses, e.g. 4 weeks at the beginning of the students’ studies.

Birmingham University appears to have been the first to be seriously concerned about the needs of overseas students. Vera Adamson was appointed in 1962 to advise overseas students and to start induction courses. This involved analysing students’ problems, developing some teaching materials as well as teaching part-time, and trying to devise an analytical test. In 1964, she was formally appointed as Tutor to Overseas Students. From 1963 to 1965, Alan Davies became responsible for designing the English test, which eventually became the widely used English Proficiency Test Battery, or EPTB [the “Davies test” (1964)]. In October 1971, Tim Johns joined Birmingham University, developed and implemented a diagnostic assessment for overseas postgraduates, and then organised pre-sessional courses and in-sessional classes to help the students.

In September 1968, Brian Heaton was appointed as Lecturer in English for Overseas Students at the Institute of Education, Leeds University, where he had helped students informally since 1965. His task was to identify overseas students who needed help and to provide English classes for them. He constructed the Leeds Proficiency Test in 1971, which was given to all overseas students on arrival, and then developed writing programmes for these students.

At Manchester University, the Faculty of Technology–UMIST—had since the early 1960s had a large number of international postgraduates who needed language help. Derek Kuster had been attending to the social and welfare needs of the students, and had later organised some remedial English classes. In 1968, Ken James joined the School of Education at Manchester University as Special Lecturer in Teaching English Overseas (TEO) to trainee EFL teachers. During the summer of 1968, he started teaching English and ESP on a 6-week course for Latin-American students attending postgraduate courses in Overseas Administrative Studies. Such courses continued and grew, and in 1970 he was appointed Lecturer in Education and Tutor in English to Overseas Students, which was the beginning of the ELT Unit. He was joined in the Unit in January 1972 by Bob Jordan (myself). The ELT Unit administered Manchester’s diagnostic test for NNS, the Chaplen Test, and offered full-time pre-sessional courses to such students in the summer months and part-time in-sessional classes during term time.

Newcastle University joined the youthful EAP endeavour with the appointment of Ron Mackay in 1970, initially in the Language Laboratory, which became the Language Centre in 1972. Mackay’s brief was to identify NNS students who had language deficiencies that would interfere with their studies, and then to help them through English classes, courses and materials.
3. The start of ‘SELMOUS’

The members of the four universities referred to earlier were all running similar kinds of pre-sessional English courses and classes but were working in isolation. They were beginning to feel the need to discuss their difficulties with their counterparts in other universities and to share materials and approaches.

Vera Adamson took the initiative to arrange an informal meeting at Birmingham University of those interested in each other’s work. The meeting took place in the Department of English on Monday 19 June 1972. It was attended by Vera Adamson, who chaired the meeting, and Tim Johns from Birmingham, Ron Mackay from Newcastle, and Ken James and myself from Manchester. Brian Heaton from Leeds was unable to attend but expressed his desire to join the group. The group discussed research that was being conducted into overseas students’ language difficulties at their universities and brought samples of their own teaching materials to discuss.

It was agreed that the group should meet annually and that members should take it in turns to host it. They agreed that “membership should be restricted to individuals or departments of British universities directly involved in the teaching of English for Special Purposes to overseas students”—preferably on a full-time basis. They should prepare a list of their personal teaching materials and research topics and send them to the host university at the beginning of each academic year for circulation to all members. The general feeling was that “small is beautiful”—a small group could get to know each other well and not be overloaded with administrative work regarding the meetings.

Over lunch, the five tutors discussed a possible name for the group. Several suggestions were made but no firm decision was reached. It was felt that the emphasis should be on materials as they were the prime need at the time. At the end of the meeting they agreed to think about a group title and send it to Birmingham. Just three days later, on 22 June, Ron Mackay wrote to Vera Adamson that he had an idea for the group name that fitted in with the focus on materials development: “further doodlings have produced SELMOUS Group—Special English Language Materials for Overseas University Student”. Thus it was that SELMOUS started, with the Universities of Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle and Leeds as founder-members (Table 1).

The second meeting, at Manchester University in June 1973, discussed pre-sessional courses, research projects and English tests. In addition, I led a session looking into the needs of overseas postgraduates. I had conducted various surveys among students at Manchester in 1972 and 1973: spoken English, reading and writing. Ron Mackay had conducted the same spoken English questionnaire survey at Newcastle in December 1972. We compared results, which were remarkably similar, and wrote an article for the Times Higher Education Supplement (8 June, 1973) and a research article for a university journal (Jordan & Mackay, 1973). The main findings, unsurprisingly, were that the students’ biggest problems on arrival were, firstly, understanding spoken English and, secondly, speaking English. Six months after arrival, speaking was the biggest problem, followed by understanding, and then writing, which became
more of a problem as they had to do more of it. This was an early example of data collection for needs analysis.

