PART I

Conceptions of EAP
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What sets English for academic purposes (EAP) apart from general language study is its focus on specific, purposeful uses of language. Cummins (1982) refers to specific purposes texts as using ‘context-reduced’ language which tends to be abstract, and seems to rely less heavily for its coherence on an immediate context than the language of everyday interaction. EAP students are studying English for a particular practical need which means curriculum designers study target language features in specific academic contexts, and teachers focus on these features in their classrooms. The idea of specificity, then, has come to influence the kinds of data researchers collect, the ways they collect it, and the theories they use to understand it. Equally importantly, a focus on specificity has shaped the field’s heavy dependence on a strong research orientation, and led to the development and sharpening of key concepts such as genre, authenticity, discourse community, communicative purpose, and audience. But while the notion of specificity is at the heart of most definitions of EAP, debates continue over just how specific its purposes should be.

This debate goes back to Hutchinson and Waters’ (1980) article ‘ESP at the Crossroads’, and arises partly as a result of different perceptions of how academic language is used and learnt, and partly because of the constraints of different instructional contexts. Essentially, the issue resolves into a single question: are there skills and features of language that are transferable across different disciplines or should we focus on what is needed by particular learners? Some teachers have sought to tailor instruction to students’ disciplinary subject matter needs, while others have tried to identify common ground among students and teach what Hutchinson and Waters (1980) referred to as a ‘general linguistic competence’. This second view informs EAP textbooks and has found its way into many EAP programmes, particularly in pre-sessional and preparatory courses for international students seeking to get the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) grade they need to study in English. The issue of specificity therefore challenges EAP teachers to take a stance on how they view language and learning, and to examine their courses in the light of this stance.

While initially there was a polarized debate between opposing camps, a better understanding of both the complexities of instructional contexts and the characteristics of academic language has led practitioners to see the two positions as ends of a continuum rather than a dichotomy: a dilemma rather than a conflict. This chapter lays out the arguments for both positions to
raise some key issues of EAP practice and theory while sketching a view of specificity as is supplied by the student as well as the teacher. The chapter concludes with a brief case study of both general and specific courses in Hong Kong.

**English for general academic purposes (EGAP)**

Following an EGAP approach, teachers attempt to isolate the skills, language forms, and study activities thought to be common to all disciplines. The claim is that once students have learnt these generic features then they can use them in a variety of contexts and for a range of needs. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 41), for instance, include among these: listening to lectures, participating in tutorials, reading textbooks and articles, and writing essays, examination answers, and reports. There are several reasons advanced for taking a general approach (Hyland, 2002).

First, some authorities have expressed doubts about the possibility of discipline outsiders identifying, and adequately teaching, specific varieties at all. Thus, Spack (1988) famously argued that language teachers lack the expertise and the confidence to teach subject-specific conventions and so these should be left to subject specialists as they know them best. Instead, EAP teachers ought to focus on general principles of inquiry and rhetoric. Second, there is the idea that EAP is simply too hard for students at lower levels of English proficiency who need to acquire a ‘general English’ suitable for all contexts before they can study the complexities of academic discourse. This sees language learning as an incremental process of acquisition involving a mastery of core forms before others.

Third, a focus on subject-specific skills relegates EAP to a low-status service role of simply supporting academic departments rather than developing its own independent subject knowledge and skills. This leads to what Raimes (1991) called ‘the butler’s stance’ on the part of EAP, which de-professionalizes teachers and marginalizes EAP units. Widdowson (1983) argues that developing skills and familiarity with specific rhetorical schemata actually amounts to a training exercise. He sees this as a more restricted and mundane activity than education, which involves assisting learners to understand and cope with a wider range of needs. Krashen (2011) similarly regards specific EAP as skill-building: simply describing academic language then teaching it directly. Huckin (2003), in fact, suggests that specific EAP can easily lead to a teacher-centred prescriptivism and an overly rigid focus on certain genres, forms, and tasks at the expense of others. This straitjackets creativity and encourages a dull conformity to convention and a static, decontextualized pedagogy, particularly if teachers fail to acknowledge genre variation. Such an approach may produce unimaginative and formulaic essays, and fail to prepare students for the unpredictable new forms of communication that await them in their professional careers.

