

ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES: A TERTIARY EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is considered one of the branches of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which includes English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Professional Purposes (IPP). The EAP focuses on students' needs and communicative skills related to specific academic disciplines and contexts. In the past, EAP was associated only with the reading of written texts, but currently other modalities are being introduced aiming at the development of communicative competence and the success of students in different courses. Students must learn to deal with university discourse as a whole, in addition to knowing the specific discourse of their areas of study and this will help, not only in the conduct of their courses, but also in the formation of more qualified professionals. This article discusses EAP in a tertiary education perspective.

According to Hyland (2006) one of the main reasons for the emergence and expansion of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses in many universities around the world was the growing number of international students enrolled in educational institutions. One of the primary objectives of the EAP is to assist students and researchers in communicative practices in different areas of undergraduate and graduate courses, where classroom interaction, research and even some administrative practices require the effective use of English language.

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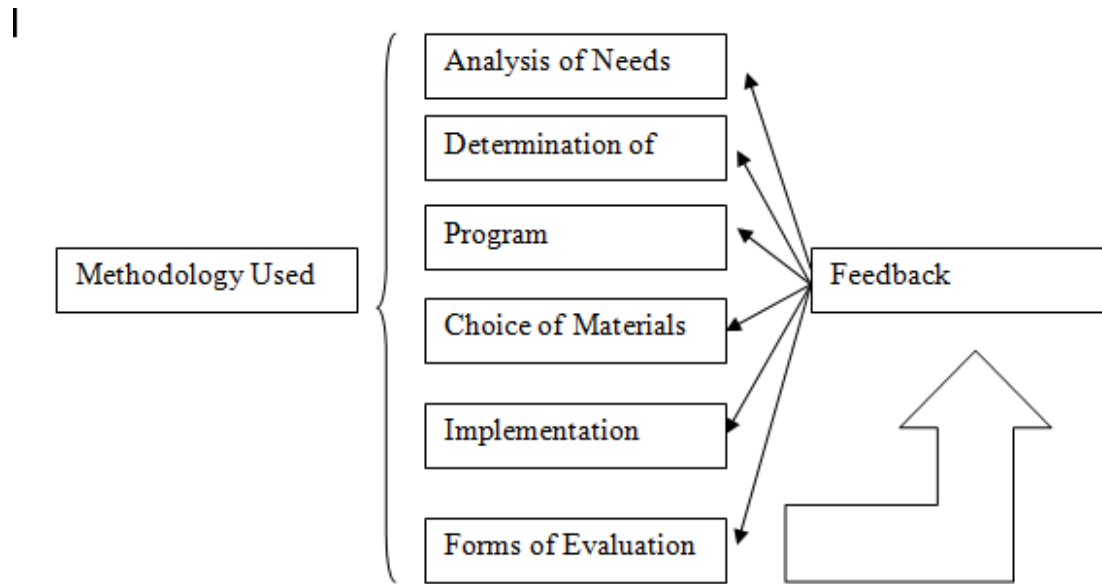
communicative competence and the success of students in different courses. Students must learn to deal with university discourse as a whole, in addition to knowing the specific discourse of their areas of study and this will help, not only in the conduct of their courses, but also in the formation of more qualified professionals.

Modern academic life requires the development of students' communicative competence and it has important characteristics capable of reaffirming the importance of teaching EAP today: a- Students need to assume new roles and use knowledge in different ways; b- Communicative practices may not be uniform in all areas or disciplines; c- Certain practices are linked to power and authority and they can marginalize groups or individuals who do not adhere to them; d- The English language has become the main language in the academic universe. In addition to the points presented above, Hyland (2006) emphasizes that such characteristics of the academic universe led the EAP to a subdivision that includes English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). EGAP relates to the use of the English language in the university context as a whole and deals with academic activities and events such as listening to lectures, attending seminars, reading articles, writing essays, reports and dissertations, attending classes, etc. There are arguments that favor the EGAP, highlighting that (a) teachers may lack training and knowledge to conduct very specific courses, such as English for medicine and electrical engineering, for example; (b) beginners may have difficulties with the language level presented in the courses; (c) it is necessary to know the general academic conventions before introducing speeches or specific vocabulary related to a single area or discipline.

On the other hand, ESAP's followers emphasize the importance of a more direct focus on different disciplines and their conventions, arguing that (a) there is no evidence that students learn sequentially and that the argument that beginners may experience difficulties cannot be proven; (b) the association between the general and the specific must be made from the beginning so that there is familiarity with the specific speeches; (c) the EGAP cannot serve as a way to remedy past language deficiencies; (d) the focus of an academic English course should be specific and not in ways that students rarely use in real interactions.

The task of designing a coherent EAP course can be difficult for many teachers, but some key elements must be noted.

Figure 1: Elements for developing EAP courses



If students' needs are identified and taken into account, other elements such as objectives, program, materials, methods, forms of assessment, and feedback should be intertwined with this.

The term needs, in the conception of many authors (Gillet, 2015; Hyland, 2006; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), is very broad and, therefore, capable of encompassing different aspects such as students' objectives, teaching and learning contexts, levels of proficiency, preferences, learning styles, future use of language, etc. Hyland (2006) summarizes students' needs as what students currently know, what they don't know, and what they want or need to know.

There are many ways that we can access information related to students' needs and they include the use of questionnaires, analysis of written or oral texts they produce, interviews, classroom observation, assessment results, etc. If the teacher knows the students, he will be able to plan and design a coherent course and will make the students motivated and involved throughout the process.

