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An academic literacies argument for decentralizing EAP provision

Neil Murray

English-medium universities have generally adopted centralized models of in-session English language provision, where expertise resides and is often delivered within language development units or as part of larger cognate departments, typically TESOL or Applied Linguistics departments. This arrangement might be seen as reflecting a one-size-fits-all study skills perspective on EAP, one that treats the development of student writing, in particular, as mastery of a set of skills that are generalizable across different disciplines. With the emergence of the 'academic literacies' perspective, this emphasis has shifted somewhat towards an approach that gives greater recognition to the variation which exists between the writing practices of different academic disciplines. This shift provides support for a move away from a centralized model of English language provision to a decentralized approach that brings with it a number of distinct benefits outlined in this article.

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, there has been growing evidence, both in the literature and in institutional practices, of a move away from a study skills approach to the teaching of academic English at universities to one framed within an academic literacies perspective (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 2003). Lea and Street (*ibid.*: 158–9) have described the study skills approach in the following terms:

The study skills approach has assumed that literacy is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts. The focus is on attempts to 'fix' problems with student learning, which are treated as kind of pathology. The theory of language on which it is based emphasises surface features, grammar and spelling.

The study skills approach is, they claim, 'crude' and 'insensitive' in that it fails to reflect the fact that writing in the academy cannot simply be reduced to the development of a static set of skills regarded as generalizable in their application to different academic disciplines; instead, it needs to be conceived as the outcome of a process through which students develop an understanding of and the ability to adapt to the discourses, behaviours, and expectations of their disciplines, as well as the broader institutional contexts in which they are located. These discourses, behaviours, and expectations play an important role in defining and shaping the disciplines concerned, and, in acquiring an understanding of them, students undergo a process of social acculturation through

which they gain admittance into their respective communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2000).

The study skills approach, then, fails to take sufficient account of context by promoting a model of language development—and associated learning goals—that is insufficiently nuanced to reflect the practices of individual disciplines in terms of language, social meanings, and identities. In contrast, the academic literacies model

... sees the literacy demands of the curriculum as involving a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. From the student point of view a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes. (Lea and Street op.cit.: 159)

The ‘settings’ to which Lea and Street refer are, as Rex and McEachen (1999) note, distinctive both in terms of the specialized vocabularies, concepts, and knowledges associated with each discipline, as well as their accepted and valued patterns of meaning-making activity (for example genres, rhetorical structures, argument formulations, narrative devices, and so forth) and ways of contesting meaning. That is, every discipline has associated with it a ‘set’ of academic literacy practices in which students seeking to obtain membership of its community of practice need to become conversant.

What I wish to argue here is that viewing the development of English language from an academic literacies perspective has important implications not only for how we develop students’ English language once they have enrolled at university (see, for example, Hyland 2007) but also for how English language provision is *structured* within institutions. Specifically, an academic literacies perspective argues for in-sessional provision that moves away from the kind of centralized model of delivery that has traditionally predominated in institutions of English-medium (EM) higher education, towards a decentralized model where language is taught, perhaps even structured and managed, locally at a faculty level, even at departmental level, should resources permit. Such a model of provision brings with it a number of significant benefits that usefully extend the discussion of disciplinary practices and discourses now well-established in the literature.

Remedying the deficit view of EAP

One important bi-product of the academic literacies perspective, often-cited as one of its greatest strengths, is that it distances the development of English language within higher education from the notion of deficit with which it has, for many, been traditionally associated. By conceptualizing students' language development epistemologically through understanding the expectations and thus requirements of individual disciplines, student writing is seen less in terms of what is good and bad practice according to a monolithic, universally applicable view of academic English, and more in terms of a process of gradually becoming acquainted with particular disciplinary practices. And this is highly significant in that it positions the non-native speaker (NNS) student¹—the usual focus of English language development activity at EM universities—differently in relation to the native-speaker (NS) student of English than has historically been the case. They are no longer the 'poorer cousins' of their NS counterparts, for few assumptions can be made about the academic literacies with which *any* student, NS or NNS, comes to their university studies, especially—but by no means exclusively—in the case of degree subjects to which students have had little or no exposure during their school years. This means that every student stands to benefit from opportunities to acquire an understanding of those academic literacies essential to studying effectively within their discipline and being admitted to membership of its community of practice. As such, while students will inevitably come to their studies with differing degrees of familiarity with the literacies of their particular disciplines, the development of those literacies needs to be seen as an integral part of student learning; that is learning for *all* students, in higher education.