He argues:

> In general, a teacher centered approach, no matter how specific, is unlikely to have the pedagogical effectiveness of a student-centered approach, especially in heterogeneous classes.

(Huckin, 2003: 3)

Raimes (1991), in fact, argues that academic writing at university should be part of a liberal arts curriculum which elevates the status of EAP by supporting a humanities aspect of students’ experiences.
Fourth, and most centrally, is the idea that there are generic forms and skills that are transferable across contexts and purposes. Skills such as skimming and scanning texts for information, paraphrasing and summarizing arguments, taking notes from lectures, and giving oral presentations are often cited as universally useful to all students (e.g. Bruce, 2005; McCarter & Jakes, 2009). More centrally, some commentators argue that EAP should focus on register-level features rather than disciplinary-specific ones. Hutchison and Waters (1987: 165), for example, claim that there are insufficient variations in the grammar, functions, or discourse structures of different disciplines to justify a subject-specific approach. This is based on what Bloor and Bloor (1986) call the \textit{common core hypothesis} or the idea that many features of English are found in nearly all varieties. This idea underlies most EAP textbooks as a means of making the materials as relevant, and therefore saleable, to as many students as possible.

Certainly there are register-level features which characterize a great deal of academic discourse, particularly writing. Students are often encouraged to employ features such as nominalization, impersonalization, and lexical density, foregrounding disciplinary arguments and subject matter to suppress their personal interests and identities. They are asked to sacrifice concreteness and empathy and to disguise the dynamic processes of change. Instead, academic conventions require them to discuss abstract concepts and relations, and to categorize, quantify, and evaluate according to the perspectives of their discipline (Halliday & Martin, 1993). Some efforts have also been made to identify what a core of academic competencies might consist of. Johns (1997: 58–64), for example, draws on the work of various writing theorists to create a list of features of ‘general expository academic prose’. This includes explicitness, intertextuality, objectivity, emotional neutrality, hedging, correct social relations, appropriate genre requirements, use of metadiscourse and signalling, and the display of a ‘disciplinary vision’.

**The case for specificity**

In many situations, however, EAP is most successful when it is tailored to meet the needs of the specific circumstances of students (e.g. Hyland, 2002; Sloane & Porter, 2010).

Many EAP teachers dispute the view that specialist discourse should be left to subject lecturers. It seems evident, for example, that subject teachers generally lack both the expertise and desire to teach literacy skills so that even giving feedback on written work can be cursory or non-existent (Hyland, 2013). Subject specialists often believe that academic discourse conventions are self-evident and are content to simply assign grades to products without concerning themselves with the process of arriving at the product. Nor is it entirely clear what comprises the underlying core or ‘general principles of inquiry and rhetoric’ (Spack, 1988) which teachers are advised to address. Even faculty members often disagree on commonalities; for example, Krause (2014) found in interviews with 50 academics that views about what generic skills should be in the university curriculum differed by discipline.

A second argument for specific EAP asserts that students do not necessarily learn best by studying general features before more specialized ones. Second language acquisition research shows that students do not learn in this step-by-step fashion according to an external sequence imposed by a teacher but acquire features of the language as they need them (Ellis, 1994). Students may need to attend more to sentence-level features at lower proficiencies, and perhaps require remedial attention in some areas, but there is no need to ignore either discourse or discipline at any stage. In fact, we now know a great deal about how disciplines use language, from the frequency and meanings of self-referring pronouns (Hyland, 2012a) to the genres on which students are assessed (Nesi & Gardner, 2012). It would, therefore,
seem almost perverse not to employ the considerable knowledge we have of disciplinary variation in the service of teaching.

There are, in fact, serious problems with identifying a ‘common core’ of language items. Focusing on a finite formal system ignores the fact that any form has many possible meanings depending on its context of use. If we incorporate meaning into the common core, however, we are led to the notion of specific varieties of academic discourse, and to the consequence that learning should take place within these varieties. As Bhatia (2002: 27) observes:

students interacting with different disciplines need to develop communication skills that may not be an extension of general literacy to handle academic discourse, but a range of literacies to handle disciplinary variation in academic discourse.