From 1974 onwards, more university units joined SELMOUS and some departments that started with only one member of staff to provide help for overseas students increased this to two or even three. The Centre for Applied Language Studies (CALS) at Reading University joined in 1974 with Keith Johnson and Keith Morrow, and in 1976 Pauline Robinson started at CALS. The EFL Unit at Essex University became a member in 1976 with Jo McDonough, who was then joined by Tony French. In the following years still more universities joined: University College at Buckingham (Pat Howe), Southampton University (George Blue), Exeter (Gregory James), Lancaster, Warwick, Durham, Aston. . . SELMOUS was growing.

4. The first national EAP conference

In 1975, SELMOUS linked with BAAL to organise its first national conference, on the theme of “The Language Problems of Overseas Students in Higher Education

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19 June 1972</td>
<td>First meeting of SELMOUS (to be) at Birmingham University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16–18 April 1975</td>
<td>SELMOUS first national conference (jointly with BAAL) at Birmingham University. Thereafter, conferences held every two years (for 3 days at Easter).</td>
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<td>1977</td>
<td>Papers of the first conference published. Thereafter, papers published usually 1–2 years after each one.</td>
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<td>April 1977</td>
<td><em>SELMOUS Occasional Papers</em> No.1 published; the only one to appear.</td>
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<td>Early 1989</td>
<td>SELMOUS changed its name to BALEAP.</td>
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<td>June 1989</td>
<td>BALEAP’s Constitution and Code of Practice formalised—setting standards, and for members to subscribe to.</td>
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<td>June 1991</td>
<td>Accreditation Scheme started for pre-sessional and other EAP courses; recognised by the British Council.</td>
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<td>June 1991</td>
<td>The start of one-day PIMs (Professional Interest/Issues Meetings)—2 or 3 a year, in different venues, with a specific theme.</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td><em>BALEAP Register of Current Research in EAP</em> started; published in April 1996. It listed 31 institutions with 58 projects (compiled by Jo McDonough, Essex University)</td>
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a From 1975 to 2001 there have been 14 biennial conferences, plus a joint conference in 1982. A list of BALEAP publications is included in Appendix 3 of Jordan (1997). The Research Register is now on-line.
The conference was held at Birmingham University from 16 to 18 April. Many papers were given in the following categories: identifying and assessing students’ needs, designing syllabuses and special courses, and course components and materials. The papers were edited by Tony Cowie and Brian Heaton and published in 1977 under the title “English for Academic Purposes”, seemingly the first time this title had been used on a publication.

5. The first use of the term “EAP”

It is of interest to note when the term ‘EAP’ was first used. Tim Johns (1981) recalls using it at a meeting with two British Council officers (Keith Jones and Peter Roe) in October, 1974. By spring 1975, it was being used generally by the British Council. For example, an ETIC ‘occasional paper’ English for Academic Study, was published in April, 1975. Its preface discussed the difference between EAP and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) and noted that they were the two main branches of ESP (the key area within EAP being EST). In 1976, the British Council English Teaching Division Inspectorate in London organised a training seminar on EAP for its ELT staff and by 1977 the term ‘EAP’ was also being used in the USA.

In 1989, SELMOS changed its name to BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in EAP). The name change resulted from membership expansion, a broadening of interests in all aspects of language provision for international students, and an increase in professionalism. To help promote the professional development of staff a Code of Practice was formalised (see Appendix 4.1 of Weir and Roberts, 1994) and an Accreditation Scheme introduced (see O’Brien, 1996). In 1991–1992 I conducted a questionnaire survey of BALEAP members’ EAP courses, comparing course content, the time spent on components, and the books and materials used (Jordan, 1996).

6. Changes in EAP

Since the early days of language support for international students in Britain, the USA, Australia and elsewhere, there have been many changes, not least in materials, methods, technology, expectations and finance. There has also been a large increase in the number of international students, many of whom required additional English support. Consequently, more staff are needed or there is more pressure on existing staff. Most pre-sessional EAP courses are now four, eight or 12 weeks; longer ones are often 6–12 months and may be called foundation courses.

A marked change in more recent years has been the greater attention paid to academic culture, i.e. the higher education system, subject specialist conventions regarding staff and student relationships and expectations, and writing conventions. Awareness has also been raised regarding cultural conventions and learning styles, for example, the need for students to be able to read and reason critically, not just to accept what is printed in articles or books. This can be seen in the way academic writing has moved on from simply considering register analysis and learning and
practising vocabulary to focus on the purpose of the writing, its readership, its structure, appropriacy and style.