Two main types of Course Program can be used in teaching EAP: analytical and task based. In the first case, the program focuses on decontextualized forms and individualized units of knowledge and students must internalize and accumulate such forms. In the second case, there is the use of communicative tasks that emphasize the use of the target language through daily activities or linked to the academic universe. Both types of programs can be successful, success being related to the types of classes, contexts, objectives and learning styles.

Teachers need to know whether the materials used in the course are directly related to the needs, profiles and objectives of the students. The materials (textbooks and other types) are extremely important, as they help in the increment and application of the methodology adopted for the course. Good teaching materials should offer opportunities for discussions and analysis, production of oral and written texts, vocabulary enrichment through different textual genres, resources and authentic tasks that are relevant to students.

Four types of teaching materials can be used in teaching EAP: reference materials, textbooks, bespoke materials and electronic materials.

The reference materials focus on general knowledge and, in this category, dictionaries, encyclopedias and grammars fit. These materials are useful in any context of foreign language teaching, but teachers should instruct students about the correct time to use them. Textbooks, on the other hand, represent the broadest category of teaching materials and are widely used in Sri Lankan contexts of teaching English as a Second Language, but in some cases they can be very general and require adaptations according to each context. Such adaptations are very common and include, for example, supplementation of information or activities or the removal of topics and units aimed at meeting the needs of students.

Tailored (bespoke) materials are generally developed by the teacher based on knowledge about his/her students and must take into account factors such as course duration, sequence, linguistic and vocabulary level. When considering the internal structure of units in many textbooks, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) believe that a coherent unit model to be developed by teachers should include at least four basic elements: stimulus, content, linguistic focus and task.

The stimulus provides new vocabulary, models for using the language, the topic to be discussed in the lesson, opportunities for using prior knowledge and integrating skills through brainstorming. The content is represented by information about the proposed topic. Such information can be presented through text, for example. Both the content and the stimulus may contain non-linguistic elements to be explored in the classroom.

The linguistic focus will allow for a more detailed analysis of the language, allowing students to analyze how the separate forms are grouped together to produce meaning. The task must allow the use of language and the content learned in real communication situations.

Electronic materials, on the other hand, are capable of offering an incalculable variety of media resources that are capable of contemplating auditory and visual stimuli, including online newspapers and magazines, videos, films, use of social networks for real contact with people around the world, chat rooms, use of instant messaging, etc.

The final two steps to be considered when developing an EAP course are the evaluation and feedback forms. Evaluation is an important element in the teaching of EAP and the term is broad and can direct us to various ways of evaluating students during the process, which leads teachers to detect problems and make adaptations during and after the process.

Formative assessment is related to the observation of the process and feedback cannot be limited only to the attribution of grades, but to closer and continuous monitoring. The summative assessment is related to formal tests, they include a unit worked in class, a lesson or semester and are usually used to assign grades to students. Both types of assessment are extremely important and their use depends largely on the objectives and contexts of teaching and learning. The Sri Lankan context almost always requires formal assessments and, therefore, a balance between the two forms of assessment is suggested.

Providing feedback is important not only because students have the opportunity to track their progress and identify their difficulties along the way, but feedback also allows students to “receive messages” about university values, understand their role in the process, helping them in the construction of their academic identities.

The implementation of an EAP course, in addition to presenting distinct stages that require attention on the part of universities, also presents challenges. Some of these challenges will be listed and discussed below.

The time allocated to courses may not be enough for students to become familiar with the specific terms and contexts of future use of the target language. In this way, the focus should also fall on the development of skills that contemplate effective ways of learning and optimize the learning that go beyond the limits of the classroom. Teachers tend to waste a lot of time on translation and grammar activities, which can lead to lack of motivation and dropping out by students.

Textbooks may not be in accordance with the needs of students, covering topics that will not be useful in the future or bringing a level above or below the real level of the class. Many problems are detected in the selection of textbooks, but it must be kept in mind that there is no ideal book for a particular group. The choice should be discussed and evaluated by all teachers involved in the project and, in the future, teachers should be aware that books should be adapted and complemented, depending on the needs of each class.

The level of the EAP may be beyond the actual level of the students. It is known that the majority of courses and materials intended for teaching EAP have intermediate and advanced levels and many Sri Lankan students have a weak language base. In this respect, the identification of the proficiency level of the class is very important for the conduct of the course and this can be done through tests, such as the TOEFL, which aim to group students according to their language level. On the other hand, institutions can design their own diagnostic assessment mechanism, avoiding standardized tests.

The low interest of students in the EAP represents another challenge to be overcome. Most students do not recognize the importance of the EAP, believing that it will not be useful in the future field of action. Such a problem can be alleviated by raising awareness of the importance of the English language in the current global context, its role in exchange programs and the university environment, and through forums and seminars that present people using the language in a real and meaningful way.

CONCLUSION

The starting point for EAP courses is the identification of students' needs, which includes language level, socio-cultural context, learning styles and other factors. The program should be based on authentic tasks that reflect the real use of the language through academic and professional practices, increasing the involvement and motivation of students in the course. The selected materials, on the other hand, must include authentic and meaningful situations and texts, being chosen based on prior knowledge of the classes to be worked on by the teacher. The evaluation can be formative or summative, but in both cases the feedback is extremely important, as it will help the student to check his progress and the teacher to evaluate and improve the course.

On the other hand, we can affirm that, despite the challenges and difficulties in the implementation of EAP courses, the objectives can be achieved through the improvement of the teachers' skills and the knowledge of the students and contexts of performance.

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