Taking a ‘narrow angle’ approach focusing on the genres, skills, and language features most applicable to students’ specialisms is also likely to be more motivating for them, making the relevance of study more obvious while activating their often considerable subject-specific knowledge. It also ensures that students are not studying aspects of the language they do not need or that may be used differently in their own specific fields of study. Even the so-called universal ‘semi-technical’ items in the Academic Word List (AWL), for example, can have very different frequencies and meanings in different disciplines so that teaching items as if they were generally useful and semantically equivalent may seriously mislead students (Hyland & Tse, 2007).

The wide-angle view which underpins EGAP sees academic literacy as a single, overarching practice; this not only disguises variability, but also suggests to both students and faculty that the language needed in academic contexts is merely an extension of everyday English. Students are seen as struggling with the conventions of their disciplines because of their imperfect acquisition of English at school or because they are using these conventions in a second language. In other words, students arrive at university with a deficit of literacy skills which can be topped up through some intensive EAP classes. The language centre is therefore a kind of remedial safe-house staffed by demoralized and inexperienced staff where EAP is relegated to a minor support role.

On the other hand, English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) may be more professionally challenging for teachers who have to familiarise themselves with the rhetorical and linguistic demands of particular contexts. It requires the jack-of-all-trades EAP practitioner to become a specialist in the ways that particular disciplines see the world and communicate how they understand it. At the same time, however, it elevates the importance of literacy specialists and the centres they work in, gaining the respect of faculty who generally appreciate the investment in time and commitment that teachers make in researching the specialist language of their discipline. This additional professionalism obviously costs institutions more in attracting qualified teachers, and ensuring professional development opportunities for them so they are able to research the needs of students and the demands made of them by their studies. The additional cost of this, however, is likely to be offset by more efficient, targeted, and motivating instruction, so that cost-effectiveness should be determined not just on the basis of cost but on the basis of effectiveness.

**Foundation and features of specificity**

The principle of specificity receives strong theoretical endorsement from social constructionism which stresses that disciplines are largely created and maintained through
the distinctive ways in which members jointly construct a view of the world through their discourses (e.g. Bruffee, 1986; Hyland, 2012b). Each discipline draws on different lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical resources to create specialized knowledge. Wignell, Martin and Eggins (1993), for instance, characterize the sciences as reworking experience technically by establishing a range of specialist terms which are ordered to explain how things happen or exist. This technicality is then used to create further technicality through defining, classifying, and explaining. The humanities, like history and philosophy on the other hand, employ abstraction rather than technicality, moving from instances to generalizations by gradually shifting away from particular contexts to build ever-more abstract interpretations of events. In other words, literacies are not just tools we pick up and put down as we need them, but are central to community epistemologies and personal identities. This means that students have to deploy a repertoire of literacy practices appropriate to different settings, and handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes.

It is, in other words, difficult to separate completely the teaching of specific skills and rhetoric from the teaching of a subject itself because what counts as convincing argument, appropriate tone, persuasive interaction, and so on, is managed for a particular audience. Students do not learn in a cultural vacuum but are judged on their use of discourses that insiders are likely to find effective and persuasive (e.g. Anderson, Evans & Harshorn, 2014). Ballard and Clanchy’s (1991: 17) point from twenty-five years ago is worth repeating:

Just as modes of analysis vary with disciplines and with the groups that practise them (physicists, psychologists, and literary critics), so too does language. For the student new to a discipline, the task of learning the distinctive mode of analysis… is indivisible from the task of learning the language of the discipline… One area of development cannot proceed without the other.

This view of discipline-specific variation is supported by a large, and very diverse, body of research.

Most obviously, there is a high degree of specificity in the kinds of writing that students are asked to do in different disciplines. The ability to construct disciplinary arguments is at the heart of conceptual understanding of a field, and learners are required to think their way into their disciplines by learning to craft their writing in community-specific ways. Written genres themselves become the tools by which knowledge and learning are articulated for students. Because of this, writing has come to be seen as a social practice rather than a skill (Lillis, 2001), and specific genres are recognized as having a powerful influence on how students understand and engage with their disciplines. Even in cognate fields, such as nursing and midwifery, students are asked to produce very different writing assignments (Gimenez, 2009), and this diversity can present considerable challenges to students. A large-scale corpus study, in fact, has distinguished thirteen ‘genre families’, ranging from case studies through empathy writing to research reports, which differ in social purpose, generic stages, and the networks they form with other genres (Nesi & Gardner, 2012).

