# TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING IN AN EAP COURSE: LECTURERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EGAP AND ESAP APPROACHES

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## ABSTRACT

The field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has seen English for General Academic Purposes or EGAP as a popular approach adopted by many practitioners (Basturkmen, 2006). It has been regarded as a model that helps EAP practitioners in their course, particularly in managing their students and preparing the course materials. In this model, EAP courses are not designed to cater to one specific discipline but are built around a general approach that is concerned with a common core of universal skills or language forms which can cater to various disciplines in an institution (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). However, some claim that EAP is not about improving generic language abilities but it should be helping students to develop communicative skills in specific academic and professional settings. They highlighted the notion of specificity as a key issue in EAP (Hyland, 2006) and have argued for the use of English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) as a better approach than EGAP. This argument has led this study to investigate the perceptions of lecturers who teach an EAP course that adopts the EGAP model in teaching academic writing. Fifteen lecturers from a language centre in a Malaysian public university were selected using the purposive sampling. The aim was to find out their views of the EGAP approach as well as ESAP. Interviews were done and the data were qualitatively analysed using the thematic analysis. Initial findings revealed their limited knowledge of EGAP and ESAP. There were also mixed responses regarding the effectiveness between the two approaches. Finally, it is proposed that the EAP course should integrate both EGAP and ESAP approaches to improve the academic writing course.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of specificity has always been a key issue in EAP (Hyland, 2006). Discussions on this issue are usually related to the two approaches in EAP - 'English for General Academic Purposes' (EGAP) and 'English for Specific Purposes' (ESAP). EGAP and ESAP has been a topic of discussion by practitioners who have been arguing for the best approach to teach EAP (e.g., Basturkmen, 2003, 2006; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Hyland, 2006; Jordan, 1997; Spack, 1988; Widdowson, 1983).

The EGAP approach focuses on the teaching of the language skills that are common to all disciplines" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). It is based on an idea that EAP should not be seen as a course to fulfill specific purposes (Widdowson, 1983); it is an approach to language teaching in which the learning process should not differ from general English (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Jordan (1997) states that by having EGAP, students are able to see the relationship between language skills and can utilise them in their studies and projects. However, he also points out the disadvantages of it, that tutors will have limited choice and control of materials and methods, and that students may not need all the skills. He describes EGAP by giving six main study skills areas deemed important in an EGAP approach. They are: academic reading and writing; vocabulary development; lectures and note taking; speaking for academic purposes; reference or research skills; and examination skills. Overall, the main idea behind an EGAP approach is that EAP courses should not be designed to cater to one specific discipline, but should be built around a general approach that is concerned with a common core of universal skills or language forms which can cater to various disciplines in an institution (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002).

On the other hand, ESAP is a view that is concerned more with the needs of particular groups in academic contexts; in other words, ESAP implements disciplinary specificity in an EAP course (Hyland, 2013b). Disciplinary specificity in EAP refers to "the teaching of the features that distinguish one discipline from others" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p.41). Examples of ESAP course are English for Business or English for Nursing. Hyland (2002) asserts that EAP must involve teaching literacy skills suitable to the purposes and understandings of particular academic communities. In this view, it is important to note that students' disciplinary activities are an essential part of their engagement in their disciplines. One of his main arguments against EGAP concerns the notion of the common core hypothesis – transferable general skills and forms across contexts and purposes. Hyland claims that the main problem lies in defining what a common core is. Although some topics like 'business writing' and 'persuasive language' as well as features of academic writing like 'explicitness' can be categorised as a common core, he argues that they are "only 'core' in a very general sense and give the misleading impression of uniform disciplinary practices" (p. 389). He further explains that these core features are insufficient for students to understand disciplinary conventions or develop academic writing skills.

Basturkmen (2003) uses the terms 'wide-angle' and 'narrow-angle' introduced by Widdowson (1983) to reflect her notion of EGAP and ESAP respectively. According to Widdowson, wide angle courses are similar to English for general purposes courses that provide learners with "a general capacity to enable them to cope with undefined eventualities in the future" (p. 6), while narrow angle courses provide learners with "a restricted competence to enable them to cope with clearly defined tasks" (p. 6). Basturkmen argues that although narrow-angled course designs can be theoretically attractive, they are impractical in terms of preparation time and can cause students to have insufficient experience of language if they end up not being in the group for which the courses are intended. Furthermore, Basturkmen (2006) questions the existence of 'specific elements' in ESP. She introduces the idea of 'specifiable elements' which are more critical for ESP learners but are not exclusive to certain disciplines. Moreover, some other issues raised by Jordan (1997) with regard to ESAP are students' inadequacy in the specialist subject and tutors' teaching ineffectiveness in the specialist subject. He explains that some students may have difficulties coping with the subjects in the disciplines even before coping with the language of the subjects. The EAP tutors may also not be able to cope with the technicality of the specialist subjects and this in turn may affect their teaching.