In the past, misunderstandings often arose among international students who were not always familiar with the need to acknowledge the sources of their ideas or quotations. Depending on the students’ own education and background/country, there was not always the need to give this acknowledgement. This was all part of language work that involved summarising, paraphrasing and synthesising. It is now much better understood that, as part of teaching NNS students the academic conventions and ensuring they avoid accusations of plagiarism, it is necessary to teach them how to use quotations/citations and acknowledgement systems, and to become familiar with writing references and bibliographies.

Another marked change has been in the methods and materials for teaching English for specific academic purposes. Since the late 1970s, team-teaching—the joint teaching, or sharing of teaching, by both the English tutor and the subject specialist—has been an area of progress. Johns and Dudley-Evans have been two of the EAP teachers and researchers to the fore in this movement (e.g. Dudley-Evans & Johns, 1981; Johns & Dudley-Evans, 1980). Even if team-teaching is not possible for various reasons, other forms of co-operation have been found to be extremely useful: for example, in the provision of text specimens and reading lists, recording short talks for audio- or video-cassette for language practice, giving guest lectures, and even co-operating in the writing of practice material (e.g. Jordan & Nixson, 1986).

Co-operation between EAP units and specialist departments can only have a beneficial effect on the students involved. It shows the students that their departments take seriously their attempts to improve their English. Combined with language practice geared to their subject, overall this increases the students’ motivation (e.g. Jordan, 1984).

7. Needs analysis

As Liz Hamp-Lyons (2000) has said, “Needs analysis is fundamental to an EAP approach to course design and teaching”. There are various ways of collecting the necessary data for analysing students’ needs: these include language tests, questionnaire surveys, monitoring in class, self-assessment and interviews (Jordan, 1997; West, 1994). An outstanding investigation into overseas students’ linguistic difficulties in activities connected with their studies at Cambridge University during their first term in 1980 was conducted by Geoghegan (1983). She received questionnaires from 555 NNS students and then interviewed 65 of them; she found that their biggest areas of difficulty were participating in seminars, and academic writing.

These findings were broadly matched by Jordan’s (1993); questionnaire surveys conducted among students attending pre-sessional EAP courses at Manchester University between 1986 and 1990. The students’ experience of studying in their own country was also surveyed and compared with their expectations of studying in Britain. It was clear that the majority would suffer some disappointment or frustration as their expectations would not match the realities of the study situations, for
example, expecting to be told precisely what to read by their subject tutors, who they also expected to correct any mistakes they made with English. This highlighted the question of differences in academic cultures—a fruitful area for research.

8. The views of EAP teachers

At the 1981 SELMOS Conference at Essex University, Tim Johns (1981) gave a paper based on a questionnaire survey he had conducted in 1980 among nearly 100 EAP teachers from a number of countries. He listed five problems he had identified in discussions with EAP teachers on various courses, and asked the teachers to rank the problems in order of importance. The results were as follows: (1) low priority in timetabling; (2) lack of personal/professional contact with subject teachers; (3) lower status/grade than subject teachers; (4) isolation from other teachers of English doing similar work; and (5) lack of respect from students. Johns noted that the recurrent theme in the teachers’ comments was ‘professionalism’: in other words, they questioned how far their activities were seen by other academics as being fully professional.

In 1992, Cowie and Addison (1996) conducted a structured telephone interview among EAP staff at 94 institutions of higher education in Britain. The purpose of the survey was to assess the provision of language support for international students and to explore the experience and views of the EAP teachers. They found that 95% of the institutions provided a language support service but only 17% kept rigidly to the agreed standard of language proficiency for entry. In other words, many students started courses with inadequate English and then needed more help: this increased the teaching load on EAP teachers. Only 29% of the staff thought that the language support was adequate; more teachers were needed. Many of the language support staff were dissatisfied with their own position as 61% of them had part-time jobs and only 26% had permanent contracts. Frustration was caused in many cases by departments refusing to make space in their timetables to enable students to attend classes.

I conducted a questionnaire survey among BALEAP members in late 1998: 73 EAP teachers from 32 universities responded (Jordan, 2000). The respondents listed their greatest difficulties as follows: (1) aspects of teaching (62%); (2) aspects of materials (18%); (3) professional status (15%); (4) co-operation with subject departments (5%). The comments on ‘professional status’ referred to the lack of recognition of the importance of EAP in some institutions. Also mentioned were the poor job security and prospects of some of the teachers. Only 3% referred specifically to timetabling difficulties.

It was pleasing to note that in 1998 there was no reference to working in isolation, which had featured in the 1980–1981 international survey. This suggests that BALEAP and other associations have provided the means of making regular contact, together with their important conferences which disseminate information and ideas. Understandably, most of the problems emanated from the everyday work of the EAP staff, for example, teaching multi-disciplinary groups and students with a poor initial level of English. In addition, a need was expressed for better teaching
materials that would reflect the real needs of students, especially involving lectures, for example, video materials.

