Learning for Academic Purposes

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INTRODUCTION

Many English language teachers work in higher education and teach English for academic purposes (EAP). Most teach English for study purposes, although some may act as advisors in English for instructional or research publication purposes. To date, EAP literature has largely aimed to develop descriptions of academic language use as "EAP linguistic enquiry" (Swales, 2001: 43) as well as proposals for EAP teaching. It has given relatively limited direct attention to the topic of learning. This chapter focuses on learning in EAP. First, it describes the nature of the domain and the various purposes for learning EAP. This is followed by an examination of key learning issues related to English for study purposes. The chapter continues with a section on implications for teaching and assessment, followed by a conclusion, discussion questions and key readings.

OVERVIEW

Two major groups of EAP learners are students and academic staff in higher education, including, but not restricted to, students and staff with English as an additional or second language. The purposes for learning of these groups is shown in Table 14.1 and discussed below. The Focus column in the figure refers to student, research and instructional discourses, which are terms taken from Hyland's (2009) classification of types of academic discourses.

Students in higher education are typically learners of EAP for study purposes. Some graduate students may also be learners of EAP for research publication purposes. It is generally understood that "student discourse, and in particular, writing are at the heart of teaching and learning" (Hyland, 2009: 123). The field of EAP originated largely as a response to the needs of English language teachers in higher education in supporting students, generally students with English as a second or additional language, to meet the linguistic

LEARNER GROUP	FOCUS	DOMAIN	COMPONENTS OF LEARNING	EXAMPLE COMMUNICATIVE EVENTS AND GENRES
Students	Student discourses	English for study purposes		
		General academic purposes	Formal academic English register (linguistic features, writing conventions, rhetorical styles and norms) Study skills and competencies	Lectures Presentations and seminars Textbooks (reading) Essays, assignments, theses (writing) Office-hour and supervisory meetings
		Specific academic purposes	Disciplinary uses of English Writing/Speaking practices and culture of a disciplinary discourse community	Depending on discipline: e.g., laboratory reports in sciences
Faculty and graduate students	Research discourses	English for research publication purposes	Expert writing and speaking practices in the academic discourse community	Research articles Conference presentations
Faculty and teaching assistants	Instructional discourses	English for instructional purposes	Monologic/Interactive speaking and listening skills	Lectures, seminars & tutorials Classes and labs Office-hour and supervisory meetings

Table 14.1   Components of EAP Learning in Higher Education, According to Group and Domain

demands of academic study. The field has given considerable interest to identifying and describing the types of communicative events (readings, writing tasks and spoken events, such as seminars and tutorials) encountered by the students in the higher education setting at hand. Analysis is made of the learners' linguistic skills, or competencies, benchmarked against the skills deemed to be necessary for successful participation in key communicative events and fulfilment of assessment tasks in their academic studies. Nesi and Gardner (2012), for example, identified the range of written genres students were required to submit for assessment in their disciplinary studies in UK universities, (for example, case studies, critiques and literature surveys).

A distinction is made between English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The provision of EGAP instruction is fairly common, and tends to be offered to students before the commencement of, or during, the first and second year(s) of university study. The provision of ESAP instruction is not as common, and it is more likely to be offered in later years of undergraduate study and in postgraduate study, when students' majors or target disciplines have been determined. (ESAP is discussed further in *Key learning issues*, p.132.)

EGAP instruction conventionally targets study skills (such as listening to lectures, reading and note-taking, referencing skills and participating in seminars) and development of the "general academic English register incorporating a formal academic style" (Jordan, 1997: 5). In general, learners' ability to use planned genres rather than relatively unplanned genres is highlighted in the EAP literature (see Chapter 25). For example, more attention has been given to learning speaking skills for making presentations, rather than speaking skills for participating in class or lecture exchanges. Suggestions were made also (Waters and Waters, 2001: 378) to include study competencies, such as logical thinking and autonomy, the "underlying cognitive and affective attributes on which effective study is based".

