

## THE GENERAL – SPECIFIC DEBATE IN EAP: WHICH CASE IS THE MOST CONVINCING FOR MOST CONTEXTS?

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### **Abstract**

This article is based on the presentation *Integrating reading and writing in EAP: Citation, Criticality, Creativity*, given at the 2012 Bilkent University biennial conference on EAP (English for Academic Purposes). The focus of the article is the EGAP / ESAP debate: respectively English for General, and Specific, Academic Purposes. This important distinction can be traced back to the 1990s and the work of EAP practitioners such as Jordan (1997). Through a critical review of the literature and a discussion of the key issues arising, illustrated by practical examples where appropriate, the article aims to demonstrate that for a number of pedagogical and practical reasons an EGAP rather than an ESAP approach is the most appropriate approach in most EAP contexts.

**This paper will also feature in our special edition of the proceedings for the 2012 Bilkent University biennial conference on EAP (English for Academic Purposes)**

**Key words:** English for General Academic Purposes; English for Specific Academic Purposes

### **Introduction**

This forum article is based on the presentation *Integrating reading and writing in EAP: Citation, Criticality, Creativity*, given in Ankara on June 8 2012 as part of the Bilkent University biennial conference on EAP (English for Academic Purposes). The presentation framed the more practical material by focusing first on a number of key theoretical distinctions and tensions in EAP. This article is limited to and expands upon the first such distinction of the presentation, namely the general versus specific argument. This refers to the emergence of two apparently polarized stances in the approach to EAP practice, EGAP and ESAP: respectively English for General, and Specific, Academic Purposes. The distinction may be traced back to the 1990s, when Jordan elaborated on the concepts of EGAP and ESAP to reflect the growing interest in greater specificity within the field of EAP (Jordan, 1997, p.141ff and p.228ff). This article expands on this distinction by scrutinizing and critiquing arguments for an ESAP approach in the literature, and proposes that for a

number of theoretical, practical, and pedagogical reasons, an EGAP approach is preferable in most EAP contexts.

Following Jordan's work, the EGAP / ESAP distinction started to be discussed in the literature, although not all EAP methodology books discuss it in great detail. In *EAP Essentials* Alexander, Argent and Spencer (2008) offer a brief overview of the general or specific EAP issue, which they include as one of four "contentious issues" identified in EAP practice (Alexander et al., 2008, p.25). They refer to the general nature of most EAP classes, and conclude by suggesting that "it is ultimately the students' responsibility to deal with subject specificity" (ibid., p.26). This crucial point about responsibility is revisited later in this article. *Uncovering EAP* (McCarter & Jakes, 2009) also discusses general EAP, bringing in specific contexts in the final chapter but in the context of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) rather than ESAP. The more theoretical *English for Academic Purposes: an advanced resource book* (Hyland, 2006) positions EGAP / ESAP as one of four key "conceptions and controversies" (the same four that are subsequently discussed by Alexander et al., 2008). These are first introduced in unit 1 then extended and explored later in the book. In the most recently published EAP methodology title, *Theory and concepts of English for Academic Purposes*, Bruce foregrounds the EGAP / ESAP distinction in the 'Defining EAP' section of his opening chapter (Bruce, 2011, p.4ff).

The EGAP / ESAP distinction has also been discussed periodically in the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. In 2005, for example, Bruce proposed a general, i.e. non-discipline specific, EAP writing course (Bruce, 2005). Gimenez (2008) examined discipline-specific writing in nursing and midwifery; his conclusions are touched on later in this article. In 2011 Liu, Chang, Yang, and Sun found discrepancies in student perceptions of their needs and wants in EGAP / ESAP contexts (Liu et al., 2011).