Nevertheless, Hyland (2013a & 2013b), although admitting that the notion of specificity remains controversial and may be logistically challenging and not cost effective, claims that EAP is not about improving generic language ability, but helping students to develop communicative skills in specific academic and professional settings. Perhaps one way to solve this is by integrating both approaches, as suggested by Dan (2019) who believes that ESAP can be designed as a bridge course for the EGAP and subject teaching. Even though there are issues with the practicality of ESAP, it should not be made as a reason to undermine the benefits that it can give to students with specific language needs for their academic purposes. This can be deemed reasonable as research has shown that both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages (Deng, 2022).

**THE STUDY**

This study is part of a case study that investigated EAP students' academic writing at a language centre in a public university in Malaysia. This university requires its undergraduate students to take an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course which is offered by the language centre as one of the university required courses. Although the students are from various faculties and different disciplines, the lecturers are given the same course outline with the same topics and assessment in teaching all the students. Therefore, the EAP course can be categorized as an EGAP course. Nevertheless, from discussions with some of the lecturers, not all of them have a clear understanding of EGAP and ESAP. In fact some seem to not have any knowledge at all about the existence of the two approaches. On the other hand, this may not be a surprise as these lecturers come from the English language studies background and have not been exposed much to ESP. Hence, this study is to explore their perceptions of EGAP and ESAP approaches in ESP in teaching academic writing.

**METHODOLOGY**

The research employed the qualitative approach in collecting and analysing the data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted due to its suitability for situations where the interviewer is familiar of the phenomenon being investigated. The interviewer can ask broad questions about the topic instead of ready-made response categories "that would limit the depth and breadth of the respondent's story" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136). A semi-structured interview has an open-ended format where the interviewer's role is to guide the interviewee for responses and prompt them for elaboration on certain topics (Dörnyei, 2007). In addition, the interviewee also has the flexibility in how to reply to the questions (Bryman, 2012).

Using purposive sampling, data were collected from the interviews with 15 EAP instructors. Each interview took between 20 minutes to half an hour. Table 1 summarises the participants according to their levels of experience. Each participant is labelled as IEAP which stands for (Instructor of EAP) followed by a number to identify them.

**Table 1: Interview Participants**

| No | Lecturer/code | Gender | Qualification | Level of Experience | |
|----|---------------|--------|---------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | IEAP4 | Male | First degree | 1.5 years | |
| 2 | IEAP15 | Female | First degree | 2 years | Some experience |
| 3 | IEAP8 | Female | First degree | 3 years | |
| 4 | IEAP7 | Male | First degree | 4 years | |
| 5 | IEAP9 | Female | First degree | 4 years | |
| 6 | IEAP13 | Female | Master's degree | 4 years | |
| 7 | IEAP14 | Female | Master's degree | 4 years | Experienced |
| 8 | IEAP1 | Female | First degree | 5 years | |
| 9 | IEAP10 | Female | First degree | 8 years | |
| 10 | IEAP11 | Female | Master's degree | 10 years | |
| 11 | IEAP2 | Female | Master's degree | More than 10 years | |
| 12 | IEAP12 | Female | Master's degree | 12 years | |
| 13 | IEAP5 | Female | Master's degree | 13 years | Experts |
| 14 | IEAP6 | Female | First degree | More than 15 years | |
| 15 | IEAP3 | Female | Master's degree | 16 years | |

It can be seen from Table 1 that there was almost a balanced number of participants based on their levels of experience. Three instructors who have been teaching EAP for three years or less were categorised as having 'some experience'. One lecturer had three years of experience, one had two years of experience, and one had only taught EAP for one and a half years. Additionally, six instructors were categorised as 'experienced'. Four of them had been teaching EAP for four years, one had five years of experience and one had eight years of experience. The last category was the most experienced ones, referred to as 'experts' in teaching EAP.

The method used in coding the interview data was thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2012). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). The analysis involved transcribing, coding and assigning themes to the data.

Validity and reliability are two important things that need to be considered when using questionnaires. In qualitative research, validity and reliability can be achieved by conducting member checking (Brown, 2001; Creswell, 2014). This is done by letting the participants verify the accuracy of the data and the researcher's interpretations of the data. With regard to this study, member checking was done with the participants by discussing the interview data with them.

**FINDINGS**

The findings will be presented and discussed to answer the research question, which is:

What are the EAP instructors' perceptions of the EAP course in the context of EGAP and ESAP?
During the interviews, EAP instructors were asked about their awareness of two approaches in EAP course design – English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). The knowledge of these two approaches is deemed important for teachers of EAP, as it has been discussed by many EAP practitioners in relation to EAP course design and best approaches (e.g., Basturkmen, 2003 & 2006; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Jordan, 1997; Hyland, 2006; Spack, 1988; Widdowson, 1983). Initial responses from all the EAP instructors revealed that none of them knew about the two approaches at all. However, after some explanations of the meanings and differences between the two, the participants had an understanding of what they were. It was not difficult to explain to them as they were quite familiar with the concept of general approaches and specific approaches to academic writing.