The fact that English language provision in EM universities has traditionally been organized and delivered centrally via dedicated English language units or Applied Linguistics/TESOL departments with an English language arm to their activities might be seen as reinforcing the deficit view that is antipathetic to an academic literacies perspective on language and its development. It reflects a study skills approach to the English language needs of students across the university by locating language development activity within a single unit, centre, or department, often irrespective of the varied language needs of students studying different subjects. If students are struggling with language, they 'self-refer' or are 'referred to' this generalist central unit (what might be seen as a clinic of sorts for those who are seen as lacking in some

respect or who need treatment to right their ills: an idea captured in Lea and Street's (op.cit.) critical reference to 'pathology'). Significantly, such units are seen primarily, and in many cases exclusively, as serving the needs of those students for whom English is not a first language (NNSs), rather than those for whom it *is* (NSs) but who may, none the less, also be struggling to meet the language demands of their studies. This fact further reinforces the notion of NNS students being in deficit and differentiating them from NS students who are often wrongly seen as having the language skills to succeed by virtue of being native speakers, despite the fact that they also need to develop the academic literacies of their disciplines in much the same way as their NNS peers. This not only has the potential to disadvantage NS students through failure to recognize their language needs but also risks stigmatizing, even marginalizing, those NNS students who are struggling with language.

Promoting relevance and student engagement

The local delivery of English language development opportunities means that syllabi can be negotiated with staff and students within the relevant faculties and departments and thus tailored to be more responsive to their specific language needs. Furthermore, through understanding the particular academic demands faced by students operating in distinctive disciplinary contexts, teachers are able to research appropriate materials and produce lessons that are relevant and engaging, and which therefore promote learning most effectively. This raises an important point which seems to go largely unrecognized in the kind of centralized, study skills-based provision that predominates in universities: most if not all NSS students will have already had their fill of the kind of study skills-based teaching-learning associated with what is often referred to as English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) (see, for example, James 2010) by virtue of having had to prepare for university English language gatekeeping tests such as IELTS, performance on which determines, in part, whether or not they secure entry to their university of choice. Having successfully enrolled in their degree programme, and, by implication, achieved the required standard on the relevant gatekeeping test, what most of them do *not* need or want is more of the same general EAP or study skills diet; instead, as many very quickly realize, they require a working understanding of the particular literacies that will enable them to negotiate the immediate and particular demands of their studies: to complete coursework assignments (for example, business reports, critical syntheses of biology research articles, a presentation of a legal defence

case, etc.). Provision that fails to offer them this support is unlikely to be well received; indeed, this is arguably why, following an initial flurry of enrolments and (commonly) oversubscriptions on university in-session courses at the beginning of the year/term, attrition rates are typically quite high after the first few weeks of teaching (Lobo and Gurney 2014). Students are highly pragmatic and if they feel that in-session classes are merely offering more of the kind of EGAP they studied at length prior to entry to university, they will simply vote with their feet. They will not invest time in attending such courses unless they are seen to offer a clear and tangible return in terms of an increased ability to meet their immediate course needs and secure good grades, particularly when many already feel under pressure from trying to keep up with their 'regular' coursework, not to mention maintain a social life!

Aligning EAP teachers with faculties

Clearly, if materials are to be relevant and effective, this means in-session EAP teachers need to be attuned to the discourses of particular disciplines and have an understanding of the relevant academic literacies and the assessment practices and criteria according to which student performance will be evaluated (Curnow and Liddicoat 2008). This is another argument for decentralizing provision and locating English language teachers within faculties or individual departments, where they are best placed to:

- Build their discipline knowledge. The longer they work in a particular faculty/departmental context, the more familiar they will become with the expectations to which its students are subject and to its modus operandi. This, in turn, will allow them to shape their syllabi and pedagogy accordingly in ways that meet students' needs and departmental expectations and aspirations, thereby helping ensure relevance and thus engagement.
- Integrate into the local academic community and understand it better at a systemic level; that is to say, its structures, procedures, constraints, and the opportunities that exist as these relate to the development of students' language competence. Such understanding, in tandem with opportunities to develop productive working relationships with academic and professional staff in their respective faculties/departments, promotes English language teachers' capacity

to operate effectively and better influence and support both academic staff and students through personal contact, faculty and departmental committees, etc.