To turn to a practical and professional context, the UK-based EAP teachers' association BALEAP (the global forum for EAP professionals, formerly the British Association of Lecturers in EAP) dedicated their biennial conference of 2009 to 'English for Specific Academic Purposes'. This marked a major shift in the visibility of EGAP / ESAP, for the previous biennial conference of 2007 featured few papers explicitly on the topic, a rare exception being Northcott (2009). However, not all of the papers presented in the later 2009 conference directly engaged with the EGAP / ESAP debate. Of the three plenaries, one

(Nesi, 2011) mainly discussed reflective writing in the BAWE (British Academy of Written English) corpus, while the other two, Hyland (2011) and Feak (2011) investigated the conference theme in some depth. Their two arguments are of particular interest in the context of this paper.

In her plenary at the 2009 BALEAP conference, Feak (2011) took an ethnographic approach, tracing the journey of one of her students at the University of Michigan. This case illustrated the hazards faced by an overseas (Korean) student in a local (American) academic context. Foremost among these hazards, Feak maintains, are disciplinary differences, notably apparently conflicting advice from different but often closely-related disciplines such as Anthropology and Sociology. Feak's conclusion, however, is not to separate students into supposedly homogeneous discipline-specific classes. Conversely, she stresses the increasing trend towards interdisciplinarity (Feak, 2011, pp. 35-37), noting that students in universities such as Michigan are increasingly required to take courses in more than one discipline. Meanwhile, "the lines between disciplines are increasingly blurred" (Feak, 2011, p.35), and research in many fields, for example medicine, is increasingly interdisciplinary. Feak concludes that her Korean student herself needs to navigate her way through the different disciplines she is working in, work out their conventions and expectations, and find her own voice. Amid this process, EAP teachers need to "rely on our students to serve as our informants" (ibid., p.42). Most importantly, the model at Michigan is to offer postgraduate level writing courses which are open to students from all disciplines, "from the hard sciences to the humanities, thus allowing for the raising of interdisciplinary awareness" (ibid., p.43). Feak's argument, then, is for an interdisciplinary rather than a discipline-specific approach. In promoting this model, Feak makes the following observation:

Advanced academic literacy courses [...] should not put us in the position of acting as substitutes or surrogates for content advisors; that is not our role to play. Such classes may perhaps require us to relinquish the idea that we must know in advance what our students need, and that we need to have the disciplinary content expertise before we can offer courses that achieve the level of specificity that fills the gaps in students' understanding of academic discourse. (Feak, 2011, p.42 – 43).

This intriguing observation implicitly questions the long-held assumption that, in common with other ESP contexts, EAP is needs-driven (e.g. Bruce, 2011, p.118). Feak is instead

proposing that the role of the EAP teacher in postgraduate writing classes is to facilitate their students' understanding of discipline-specific knowledge, in a process led by the student, and to do this in a non-preconceived way through mixed discipline classes.

We turn now to the other 2009 BALEAP conference plenary paper which discussed discipline-specific EAP teaching, that of Hyland (2011). Hyland illustrates the notion of specificity in broad terms before offering counter-arguments to an EGAP approach. However, Hyland's observations on specificity, of themselves, do not appear to provide logical support for his pro-ESAP stance. He starts by reporting corpus research, by Biber (1988) and Halliday (1989), which show certain features, such as nominalization, to be more associated with written versus spoken texts (Hyland, 2011, p.13). This phenomenon is now well-established, with mounting corpus-based evidence for differences in written, especially written academic, texts compared with spoken texts (e.g. Biber, 2006; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan, 1999; and Carter and McCarthy, 2006). The existence of distinct linguistic features in academic genres, notwithstanding the differences between disciplines within the academy, would seem to support an argument for a general approach: whether there is a greater degree of nominalization in one discipline versus another is less an argument for somehow reflecting this difference in specific subject materials (ESAP) than an argument for a principled academic approach for students of any discipline (EGAP).