Even genre names can be misleading as the structure of common formats such as the experimental lab report can differ considerably across different engineering disciplines, for example (Braine, 1995). Terms like lectures or essays imply neither homogeneity nor permanence and it is easy to believe there is greater similarity in the communicative practices of different communities than is actually the case. Ethnographic studies of individual students and courses reinforce this picture of marked diversities of tasks and texts in different fields (e.g. Prior, 1998).
Interviews with faculty and students together with analysis of course assignments at Hong Kong University, for example, revealed that students in the Speech and Hearing Sciences write reflective journals, journalism students write narratives, and pharmacy students produce drug profiles (Hyland, 2015). Nesi and Gardner (2012), in fact, identified three main functions of undergraduate assignments: to demonstrate disciplinary knowledge, to produce new knowledge, and to prepare for professional practice following graduation. These broad social purposes are clearly subject-related and are reflected in the expectations and feedback comments of tutors (Hyland, 2013). Language, or rather specific varieties of language, therefore has a powerful influence on how students understand and engage with their disciplines. Language is tied to disciplines because it is inseparable from how we understand the world. This famous quote from Bartholomae captures this perfectly:

> Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history, anthropology or economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.

(Bartholomae, 1986:4)

These ‘ways of knowing’ are not learned by repetition or memorization, but by writing, and learning a subject needs to be closely linked with learning to write in a subject.

This view of multiple literacies in universities is reinforced by text analysis research. While academic genres are often identified by their conventional surface features, they are actually forms of social action designed to accomplish disciplinary recognized purposes with some hope of success. We are more likely to achieve these purposes if we frame our messages in ways which appeal to appropriate culturally and institutionally legitimated relationships. So, in analysing the extent to which student writing across disciplines draws on generic or specialized vocabulary, Durrant (2014) found substantial variation between disciplines, while most disciplines were relatively internally homogeneous. Hyland’s work on undergraduate writing also found considerable specificity in both the frequency and functions of features. Students’ uses of hedges (Hyland, 2000), self-mention (Hyland, 2012a) and engagement features such as reader pronouns and directives (Hyland, 2006) all differ across disciplines. One major reason for this is that writers draw on what they know as a result of their reading and writing of other texts. This not only offers the individual writer a way of managing the complexities of disciplinary writing, but also contributes to the stabilization of reproduction of disciplines.

In sum, this research shows that scholarly discourse is not uniform and monolithic but an outcome of different practices and strategies, where argument and engagement are crafted within specific disciplines that have different ideas about what is worth communicating and how this should be done. The fact that subject teachers are generally unwilling, for various reasons, to teach these practices encourages EAP teachers to bring their courses as close as they can to their students’ reasons for learning English. This is likely to make teaching more effective as students will be able to make use of it in their subject classes (e.g. James, 2014). Equally importantly, as I noted earlier, students are likely to be more motivated if they can see that their English course is directly related to their main subject course. Studies by Malcolm (2013), Kember, Ho and Hong (2008) and Woodrow (2013) have all found that students were motivated by courses which they saw were relevant to their wider studies. All these reasons point to the desirability of taking a specific approach as the most effective mean of equipping students with the communicative skills they need to participate in their studies.
Commonalities: contexts, continua, and consciousness-raising

While the idea of professional communities, each with its own particular practices, genres, and conventions, leads us towards a specific role for EAP, there are contexts where identifying these kinds of specific needs is problematic. Many students are enrolled in EAP programmes before they have selected a disciplinary major, such as in the numerous pre-sessional courses offered to international students, or in ‘common core’ first year programmes where students take a range of courses before deciding on a major. Students around the world are also attending classes which prepare them for university admissions tests, such as IELTS, Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), and the Pearson Test of Academic English. These global language exams can only be reliable if they reduce the complexities of academic communication to something that can be administered and consistently measured for large numbers of candidates. This led, in fact, IELTS to abandon subject-specific exam modules in favour of generic tests (Davies, 2008).

