The new order: EAP as general English

Steph Dimond shows there is an interesting middle ground between EAP and general English.

EAP and you

Are you interested in working in the EAP field? Despite current concerns about the increasing marginalisation of EAP – an issue at the top of the agenda in the BALEAP Professional Issues Meeting held in November this year (Hyatt, 2015) – working in this area remains an ambition for many younger teachers keen to bring their enthusiasm, ideas and approaches to the EAP table. However, my conversations with them often highlight a perception of EAP as separate, as other, an area sealed off from general practice and difficult to join.

Having worked in both contexts for many years as a teacher and a trainer, it is this interplay between the two and the perceptions that surround them which I have found most interesting. The EAP context is indeed different in many ways; but in others, especially as HE provision shifts and changes, at least for some of us, the distance can be smaller than often asserted. And I wonder if the benefits of a less divisive perception would be good for all?

So I would like to consider three questions, especially useful if you still work within General English.

1 Why is EAP perceived as ‘other’?

For the last 30 years the provision of EAP has developed beyond recognition. Growing out of the research based approaches associated with ESP, it is now a substantial field of practice in its own right: Jordan (2002) gives a clear chronology of EAP’s first 20 years of development, including the founding of its name in a 1974 British Council meeting. Since that time, many arguments have been waged about the nature, purpose and characteristics of EAP.

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In particular, focus has understandably concentrated on what differentiates EAP from General English. The beginnings seem fairly clear cut. English for Academic Purposes ‘is defined quite simply as teaching English with the aim of facilitating learners’ study or research in that language’ (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons, 2002). And yet, as Hyland and Hamp-Lyons acknowledge, this apparently simple genesis has gone on to draw from a whole range of disciplines for its methods, theories and practices.

Heavily research based EAP discussions have moved through a range of approaches: Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) discuss the four dominating movements of register analysis, rhetorical and discourse analysis, skills based approaches and learning-centred approaches; Blue’s (1988) division concerns differences in English for Specific Academic Purpose versus General Academic Purpose and considers multidisciplinary practice; there are also issues based around concepts of power and culture (Pennycook, 1997).

So far so different. But the model of EAP, the cohorts and expectations about delivery, certainly at the chalkface, have changed in recent years; it is not a static concept. And how do such distinctions impact on teachers of both EAP and General English?

2 Are there useful links between current practice in EAP and General English which can be of benefit to both?

All the research and literature surrounding EAP can be difficult for new teachers entering the field to navigate. Perhaps this has long been the case.

When I first transferred from General English programmes to EAP, the...
prevailing perspectives I encountered from others appeared to be based on quite clear, binary divisions as if I should leave much of my understanding of teaching at the door because it was 'general'. These perspectives placed the notion of EAP (and/or ESP, EOP, EPAP, EGAP and ESAP - use the acronym(s) of your choice) one side of a very tall fence, and the teaching and learning processes of General English on the other. I was anxious. And not just about all the acronyms. My personal practical knowledge, the kind of hard won 'classroom image' formulated through my personal and professional experience (Clandinin, 1985; Nuthall, 2001) seemed, at best, inadequate for this new situation. In short, I felt very much as other young teachers sometimes do now.

Now, with more experience, I see that my images and 'routines' were in fact significantly important to my practice even as I adjusted them. And I would argue that in some contexts such experience has become even more relevant. Like it or not, the constraints and practicalities of higher education, especially for those working in institutions outside of the top 20 university rankings, increasingly bring in heavier demands for teachers and larger numbers of students with entry-level language capabilities more traditionally associated with General English. A 'purist' EAP solution is not a good fit for them. Rather, I would argue that the need for the knowledge honed through teachers' experience in more generic programmes retains key value even in this more specialised context.

In parallel, General English provision is becoming increasingly specialised: young learners desire CLIL based provision, adults are interested in exam-focused learning, critical thinking skills and support for their own autonomy, areas all traditionally associated with General English. A 'purist' EAP solution is not a good fit for them. Rather, I would argue that the need for the knowledge honed through teachers' experience in more generic programmes retains key value even in this more specialised context.