There may be another very important reason to align English language teachers to particular faculties/departments, and that has to do with the way in which academic literacy is taught to students; and here, one can identify a number of models that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I have argued elsewhere (Murray 2016) that because (a) every student needs to become conversant in the academic literacies pertinent to their discipline, and (b) such conversancy cannot be assumed of any students at point of entry to university, then relevant academic literacies need to be embedded in the curriculum in order to ensure that they are imparted to all students. Furthermore, as they constitute a fundamental part of the discipline and a key to membership of its community of practice, they should not be regarded as an optional extra, as added value and a bolt-on activity. They should, ideally, be taught within the curriculum by academic content staff, and to all students, both NS and NNS.

This, of course, will seem radical to many and brings with it some well-documented demands and challenges (Bohemia, Farrell, Power and Salter 2007; Murray and Nallaya 2014), not least of which is the need to adjust curricula so that they take account of this aspect of student learning and development. Then there is the question of the willingness of staff to engage in a professional development process that requires them to make explicit the implicit knowledge they possess and manifest continually during the course of their professional lives, and to develop themselves such that they are able to teach those practices to their students. What is clear is that, in this model, English language teachers aligned with faculties/departments and who have established good personal and professional relationships and developed trust and an understanding of their local context will be in a stronger position to collaborate with academic staff in these activities: for example, to help tease out the relevant literacies and model the teaching of them where necessary. Even with less demanding and controversial models of delivery, where academic literacies are taught outside the curriculum, English teachers—and, by extension, their students—still stand to benefit from these relationships and their being integrated into the local academic community. It promises to give them greater influence and an increased ability to be creative and to access resources directly relevant to students' needs.

Decentralizing provision in the manner proposed, does not preclude all English language teaching staff coming together periodically for the purpose of exchanging experiences and learning, as well as for other activities such as professional development. Indeed, these activities are crucial and help maintain a sense of collective identity, while also mitigating against any sense of professional isolation.

Enhancing the status of ELT in the institution

English language teachers working in higher education frequently feel undervalued by their 'mainstream' academic colleagues, and indeed senior management, and that their expertise goes largely unrecognized. This is, in part, due to the fact that the work of English language teachers does not, in most cases, feed into credit-bearing courses and is widely seen as a service or support activity that is incidental to the main work of the university rather than as part of its core business. There is also a quite common and misguided perception amongst 'mainstream' colleagues that the teaching of language is not a particularly skilled activity but rather one in which almost any native speaker of English is able to usefully engage.

To some extent, this impression of English language teachers and their work is a result of the fact that, historically, they have not always had the specialized teaching qualifications and experience one would wish; yet even today, where universities are far more particular in this regard, many teachers are neither required to, nor have, PhDs in Applied Linguistics or related fields and the majority are not expected to be research active. While a PhD certainly says nothing about one's ability to be a highly skilled and effective teacher, and although many English teachers are, in fact, research active, they are nevertheless frequently perceived as somehow not being bona fide members of the academic community proper and often feel like second-class citizens as a result; feelings accentuated by the fact that many are denied academic contracts which parallel those of 'mainstream' colleagues and the security of long-term employment.

While these longstanding attitudes and perceptions are, arguably, beginning to change somewhat as the higher education student body becomes more linguistically and culturally diverse, and the importance of effective English language provision is increasingly recognized as crucial to student success and therefore to institutional success (academic and financial) and reputation, they persist none the less. However, by

decentralizing provision and thereby providing the opportunity for English language teachers to become better integrated with faculties and departments, to work collaboratively with academic staff, and to establish stronger professional and personal relationships, there is increased likelihood that there will be engendered a greater understanding and appreciation of their work in terms of its value and the skill and experience underpinning it.

General proficiency versus academic literacy

Finally, as we have seen, decentralizing provision structurally reflects a recognition that language needs to be developed within the context of the discipline; that students' language needs differ to some degree, and that provision needs to be differentiated to reflect disciplinary variation in language use (Nesi and Gardner 2012). This raises the question of whether there is really such a thing as English for general academic purposes (EGAP). All academic English is necessarily contextualized—as indeed is all language—even if there may be certain features that are widely generalizable across disciplines. I have argued previously (Murray op.cit.), however, that it is possible to talk about 'general proficiency' and legitimately distinguish this from academic literacy. The idea, articulated above, that academic staff (and/or English language teachers) should teach students the academic literacies of their disciplines, assumes that students have a basic competence, a general proficiency, in English that enables them to understand and talk about what is being imparted, and this very idea implicitly acknowledges that there is something which differentiates general proficiency from academic literacy. That is, while all students require tuition in the academic literacies of their disciplines, some NNSs may also require tuition in general proficiency. Such tuition can be delivered in a manner that is consistent with the kind of localized model of provision I have discussed and which is based on the idea that students need to develop the language of their discipline. It is consistent to the extent that the teaching of general proficiency can be done in a way that points of language which are the focus of learning are taught within language contexts that again have relevance to students' degree subjects. Those contexts may be created by the teacher or taken from real texts sourced from scholarly books, articles, professional documents, etc. The advantage with this approach is not only that it appears more immediately relevant and thus motivating for students, but also provides an opportunity for them to gain further exposure to the language, content, literature, and referencing conventions of their discipline. So, to give a very simple