Hyland goes on to state that students in different disciplines are required to write different kinds of texts (Hyland, 2011, p.13), citing research by Gimenez (2008, in Hyland, 2011) which shows that "even students in cognate fields, such as nursing and midwifery, are given very different writing assignments". Gimenez' research comes across as highly credible, for writing tasks can vary across contexts, including different cultures, disciplines, institutions, and departments. If students in cognate fields do not necessarily do the same tasks and assignments, this is scant comfort for the ESAP practitioner, who can rarely hope to teach a homogeneous class of, for example nurses alone who have similar, identifiable, and specific needs.

Hyland's next point on specificity relates to culture, and in particular how a student's educational background and first language can influence their academic writing in English. An example of such influence could be the notion of writer-responsible and reader-responsible cultures, first proposed by Hinds (1987, p.143) and discussed elsewhere by

Hyland (2003, p.47 – 48): in writer-responsible cultures the writer is primarily responsible for the effectiveness of the communication, while in reader-responsible cultures such as Japanese this responsibility rests with the reader (Hinds, 1987, p.143 in Hyland, 2003, p.47 – 48). This influence of culture on writing is an interesting observation, but again does not obviously support an ESAP approach: a student's culture and background represent their origin and current identity rather than their future, in other words the academic culture they are aiming to be part of. It is a student's future destination that has traditionally been the main driver of ESP and EAP approaches. Furthermore, there is no convincing pedagogy for grouping together students from similar cultural backgrounds, either in EAP or more widely within ELT (English Language Teaching). ELT comfortably accommodates students from diverse backgrounds and works with differences towards common objectives. Indeed, in activities such as real information gaps and discussions, differences are characteristically utilized to serve communicative needs.

Research into genre is the topic of Hyland's final point on specificity. Citing mainly his own work (Hyland 2004, Hyland 2008, Hyland & Bondi 2006, in Hyland, 2011, p.14), Hyland illustrates variations between research articles and university textbooks. These differences are mainly linguistic, with some conventional differences related to citation. In short, research articles are reported to have: about double the number of hedges, defined as "devices like *possible, might, likely* and so on" (Hyland, 2011, p.18); double the instances of self-mention, i.e. *I* and *we*; triple the number of citations; and half the number of transitions, i.e. "conjunctions and other linking signals" (Hyland, 2011, p.14). These differences are unsurprising and fairly satisfactorily explained (*ibid.*), but once again they do not provide evidence in support of an ESAP approach. By implication, an ESAP approach should take account of disciplinary differences in its materials, yet it is hard to see how such materials can deal with differing *amounts* of, say, hedging, when most genres contain some hedging. Indeed, the differences in features like hedging between research articles and university textbooks misses the point about disciplinary differences, since students of any discipline are likely to read both university textbooks and research articles. In short, on an EAP programme, students need to learn about hedging, regardless of their discipline, and this learning can take place through general EAP materials.

The arguments for ESAP remain open to wider critical scrutiny. Bruce, for instance, questions the basis on which the work of Hyland supports the notion of an ESAP approach:

Hyland's studies show that academic texts from different subject areas differ in the use of these linguistic or citational features [e.g. hedges, use of *I* and *we*]. However, the strength of his argument for specificity rests on the extent to which these researched features of academic texts, of themselves, can be said to operationalize the wider phenomenon of academic subject discourses realized in texts. While the range of elements investigated in such studies is probably too small to achieve this operationalization, this research, nevertheless, appears to provide partial evidence for the case for disciplinary specificity. (Bruce, 2011, p.6)

Bruce, then, appears rather sceptical of Hyland's claim that quantitative variations in instances of certain language items and citation naturally lead to the conclusion that disciplinary differences strongly support a discipline-specific (ESAP) approach.

Much of Hyland's argument for an ESAP approach relies on diminishing what he presents as arguments for an EGAP approach. His language is curiously dismissive of EGAP proponents, who, after all, represent the majority of EAP teachers in most contexts:

The importance of disciplinary specificity in academic literacy education is not new: Peter Strevens highlighted it as a defining feature of ESP in the early 1980s, for example, but there are still voices who deny the value of this kind of instruction, and instead argue for the teaching of general academic skills.