The formal academic register is usually construed as academic prose, a complex and concise style of writing in which certain grammatical forms, word choices and discourse features are more frequent compared to other registers, such as conversation. Grammatically, for example, Academic English involves a high frequency of heavy nominal groups, indicating that learners need to learn to "pack meaning into the noun phrase, and to make the text nominally rather than clausally complex" (Parkinson and Musgrave, 2014: 48–49). Research by Coxhead (2000) shows a high frequency of certain word families, such as *analyse, concept* and *data.* The use of third person formulations, for instance *it was clear that* or *it is likely that* to mask opinions, is one of the many discourse features of scientific research articles (Hewings, Lillis, and Mayor, 2007: 231). Learners need to become proficient in using and/or understanding the meanings conveyed by such linguistic elements, as well as understanding the use of citations and other academic writing conventions that characterise this register.

In addition, learners studying in a second language education system may need to come to terms with new rhetorical structures and norms. Essays in English, for example, often employ a deductive style of argument (the main thesis is given before arguing the case), whereas students from some non-English speaking backgrounds may be more familiar with an inductive style (the case is given before the thesis) (Hewings et al., 2007). Li (2008) describes how she developed the literacy practices needed in writing a thesis with a strong argumentative style in a US university setting, a type of writing unlike that required in earlier experiences in writing a master's thesis in China.

As well as student discourses, EAP is concerned with research and instructional discourses. Research discourses are of interest to academics in both English and non-English speaking countries, as academics are generally keen to disseminate their research through journals published in English and to deliver presentations at international conferences. Globally, researchers are increasingly being required to publish in English for career development, although English is not the first language of many of these researchers (Flowerdew, 2013). Graduate students, especially doctoral candidates, too are increasingly required to publish in international journals published in English, and are likewise keen to develop their abilities in producing research discourses. English for research publication purposes has attracted considerable attention in the EAP literature. This is due in part to the fact that English has become the "unrivalled lingua franca of academia, the language in which most research articles are published, conferences held, reading is done and learning transmitted" and many academics go to considerable lengths to acquire English academic discourse (Bennet, 2015: 7).

Much research interest has been given to description of the rhetorical and linguistic features of the research article as a product of writing (Flowerdew, 2013). Investigation into the processes by which academic writers learn to write for publication has been more limited, although recent studies have investigated the problems and strategies of multilingual academics in preparing papers for publication (Martín, Rey-Rocha, Burgess, and Moreno, 2014).

Instructional discourses are of key interest to faculty staff (academics and teaching assistants). English may be used as a medium of instruction in higher education in settings where it is not the first language of the students and teaching staff. Teaching assistants and lecturers in such contexts may feel a particular need to develop the language they need to

conduct classes and give lectures, tutorials and seminars in English. Developing the speaking and listening skills required for such events can be of interest to English L2 and English L1 faculty staff.

KEY LEARNING ISSUES

LEARNING GOALS

Arguably, there is no English for general academic purposes. Swales (1990) described academic life as a set of disciplinary discourse communities. Over time, each discipline comes to establish its own language conventions and practices. ESAP is centrally concerned with the ways English is conventionally used in particular disciplines, such as Engineering or Nursing. There has been considerable research in EAP into disciplinary variation in writing, which has been driven in part by pedagogical interests in how to help students understand the writing practices of their target disciplines (Hewings et al., 2007). According to ESAP perspectives, academic English should be understood as a set of disciplinary varieties, and learning goals should be understood as the development of features of language use, linguistic skills and cultural knowledge for study in particular disciplines. Components of ESAP language ability include: the written and spoken genres and linguistic skills/sub skills used in study of the target discipline; discipline-related uses of vocabulary and discourse; and development of an understanding of the culture of the academic discipline and departmental or disciplinary expectations for student writing.