It is also the case that in the modern university, students cross boundaries. The proliferation of double majors, joint degrees, and free electives means they inhabit complex academic and social worlds, moving outside their disciplines to discuss problems and write assignments with peers from other departments, and engage with lecturers and advisors in a disparate range of spoken and written genres. Such epistemological, social, and discoursal border-crossings pose enormous challenges for students and teachers alike. Similarly, it is not difficult to imagine how rhetorically complicated life can become for students in interdisciplinary studies such as business studies, for example, where a student may have to produce texts in fields as diverse as accountancy and corporate planning. This means that it is often difficult for teachers to find sufficient commonalities to develop specific courses where students have varying target needs and little experience of academic discourse.

It is, however, difficult for teachers to identify generic features, so while intertextuality, objectivity, and hedging may be common, each is further refined and developed differently within each discipline. Some fields, such as literature or cultural studies for example, may actually subscribe to very few of them. We might, then, prefer to see skills and features as located on a continuum with some more generic and others more discipline-specific, varying by degrees along a scale. Thus, ‘objectivity’ is obviously most apparent in physical sciences such as physics and chemistry where arguments rest on impartial observation, experimental demonstration, and replication, while research in the humanities tends to be more explicitly interpretative and less abstract, with less ‘exact’ data collection procedures. Further towards the ‘generic’ end of the cline we might place referencing skills. All students need to know how to reference the sources they use and, in part, this is a mechanical exercise involving citation conventions, whether Harvard, APA, etc., and partly knowing how to successfully paraphrase ideas. These things might be seen and taught as generic skills which can be transferred across contexts, but not all disciplines use and evaluate references in the same way. There are, for example, considerable differences in the frequency of citation and in the preference for particular reporting verbs (Hyland, 2004).

In other words, contexts influence the extent to which teachers are able to implement specificity, and this should encourage flexibility in course design and sensitivity to the circumstances of particular students. The strong evidence of linguistic diversity across disciplines and for the motivational and learning benefits of English for Specific Academic Purposes materials and courses often has to be tempered by contextual exigencies. Ultimately, EAP is a means of empowering students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their studies and professional careers, and we have to recognize that there are various
ways of doing this. Specificity must therefore, in part, be supplied by the student and not exclusively by the teacher’s analysis of target texts and behaviours. A key driver for specificity in the classroom is the students who make up those classes, and for this reason teachers have sought to draw on the knowledge learners bring to the class, particularly their analytic skills.

One common solution to heterogeneous classes is to exploit these analytic skills and encourage students to contrast their disciplinary experiences through the rhetorical analysis of disciplinary texts (cf. Swales & Feak, 2012). Rhetorical consciousness-raising seeks to avoid simplistic and formulaic approaches to texts and the prescriptive teaching of target genres. Essentially, the approach emphasizes an exploratory and research-informed understanding of texts which promotes both learner awareness and learner autonomy. Teachers provide learners with the analytical concepts and tools to analyze, compare, and manipulate representative samples of discourse to experience for themselves the effect that grammatical choices have on creating meanings. Consciousness-raising always involves a focus on texts, usually through mini-analyses of the genres students have to write or of their own writing. One example is to ask students to identify and highlight where the writer of a text has chosen to use or avoid I and then determine possible reasons for this, finally writing a report to present their findings. Tasks such as this take a potentially generic feature of academic language and lead students towards the specificity of disciplinary texts. Text analyses, particularly those involving comparison with the analyses of peers, helps students become aware of rhetorical practices and the multi-literate nature of the academy.

Teachers can thus make a virtue of heterogeneity, while at the same time helping to satisfy students’ demands for personal relevance. Consciousness-raising tasks develop sensitivity to the language used in different academic genres, and insights into the expectations of their target communities. Becoming literate in one’s discipline means developing an awareness of the functions of texts and how these functions are conventionally accomplished. By making contact with those outside their field, students come to see that communication does not entail adherence to a set of universal rules but involves making rational choices based on the ways texts work in specific contexts.