(Hyland, 2011, p.14)

By positioning Strevens' work as the accepted orthodox position on the matter, Hyland seeks to portray others as being on the wrong side of the argument, merely "voices" who "still...deny the value" of his favoured ESAP approach. Such practitioners are dismissed for teaching "general academic skills". Hyland's choice of language suggests that there is a qualitative difference in the approaches of the two camps of EAP practitioners, with "general" EAP seen as inferior. Using the examples from "many EAP textbooks" of "academic writing and oral presentations", Hyland argues that teaching skills like these suggests a similarity in all courses (Hyland, 2011, p.14 – 15).

Further arguments are given. In reporting Spack's view (Spack 1988, in Hyland, 2011, p.14) that EAP teachers "lack the training, expertise and confidence to teach subject-specific conventions" and that this task is best left to subject teachers, Hyland ignores the compelling solution that the responsibility for learning about subject-specific conventions are neither EAP teachers nor subject teachers but students themselves. It is not clear why Hyland does not mention this solution, but his assumption seems to be that it is primarily the job of EAP teachers to research and teach subject-specific language and conventions to their students. In contrast, the view that students are primarily responsible for learning subject-specific conventions reflects a student-centred approach.

Gifting the primary responsibility for investigating discipline-specific conventions to the student has been suggested elsewhere, including by Alexander et al. (2008, p.26) and Feak (2011), as we have seen. As a solution this responsibility shift is so compelling that it is worth investigating the reasons for it.

One reason in support of the student as chief investigator in their discipline is suggested by the work of BALEAP. In their influential Competency Framework for Teachers of English for Academic Purposes (2008), they spell out eleven key areas for EAP teachers to aim at. In the second competence, the EAP teacher "will be able to recognize and explore disciplinary differences and how they influence the way knowledge is expanded and communicated", which may be indicated by the ability to "guide students to investigate the genres and expert practitioners of their specific discourse communities" (BALEAP, 2008). EAP teachers, then, are expected to show an awareness of differences between academic disciplines, and "guide" their students towards greater investigation themselves. Crucially, the framework does not expect teachers to have a comprehensive and detailed knowledge of every, or any, discipline; rather, their role is cast as facilitator and guide. They are expected to "raise students' awareness" and "train students to investigate" such things as discipline-specific discourse features and the use of citation. This description strongly suggests that the ultimate responsibility for acquiring greater familiarity with a specific discipline rests with the student rather than their teacher.

This stance makes excellent practical sense. In practice, there are so many disciplines that it is absolutely unrealistic for EAP teachers to gain a working knowledge of how they all operate academically and culturally. Major research universities can have 50 or more

departments offering hundreds of different courses. An EAP teacher's discipline-specific knowledge at such institutions is likely to be patchy. One teacher may teach 50 or more pre-sessional students per academic year, and these may be of any discipline. On the majority of EAP courses, such as pre-sessional courses, it may not be logistically or economically feasible to group students of the same discipline together, although some providers are able to do this. For some supposedly well-defined disciplines such as Law and Medicine discipline-specific classes may be an attractive option, yet in reality there is likely to be a long 'tail' of subjects with ever-diminishing class sizes. Even disciplines which are often spoken of as being closely related can be surprisingly numerous and distinct, for example business, management, finance, economics, accountancy, logistics, public administration, business law, and others.

A very recent emerging trend in the UK, in the tradition of the 'liberal arts' education of many North American universities which in itself can be traced back to the Renaissance in Europe, is that of an interdisciplinary, inter-faculty degree. An example of this is the BASc degree (Bachelor of Arts and Sciences), launched at UCL (University College London) in 2012, which aims to "prepare students for further research or professional work in a wide range of sectors which require interdisciplinary or broader thinking than more traditional discipline-based degrees allow" (Gombrich, personal communication, October 23, 2012). Given that students on courses such as this build their own degree programmes by taking courses across faculties including arts, humanities, sciences, engineering and medicine, as well as a compulsory language, they can by definition only be taught using an EGAP approach which fosters individual investigation of disciplinary differences.