The 1998 survey asked about the biggest changes observed in EAP in the previous 10 years. Thirty-six per cent of the respondents considered that there was now more professionalism in EAP, often due to the work of BALEAP. Twenty-nine per cent of the teachers commented that there was a wider range of better teaching materials. Nineteen per cent observed that there was a greater need for EAP because of lower levels of English accepted by universities who wanted to take more international students because of their fee-income. Twelve per cent noted that the rapid increase in the use of computers meant that there was a need for word-processing skills by students.

Jarvis (1997) conducted a survey among BALEAP members to discover the extent to which Information Technology (IT) formed a part of pre-sessional EAP courses. Thirty universities returned the questionnaires, basing their responses on the courses offered in the summer of 1995. IT formed part of 29 of the courses: word-processing was the most widely taught IT area (by 83%), and the World Wide Web was least taught (by 13%). For the majority, on-line tutorials were available for self-access use. Jarvis considered why several IT areas were not used and suggested ways in which they might be included. As Jarvis pointed out, “IT, for the vast majority of students at British universities, ‘feeds into’ their academic studies and where possible this fact needs to be mirrored on pre-sessional EAP courses”. He concluded that “it is perhaps more helpful to think in terms of ‘Information Systems for academic study’, rather than ‘IT in EAP’.

9. Research in EAP

The potential for research involving EAP courses and specific subjects and departments was discussed by McDonough (1986), and in 1995 she started the BALEAP Research Register. Jordan (1997) added to the areas outlined by McDonough by surveying BALEAP Conference papers to see which areas were being investigated. Aspects of academic writing attracted most attention. This was followed by reading, genre analysis, spoken language, evaluation and testing, academic culture, and learner training for independence.

In the 1998 survey (reported in Jordan, 1999), a total of 90 ideas were proposed for future EAP research. The biggest area involved students and learning: a number of teachers proposed investigating the effectiveness of methods and materials in helping students to learn. The next largest area was academic writing followed by academic culture.

Hamp-Lyons (2000) briefly overviewed the different types of EAP research that have been conducted in the last 10 years or so. At the 2001 BALEAP Conference, McDonough overviewed the ways in which EAP research methodology has changed, based on a survey of previous conference papers. She found that questionnaires “have been used steadily” and text analysis “has become increasingly significant”. Finally, she considered the future possibilities of smaller-scale research, some involving case studies and individual classroom-based investigations.
The research that is undertaken, sometimes to find solutions to problems or to improve teaching methods and the use of materials, can only benefit the profession as a whole.

10. ‘Directions for the future’

This was the title of the 2001 BALEAP Conference at Glasgow which had more than 60 papers covering different aspects of EAP and a range of countries. Following the conference I wrote to a number of BALEAP members to obtain their views on the current situation in EAP, with a focus on changes and needs.

Several respondents referred to the vast increase in the number of students from China in their courses, with reduced numbers from some other countries. Generally, they saw an increase in student numbers, with a greater diversity of language levels and more awareness of IT. Some noted the increasing economic pressure in universities to accept more fee-paying students with consequently more pressure on staff and larger classes. With regard to teaching materials, several considered that a greater variety was needed, especially at the lower levels. A greater use was being made of in-house materials and of Web-based resources, combined with a greater move to self-directed learning. While much of this is linked to developments in computer technology, this is often not matched by institutions’ willingness to invest in updating the resources or in adequately funding EAP courses.

The most overwhelmingly positive comments were about the advantages of EAP for the students. There were a range of aspects referred to, particularly that students were better equipped to handle their study in terms of language, study skills and study competence. Respondents felt that EAP helps students to develop their self-confidence and adjust to an alien academic environment. A number of courses include components that raise students’ awareness of academic cultural differences; sometimes these involve direct comparisons with students’ own cultures.

Some of these teachers noted a need for more EAP-specific teacher training, a belief echoed by Mary Scott (2001). She argues that while TESOL, TEFL, etc. courses for teachers provide a good foundation for the teaching of general language, they are insufficient for the teaching of EAP. EAP’s “distinctiveness derives from its aim, which is the promotion of student learning on courses within higher education institutions”. Lynn Errey (2001) agrees that specialised teacher training is needed, involving principles and approaches appropriate for EAP and ESP. This is, in fact, now beginning to happen with an MA ESP developed by Chris Candlin and Vijay Bhatia at City University in Hong Kong taking its first students in 1997 and Oxford Brookes University offering an MA in Teaching EAP/ESP beginning in 2000.

Finally, all respondents stressed the advantages of membership of BALEAP, commenting on the professional support and development it offers, assisted by the conferences, publications, and professional interest meetings. The sharing of experiences and the discussion of ideas, as well as involvement in research, are all positive aspects of such a professional association, which provides valuable assistance. Such a comment is an appropriate conclusion for this overview of the beginnings and progress of EAP’s oldest professional association.
Acknowledgements

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References