Specific and general courses: Hong Kong cases

Both types of course present their own challenges, as we found in undertaking a major reform of the EAP curriculum at Hong Kong University in 2012. The reform accompanied a major restructuring of education in Hong Kong which reduced secondary education by one year and added it to the university curriculum. This move away from a highly specialized British-oriented model to align with four-year undergraduate degrees in mainland China and the US aimed to give students greater exposure to disciplines outside their major and opportunities for exchanges with international students. Charged with developing courses to embed relevant English literacy skills instruction into the new curriculum, the Centre for Applied English Studies (CAES) chose to provide a general EAP course to all 3,000 first year students, called ‘Core University English’ (CUE), and more specific ‘English in the Discipline’ courses in later years. Together these would form the basis of students’ English learning experience and the cornerstone of academic English support for all undergraduates at HKU (Hyland, 2015).

CUE was designed to enhance students’ proficiency in academic English, and so bridge the gap between the English they had learnt at secondary school and the language expected of them when entering disciplinary studies in their second year. We decided that classes would be composed of students from a range of faculties and that they would largely focus on
Speaking and writing. The materials (Legg et al., 2014) are organized around five main themes of the Common Core curriculum: health, global issues, ethics, values, and Asia, and seek to move students from recognizing and using basic features of academic discourse, through identifying and evaluating sources, to note taking and paraphrasing, expressing a critical stance, synthesizing ideas, and finally structuring a complete academic text. Throughout the course, students are encouraged to express a viewpoint on topical, often controversial, issues, and to support that viewpoint with sources. In tutorials, they learn how to use language to collaborate in reaching deeper levels of understanding rather than winning debates.

The course constantly guides students in understanding the connections and contrasts between academic speaking and writing, and makes considerable use of models of different genre stages. Supported by tutorials and 90 hours of compulsory out-of-class learning materials on the electronic platform Moodle, learners are provided with a metalanguage to explicitly discuss strategies and features and to critically evaluate arguments and stances while reflecting on both texts and their own performances. Course materials contain many student texts which are marked up to show how stance, metadiscourse, citations, and quotes are used and how arguments are structured effectively. The fact that student texts are used as models for reading and writing, and that students are required to draw on content material from their first year common core courses in completing tasks, brings student-centred specificity into the course and helps to ensure relevance and involvement in learning.

After a general first year, students select their majors and begin their disciplinary studies which include a more specific English in the Discipline course. These courses were prepared following extensive research into the literacy demands of courses in different faculties, working in close collaboration with individual departments to ensure that the English courses aligned with the work students would do in their content courses. This kind of cooperation, however, was not always smooth, and teachers encountered a range of attitudes from enthusiastic cooperation to cold indifference. In some cases, faculty members actively tried to position language teachers as servants, expecting them to simply offer the support that they thought best. In writing of an earlier attempt at collaboration at HKU, for example, Barron (2002) argued that the ontological superiority that science teachers give to scientific facts can make them rigid when negotiating learning tasks and assignments. The divergent philosophies of functionalism in EAP and realism in science, in other words, can undermine cooperation and lead to the subordination of EAP to subject content. Needless to say, these attempts to highjack our courses were rigorously resisted.

The most positive working relationships were when our course preparations made least demands on subject teachers, and where there was mutual respect and acceptance of each other’s specialist expertise. We tried to ensure that our voice was heard in the planning of literacy education and that our courses were not subordinated to the disciplinary course. In some cases, faculty members see writing as simply something to get right, but overall the experience of curriculum reform has been positive. It has provided opportunities to explain the nature of our work to faculties and to promote the value of our role in the university, giving us a greater presence and a platform to show the centrality of academic literacy to teaching and learning in the university.

This research into faculty practices has produced some interesting courses. English for Clinical Pharmacy, for example, is a second year course designed to develop students’ abilities to meet the communicative demands of drug information delivery by focusing on common oral and written genres in drug information. Parts of the course involve teaching specific words and strategies for learning, and applying new terms so that students are able to select vocabulary and rhetorical devices appropriate to drug information genres, and to synthesize
and cite information and evidence from multiple sources to provide drug recommendations. Students also learn how to write clinical correspondence such as a drug reclassification letter and a drug incident report. Both are key elements of their medical course.