In contrast with this trend towards interdisciplinarity, there is a trend towards greater specificity. Many courses, at undergraduate as well as postgraduate level, are on the face of it extremely specialized. The following MSc at City University London is an instance of such specificity: Analysis and design of structures for fire, blast and earthquakes. This programme is for "engineering graduates who wish to gain specialist knowledge in the behaviour of structures when subjected to such loading" (City University, 2012). Two points may be made here. First, there is little practical likelihood of assembling a class comprised solely of students on this course. Second, it is arguably preferable for students on this course to be taught EAP alongside students of other disciplines, for example: other engineers (for discussion and comparison); psychology (how do people behave when trapped in buildings



under stress?); law (what are the health and safety implications of designing these structures?); geography (how do natural and manmade threats to structures vary in different parts of the world?); business (what are the business cases of building such structures?); finance (what is the trade-off between building for maximum safety versus building for value?); politics (what are the prevailing political agendas in different territories?). These questions indicate the potential for fruitful exchange in an interdisciplinary – EGAP – context. Ultimately, all disciplines can arguably be shown to be connected. For instance, a student of fine art arguably needs an understanding of measurement and perspective (mathematics), compounds and properties of paint and other materials (chemistry), movements in art and culture (history), presenting and marketing their work (business), and other concepts and disciplines. Paradoxically, with increasing specialization the need for interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange is enhanced.

To illustrate this disciplinary connectivity, I propose to offer an example drawn from my own experience as an EAP teacher. In one attempt at dividing students into distinct disciplines, at UCL Language Centre (now the UCL Centre for Languages & International Education), the EAP class of Medicine students turned out to have a striking lack of homogeneity. This class had one student each studying: molecular medicine, pharmacy, sports science, pet psychology, dentistry, cardiology, clinical research, genetics, immunology, psychology, business / management, and biomedical engineering. As the teacher of this class, I questioned why some students were there; I was told that the business and management student wanted to specialize in care homes for geriatrics. I could not have predicted this range of disciplines, nor could I easily have prepared discipline-specific materials to satisfy all their needs, which were surprisingly diverse. Similarly diverse were the students' starting levels, both linguistically and cognitively. Paradoxically, this class division into one discipline or faculty, medicine, resulted in as wide a difference as any more 'general' EAP class. Given the students' expectation of a discipline-specific approach, the job of the teacher was that much more challenging.

My approach from the outset was to shift the responsibility for investigating their disciplines explicitly onto the student. From any given student's perspective, my role as their EAP teacher was that of educated non-expert. In effect all the other students had a similar role, which allowed excellent opportunities for genuine communication. Students collaborated with other students on specific projects, notably the research and preparation of a poster

presentation on an aspect of aging. For the EAP teacher to attempt to take on the role of discipline expert, as an ESAP approach would suggest, in this situation would have been insurmountably challenging and ultimately futile.

These discussions point towards an EGAP rather than an ESAP approach. To take the ESAP argument to its logical end might result in EAP classes each of one student. Essentially, the argument boils down to whether similarities or differences are seen to predominate. Where differences are identified, it needs to be established whether they are relatively superficial differences, such as those related to topic, or deeper ones, such as differences in text organization. Hyland (2006, p.12) offers a passionate proposal for an ESAP approach, drawing on the following arguments.