example, the present perfect tense might be illustrated to Philosophy or Law students by embedding it in a sentence such as “Turiel has described morality as “prescriptive judgements of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other” (1983, p. 3)’.

One interesting and quite complex question raised by the general proficiency-academic literacy distinction is how one describes the general proficiency of NS students, particularly in light of the fact that as a result of widening participation policies and initiatives, this cohort originates from increasingly diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds. While it would be inappropriate and misguided to question the general proficiency of NS students on the basis of their language manifesting dialects that do not necessarily align with the expectations and ‘standards’ subscribed to within academic and certain workplace/professional contexts, for many of those working within such contexts these expectations reflect a kind of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) that is seen as an indicator of students’ level of preparedness for degree study and of their ability to fully realize their academic potential. Consequently, it would seem incumbent on universities to provide language development opportunities that help all students to accrue the kind of capital needed to meet those expectations.

This, however, essentially amounts to adopting a pragmatic and short-term perspective on NS students’ dialectal variation when perhaps what is needed is a more general re-evaluation of traditional notions of correctness and acceptability as these relate specifically to the higher education environment (see, for example, Jenkins 2013). Today, the globalization and internationalization of higher education means that it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of English language norms, and the case for challenging conventional views of acceptability would appear to be gaining momentum. If, as seems to be the case, there is a move towards greater tolerance of the different varieties of English manifested by the growing numbers of NNSs populating EM universities worldwide, why should that tolerance not also extend to NS varieties? The critical question is how institutions square this with the obvious need to ensure that students’ language is fully comprehensible and sufficiently precise such that academic rigour is maintained.

Conclusion

The academic literacies approach diverges from the traditional and widespread study skills approach to academic writing in recognizing the need for a more nuanced approach to the in-session teaching of EAP in EM universities that reflects the specific language requirements and expectations of particular disciplines and the variation that exists between disciplines in respect of those requirements/expectations. The context-specific nature of the academic literacies approach provides a strong rationale for moving away from a centralized model of English language provision to a decentralized one associated with which there are a number of distinct benefits.

Firstly, it helps dissociate the development of language from the notion of deficit, with which NNSs are invariably linked, by emphasizing its relevance to all students, particularly so where academic literacies are embedded in the curriculum.

Secondly, it enables EAP teachers to understand the local context and its expectations and requirements around such things as assessment methods, and to become experts in the discourses of the disciplines of the departments and faculties with which they are aligned, and therefore to better serve students by developing syllabi and materials that are better informed, relevant, and thus engaging.

In addition, moving to a decentralized model assists EAP teachers to forge productive relationships with academic staff in the faculties/departments where they are located. This, in turn, helps them understand departmental priorities and student needs as well as influence policy and decision-making in the interests of increasing their effectiveness.

Furthermore, it provides a vehicle via which to highlight the value of what English language teachers do and the often considerable skill and experience underlying it. This has the potential to increase their influence within the institution and help improve their conditions of service, with possible implications for their level of commitment to what they do.

Finally, such a move can force the institution and those responsible for English language provision to reflect on the nature of English language proficiency and provision; in particular, if and how the needs of NSs and NNSs converge and diverge and how their respective needs can be met, how the appropriacy/acceptability of student language should be determined given the increasing diversity of the student body, and the basis

on which students are assessed pre-entry as part of the gatekeeping process, as well as post-entry in their coursework.

Together, these benefits suggest that where universities decentralize their English language provision in the manner I have described, this has the potential to herald significant change not only in EAP practices but in institutional attitudes and practices more generally, ultimately to the benefit of the entire student body.

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Note

1 Particularly within the context of the growth of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) globally (and not solely within countries where it is the first or dominant language), the increasing diversity of the student body in higher education and the growing recognition of the legitimacy of other varieties of English, the use of the terms 'native-speaker' (NS) and 'non-native speaker' (NNS) have become contentious for many. I use them here, however, because of their continued general use and for ease of reference.

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