ESAP goals for learning include developing an understanding of disciplinary practices of study genres, and the ability to comprehend and/or produce the variety of English used in the target discipline. Much research has investigated writing in different academic discourse communities in terms of the genres that students use in their disciplinary studies, and the kinds of knowledge of these genres that students would require to participate meaningfully in their academic studies. Genre-based perspectives of writing view writing not as a set of generic writing skills or rhetorical forms, but rather as a set of genres produced and reproduced in a particular academic discourse community, in response to the communicative needs of that community. Over time these genres have become conventionalised. Students in sciences are likely to need to learn to write the genre of the *laboratory report* and students in education or health care that of *practice notes* (Hewings et al., 2007: 232).

Increasingly, academic English is being viewed as a lingua franca and this leads to the questioning of the use of English academic native-speakers (or writers) as models for learning. The proficient non-native user of academic English may be a more appropriate model, especially in settings in which English is used as a foreign language. Nor might the writing of seasoned academics be an appropriate benchmark for assessing student academic writing. Students are novice academic writers and novice members of their academic discourse communities; proficient student writing or speaking may thus be more appropriate learning goals and models than the writing or speaking of expert members of the academic discourse community.

LEARNING NEEDS

The identification of learning needs is a key procedure in the development of instruction in English for study purposes. Findings from needs analysis are used to inform the development of the curriculum. Needs analysis is not always a straightforward procedure, however. Stakeholders (the institution, students and teachers) may have differing perceptions of learning needs and priorities. The institutional perspective may not match that of the learners or their teachers about what is needed, or what can feasibly be achieved in the time scale, for example.

Findings from needs analysis from one setting may not be very relevant to another setting. Learning needs can, for example, be regionally specific. Johns (2009) reports that in the North American context in which she works, EAP is generally delivered at first- and second-year undergraduate levels through freshman and sophomore composition (academic writing) courses, in which reading is an integral component. In the university context in which I work in New Zealand, EAP instruction is also delivered at first- and second-year levels through writing courses, but, in addition, through courses in other skill areas, such as speaking and comprehension (listening and reading). Learning needs can also be task-specific. Investigation of the EAP competencies required for a group case study project on a particular Business Studies programme (Smith and Thondhlana, 2015) suggested a number of competencies (such as ability to read a long, complex brief, participate in a group discussion, apply research recommendations to the design of an exhibit and prepare a written report and oral presentation), indicating areas in which some students might need EAP learning support. It is entirely possible that other group projects in Business Studies, or other disciplines, might require a somewhat different set of competencies.

The relevance of English for study purposes instruction depends on delineation of needs in the specific setting at hand. At present, relatively little is known about learner needs in secondary school settings. Do L2 students in such settings also sometimes face new rhetorical structures and norms? To what extent are secondary school students expected to use the linguistic features characteristic of the formal academic register? Relatively few published studies of learner needs in secondary school education have been evident in the EAP literature to date, although students' learning of academic writing and reading clearly begin long before commencement of university studies (see, however, the special issue, 'Academic English in secondary schools', of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, edited by A.M. Johns and M.A. Snow, 2006).

DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS

The topic of how learners come to acquire academic language ability has received limited attention in the EAP literature. As described above, linguistic enquiry has led to advances in the description of academic English. Features of the academic register and patterns of organisation in key genres, such as sections of the research article, have been brought to light. Such descriptions, although useful for indicating goals for learning (what is to be learnt – the features of language use to be acquired or the kinds of texts to be produced or comprehended) do not shed light on how the features or texts come to be learnt, or the learning processes involved.

Learners may have particular difficulties in producing key text types. To identify such difficulties, researchers have compared the texts produced by different groups of learners. By comparing the use of linking adverbials in doctoral dissertations written by Chinese EFL students and published research articles, Lei (2012) identified areas of over and under-use by the student writers. Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) compared the use of noun modifiers in the writing of students on an EAP programme who were preparing for graduate study and students already enrolled in postgraduate study and who had a more advanced proficiency. Findings from the study enabled the researchers to suggest a developmental sequence in the learning of this particular linguistic feature of the academic register.