We can dispute the view that teaching specialist discourses relegates EAP to the bottom of the academic ladder. In fact the opposite is true. The notion of a common core assumes there is a single overarching literacy and that the language used in university study is only slightly different from that found in the home and school. From this perspective, then, academic literacy can be taught to students as a set of discrete, value-free rules and technical skills usable in any situation and taught by relatively unskilled staff in special units isolated from the teaching of disciplinary competences. It therefore implies that students' difficulties with 'academic English' are simply a deficit of literacy skills created by poor schooling or lazy students which can be rectified in a few English classes. EAP then becomes a Band-aid measure to fix up deficiencies. In contrast, an ESAP view recognizes the complexities of engaging in the specific literacies of the disciplines and the specialized professional competences of those who understand and teach those literacies. (Hyland, 2006, p.12)

These arguments for an ESAP approach invite a critical response. They rest on a number of assumptions. Informed by the discussion of the literature in this article together with my personal experience, in the remaining part of this article I identify, enumerate, and briefly critique these assumptions.

One, it is assumed that when students start learning English for Academic Purposes, they know what they want to study, and stick with their choice. In reality, this is often not the case. Two, an ESAP approach assumes that students are planning to study, or are studying,

within a single discipline. Again this is often not the case, as we have seen. Three, effective ESAP instruction rests on the ability of institutions to offer discipline-specific classes for the given cohort of EAP students. Yet given the large range of options available in institutions, it is frequently impractical to do so. Four, EAP teachers need to have an in-depth knowledge of the discourse and academic practices of the specific discipline, or disciplines, of their students. While EAP teachers can gradually acquire such knowledge, the time taken and the number of disciplines, variation among and within them in the context of constant development, means that it is typically not feasible to assume this.

Five, the ESAP arguments assume that specific academic content, such as discipline-specific academic conventions, language, and disciplinary practices, should be prioritized over common core, or generic, content. However, these arguments ignore the difficulties in establishing and describing this specific content, as well as the tendency for it to vary both within similar disciplines and over time. Six, the ESAP assumption seems to be that it is primarily the job of the EAP teacher, before the student, to work towards discipline familiarity. In a learner-centred approach it would be customary and desirable to shift this responsibility onto the student. Seven, in promoting a defined-discipline ESAP approach the advantages of the converse are downplayed. Notably these include the benefits gained by an interdisciplinary approach where students' perceptions of their own disciplines and their construction of meaning within them can be usefully informed and shaped by their peers from other disciplines in a communicative context. Eight, a discipline-specific ESAP approach assumes that disciplines can be isolated and independently described. Far from this being the case, as we have seen, all disciplines are ultimately and demonstrably connected, and to take the ESAP argument to its logical conclusion could result in a case of *reductio ad absurdum* where there are almost as many different discipline combinations as there are students.

Finally, there is an implication for materials. Preparing high-quality EAP materials for a specific context requires expertise, resources, and time, so there are compelling reasons to use published materials to meet some of the student needs. Any commercially produced ESAP coursebook is likely to be limited in scope, as it has to meet the needs of a specific discipline, such as law, in a wide range of academic contexts. This limitation will result in gaps in its coverage of certain knowledge, language, and skills, which would need to be met by other materials.

In short, the contexts in which ESAP is most likely to thrive are those with sufficient numbers of students in single or cognate disciplines to form viable classes led by EAP practitioners with the time and resources to convincingly investigate these disciplines. In-session courses are most likely to provide these conditions, although frequently there is a low student to discipline ratio: in other words there are, say, fifty students representing a dozen disciplines – rather than a dozen (or viable class size number of) students per discipline. Pedagogical niceties notwithstanding, non-viable class sizes mean a *de facto* EGAP approach. Pre-session courses, together with most foundation, preparatory, and lower-level courses are likely to work best following an EGAP approach.

To conclude, I have surveyed the recent literature on English for General and Specific Academic Purposes; while robust arguments have been made for both sides, the arguments in favour of an EGAP approach, and those against an ESAP approach, seem particularly compelling. Arguably, the most appropriate starting point for most EAP courses is a common-core EGAP approach which can set students up with the language and cognitive skills to thrive in their disciplines. The next stage of this discussion, I suggest, should move towards EAP as it is practised in different contexts. Research into evaluating the success of both EGAP and ESAP approaches in practice is sparse, and if undertaken and published, would be enormously beneficial in progressing this debate.

### **Biodata**

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