The learning activities for this purpose are contextualized in a drug information project jointly devised and co-assessed with the Department of Pharmacology and Pharmacy. Drug evaluation is a fundamental part of a clinical pharmacist’s career, as many of the documents prepared by clinical pharmacists have to be based on some form of drug evaluation. This project is the main assessment task and requires students, working in pairs, to evaluate and recommend two drugs that can be used to treat the same medical condition. To ensure the comparison is meaningful, the drugs assigned to the students are selected by the Pharmacy department which, after some initial trepidation, came to see the value of discipline-specific work and that we were not encroaching into professional content areas. The Pharmacy department also advised on the kind of writing task which would be appropriate, eventually settling on an article in a hospital bulletin, a common site for clinical pharmacists to publish their writing, including drug evaluations, addressed to an audience of healthcare professionals who are working in a hospital.

The Drug Evaluation Project therefore provides an early opportunity for learners to develop and practise necessary, and highly discipline-specific, writing skills. It requires them to search for and select relevant drug information from reliable sources, to compare drugs for the purpose of evaluation, and to write a comparative drug evaluation article for publication in an online pharmacy bulletin using appropriate citation and referencing styles. Each student pair writes a first draft of the article and receives feedback before writing a final draft. Teacher feedback on drafts plays an important role in scaffolding cognitive development, alerting students to their strengths and weaknesses, and contributing to their acquisition of disciplinary subject matter and writing conventions. The students certainly find the project challenging. At the beginning of the course, some complained that the second year was too early for them to write in this way as they did not feel capable of judging sources nor had the knowledge to give drug evaluations. Including a lecture by the medical librarian on finding reliable drug sources, together with the support of the Pharmacy department, helped enormously in the successful development of the programme and enabling students to see its possibilities.

A second example of an English in the Discipline course is the second year English for business studies course. It is based around three main writing assessments using genres which student focus groups revealed were particularly problematic. The main one is an academic paper where students must argue why ‘corporate social responsibility’ is beneficial to a company’s performance. Students are also expected to synthesize a case analysis, another assessment procedure distinctive to the business faculty, and to compile a small writing portfolio from samples of writing they have done, either in or out of the English class. This mixed-genre portfolio is accompanied by a letter integrating the entries, reflecting on their features and structures and pointing out the similarities and differences between them. There is, then, a demand that students produce several pieces of extensive writing, both collaboratively and individually, to demonstrate their understanding of features of key business genres, and the ability to comprehend and make inferences about the use of common language in business journals and reports.

Another aspect of the course was the decision to ‘flip the classroom’ so that input, readings, and course notes are accessed out of class, and class time is spent on discussion, collaborative writing, and peer and self-assessment tasks. This not only represents a transfer of responsibility of learning to students, but allows teachers and students to have more face-to-face time, and students to master material at their own pace. By freeing up more time for
discovery in class, we hope greater opportunities for specificity are available than by teaching
the disciplinary conventions in class.

Our involvement in ESAP, therefore, involves a commitment to research-based language
instruction. It means determining what the community’s relevant conventions are so they
can be made relevant and ‘demystified’ for students.

Conclusions

The take-home message here is that the discourses of the academy do not form an
undifferentiated, unitary mass but a variety of subject-specific literacies. Disciplines have
different views of knowledge, different research practices, and different ways of seeing the
world, and as a result, investigating the practices of those disciplines will take us to greater
specificity. We also, however, need to recognize that not all contexts are the same and that
circumstances often require teachers to identify more register-level skills. It is always
important, moreover, to recognize how students understand specificity. They usually come
with some, and often considerable, subject-specific knowledge, and we need to hand over
control of subject content to them, providing them with the tools to explore texts in their
subject contexts.

For students, the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge involves an encounter with a
new and dominant literacy, and because academic ability is frequently evaluated in terms of
competence in this literacy, they often find their own literacy practices to be regarded as failed
attempts to approximate these conventions. By detaching academic literacy from its social
consequences, it is easy to see communication difficulties as learners’ own weaknesses, and
for ESP to become an exercise in language repair. The only way to counter this is to bring
these practices back to earth by targeting specific contexts and drawing on the experiences of
our learners. Specificity, thus, provides learners with a way of understanding the diversity they
encounter at university and shows them how they might best achieve their academic goals.

Further reading

Hyland (2004); Hyland (2012b); Johns (1997); Nesi & Gardner (2012)

Related chapters

11 Language and L2 writing: learning to write and writing to learn in academic contexts
16 Corpus studies in EAP
19 Genre analysis
43 EAP materials and tasks

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General and specific EAP