And if the strengths and skills built up through teaching General English (does such a thing exist? Surely all teaching is specific in some way?) can support the practice of EAP, the reverse is also true. In fact, the contribution EAP can make back towards General English models has already been recognised. In 2003, Todd suggested that 'EAP teachers, especially in core countries, are generally more experienced and qualified than general English teachers, and ... in the university environments where many EAP teachers work, research and innovation are valued. Such factors have pushed EAP to the forefront of the English teaching field' (p.149). Distinguishing between approaches, methods and techniques (Richards and Rodgers, 1986) he highlighted the contribution of EAP to innovative approaches, including process syllabi focusing on project and task-based work, team teaching, the rise of autonomy through self-study research and the use of authentic materials and tasks in the classroom.

So it seems ever more sensible to utilise the best of both worlds, to feed our experience of classroom practice into our research and reflect back a less binary and more holistic model less easy to pigeon hole.

Diane Schmitt (2015) has recently discussed her sense of being a 'mediator' in a context where teaching is 'research informed' but research is not 'teaching informed'. Binary divisions are clean on paper but do not always reflect our fuzzy reality: we need to ensure we are linking pedagogy and practice to our research.

3 How can this be reflected in classroom practice?

Finally, in terms of delivery, on a very small scale I have been thinking about how the blurring of lines might be reflected in some techniques for the classroom. For a long time I have adopted small aspects of EAP and CLIL methodology into general practice to good effect. So, for those of you working in more general contexts, why not read up on some EAP techniques and try them out - unless you have done so already? Here are some practical tips to begin:

- **Previewing not predicting**
  Most teachers are familiar with the concept of asking students to predict, e.g. look at pictures/titles and subtitles and predict possible content. There is usually a fairly straightforward parallel between the prediction and content. However, in academic culture, students are generally aware of the topics of interest so this skill is not required. Instead they are asked to make judgements about which articles to read from a long list of potential resources or where to find material that might be relevant to their course of study. Therefore previewing - a more value-based assessment of the content and worth of texts - is helpful. Some techniques to gradually encourage students to do this:

1. Give students a set of specific questions to ask about each text or audio-visual source. These can begin with quite light prediction tasks but they then become much more meaningful, asking them to consider the validity of the source and its suitability for their purpose (see Figure 1). My students keep the grid of questions and reuse them until they become habitual.

2. Put the students into small groups. Select some texts: either on different topics or on the same topic but of different genres, from gossip magazines to serious academic essays. Place the texts face down on a table. Ask the students to gather around and give them a time limit, e.g. three minutes. They must use this time to look briefly at each text and either choose the one they think most suitable for a given topic or choose the one they think most valid as a source. This helps them develop their ability to select appropriate text for purpose.

3. Every week, choose two or three students. Either let them choose a source (reading, listening or film material) or provide one. Each student must create a poster presentation and deliver this to the class. The class then selects which source they would like to view.
Question pyramids

General English is often very passive in the way questions are posed. In other words, the student is provided with questions and must answer. Academic contexts encourage students to raise their own questions and pursue their own lines of interest. This can be quite challenging for students who have never been asked to do so before. So, rather than provide tasks to follow on from texts, ask the students to write their own questions. This can result in a series of surface level questions. So provide each with a pyramid of lower and higher order thinking skills in the style of Bloom and tell the students they must create one question for each category. Students then share or swap questions or you can pick out the best for everyone to complete (see Figure 2).

Summarise and comment

After doing some text work (reading/listening or video) ask the students to gather in small groups. The students summarise what they have done sentence by sentence. Each time they provide a part of the summary, but must add a comment of their own, e.g. 'The topic of the reading was ..., a subject I personally think is really interesting because ...', 'It explained how ... which I thought was fascinating!'

If these ideas appeal, why not dig into some EAP literature in order to discover more ideas (see, for example, Guse & Thornbury, 2011)?

EAP and General English can be 'other' and continue in their traditional guises at each end of the continuum; but they are increasingly finding middle ground. And in that space perhaps teachers can think about how the blurred lines can challenge their learners.

References


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