LEARNING TRANSFER

Instruction in the EGAP classroom often directly targets the kinds of components of academic language ability described above. It is expected that learners will transfer the study skills and knowledge of the academic register they gain from instruction to concurrent or

later, subsequent, study in their disciplinary areas. This view of learning is based on two relatively untested assumptions: that transfer occurs (learners transfer the skills and knowledge from the EAP classroom to their disciplinary studies) and that the components of academic language ability (what is targeted in instruction) are relevant in study in the different disciplines to which the learners are headed. To illustrate, instruction in the EGAP classroom may focus on the development of a specific sub-skill of academic listening (helping learners recognise topic shifts in lectures). As the learners in the EGAP class are likely to be from a mix of disciplinary areas, practice listening material may be in the form of a lecture from a general interest subject, such as psychology. It is anticipated this sub-skill is important across study in different disciplines and that the students will be able, at a later point, to transfer their learning of topic shift recognition to listening to Business, History or Science lectures. The topic of learning transfer, or how learners apply or transfer what they learn from EGAP instruction to other academic contexts or activities, has only recently been subject to a systematic review, however (James, 2014).

SITUATED LEARNING

Situated learning of academic English, or learning English through academic (disciplinary) study is a topic of key importance for EAP as findings may be able to shed light on processes and products of the learning of academic English in situ. However, a limited number of studies have as yet appeared in the EAP literature. Studies include an investigation (Storch, 2009) into ways the academic writing of international students did and did not improve during one semester of immersion in a particular university setting in Australia, and a study (Green, 2013) examining changes in the processes used by three ESL learners in preparing written assignments over a year of university study. An observational study (Basturkmen and Shackleford, 2015) of university year-one accounting classes lectures in one New Zealand (English L1 setting) setting, revealed frequent time-outs from discussion of accounting to discuss language issues, especially vocabulary and accounting 'speak' (formulaic expressions). It thus appeared that the accounting lecturers in this setting supported their students (who were from a mix of English L1 and English L2 backgrounds) in learning disciplinary vocabulary during disciplinary teaching.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT

It has been argued that analysis of learning needs is a key procedure in developing instruction in English for study purposes, and that findings from needs analysis (even in a similar setting) may not be relevant to learners' needs in another setting. EAP teachers are often called on to develop or revise courses, materials and assessment tasks. It is important, therefore, for EAP teachers to be fully cognizant of the importance of basing the curriculum on an understanding of their learners' needs, and to have knowledge of the techniques and methods that can be used to identify needs.

As discussed above, academic English is increasingly construed as a lingua franca. Teachers can consider drawing on examples of academic language use by proficient L2 students as well as L1 students, in developing instructional materials and assessment schemes. Proficient L2 student users of academic English can be used as illustrative models.

Although there are differences in EGAP and ESAP's views of the nature of academic English and the goals of learning, this does not imply that the two orientations cannot be combined in practice. Within an overall EGAP-oriented type course, the teacher may target disciplinary uses of English at times. For example, instruction could be devised that focuses on a student genre that occurs across disciplinary areas, such as the argumentative essay. The instruction can highlight uses of the general academic register that occur in

sample essays (such as, the use of hedging in making claims or the use of heavy nominal groups). By examining samples from different disciplines, instruction can also focus, in part, on disciplinary differences. For example, teaching may highlight how the introductions to the essays were constructed in the samples from different disciplinary areas.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I suggested that the topic of learning has been relatively neglected in the EAP literature and that the field's understanding of how learners acquire academic language skills and knowledge has been limited. The chapter described some recent thrusts of research enquiry into learning, such as enquiry into developmental sequences, learning transfer and situated learning. Findings from inquiry are beginning to shed light on the nature of learning in EAP, and it is expected that further research will continue to extend understanding of learning in this field.

Discussion Questions

1. How did you learn to write for study purposes or research publication purposes? Did you receive any formal instruction or were you self-taught? In either case, what seemed to work best in helping you develop your understanding of academic writing?

2. Do you think university students with English as a second language benefit from EGAP instruction before ESAP instruction? Do learners only need one of these types of instruction? If so, which?

3. What would you suggest to a group of new teaching assistants (mixed English L1 and L2) who ask you for ideas on how to improve their speaking and listening skills for teaching classes or interactive lectures in your university or school?

Key Readings

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