After the instructors agreed that they understood what EGAP and ESAP were, they were asked which approach the EAP course was associated with. Their responses were categorised as either EGAP or ESAP. Initially, the analysis showed that more than half of EAP instructors perceived the course as using EGAP as its approach, where 10 out of 15 instructors provided responses which were congruent with the notion that course is an EGAP course. The rest of the instructors provided answers which reflected misunderstandings of the approach used by the course.

Out of the 10 EAP instructors who perceived the EAP course as an EGAP course, five of them believed that course should be changed to use ESAP in its approach. Each one of them had a different reason as to why they thought so. The instructors' reasons are due to: 1. the faculty's needs; 2. the students' disciplinary specificity needs; and 3. the students' future career needs.

One of them asserted that the ESAP approach would cater to different faculties. After describing EAP as an EGAP course, she continued,

"… it can be improved to ESAP so that, you know, we can sort of cater to different kulliyyah. That would be nice" (IEAP11).

Another instructor believed that ESAP would help students according to disciplines. She said,

"Yea ESAP. I mean if we really want to help the students according to their disciplines, we should go for the formal... that kind of English" (IEAP2).

Moreover, another instructor was looking further ahead at students' future career in giving her reason why the EAP course should use the ESAP approach. She said,

"Because in that way, the... they can learn languages that can be very useful for their future career purpose later" (IEAP8).

These three instructors are among the five participants who believed that the current EGAP-based EAP should be changed to use ESAP in its approach.

On the other hand, out of 10 EAP instructors who perceived EAP as an EGAP course, only two were of the view that the course should remain as it is. Their reasons are: 1. the opportunities for students to learn from other disciplines; and 2. the standardisation of the course. One of them said that,

"… for the past three semesters, I've been having a classroom of mixed kulliyyahs. So, I could see how these ENGIN students learn from the humanistic students. And, yea... and they also are interested to do something else like, other than... topic related to their kulliyyah. For example, one student from ENGIN, he did a study on the community - no interaction

between international and local students, because he has always been questioning the interaction between the international and local students. So, he did the study on that. He did a research on that. He wrote, he read articles on local and international students' interactions. And then he made, he wrote a very good paper". (IEAP13).

In addition, when another instructor was asked why she believed EAP should remain as an EGAP course, she responded,

"It's better to standardise it" (IEAP14).

Even though not representing the majority of the participants, these are what these two instructors thought that led them to believe, that EAP should be maintained as an EGAP-based course.

In conclusion, the themes revealed mixed feelings among the instructors about the approach that the EAP course should adopt. Even though initially they were not familiar with the concepts of EGAP and ESAP, they were able to compare the context of EAP with EGAP and ESAP once they were given an explanation about the two approaches. Generally, most instructors believed that the EAP Course is an EGAP-based course but should be changed to be based on the ESAP approach.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the interviews revealed that most of the EAP instructors' perceptions matched the course description of being an EGAP-based course, which is the mainstream approach in most EAP courses. Firstly, most EAP instructors viewed the EAP course as an EGAP course. This is not surprising as the nature of the course fulfills the criteria of an EGAP model. In fact, the course outline itself specifically refers to the transferable skills in the EAP course as part of its content (see Table 2) – reflecting the characteristics of an EGAP model which most EAP courses are based on (Hyland, 2002, 2006). Table 2 shows an excerpt of the course outline which states the inclusion of specific transferable skills in the EAP course: practical skills and critical thinking skills.

**Table 2: Transferable Skills in the EAP Course Outline**

| 19 | **Transferable Skills:** *Skills and how they are developed and assessed. Project and practical experience and internship* | **Skills** *(corresponding to LOs)* | **Skill development techniques** | **Assessment method** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Practical skills | Presentations, library skill, writing skills | Formative and summative |
| | | Critical thinking skills | Critical reading skills | Formative and summative |

It is important to note that during the interviews, none of the EAP instructors were aware of the term EGAP, although EGAP has become a popular approach in EAP (Basturkmen, 2006). This may also be due to the fact that most of their academic backgrounds are related to English language studies or Teaching English as Second Language. However, they were able to relate to its meaning once the explanation was given. Despite not knowing the term, the instructors were used to the idea of transferable skills as stated in the course outline. This suggests that the instructors' perceptions of what a language course entails may have been shaped by the concept of EGAP, at least subconsciously. The instructors were mainly exposed to the pedagogy which reflected an EGAP approach: teaching language skills common to all disciplines; showing the relationships between the skills; and transferring the general skills across contexts and purposes (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Jordan, 1997; Hyland, 2002), even though the concepts were not introduced to them as EGAP. The EAP course sits well with every feature of wide-angle EGAP. The use of one set of general skills, such as research writing skills in EAP, is a trait of 'wide-angle' EAP courses with a concept similar to English for general purposes courses (Basturkmen, 2006; Widdowson, 1983).

On a different note, the EGAP approach can be associated with the study skills model of student writing, which looks at specific study skills and more general types of skills, like strategies that students need to transfer to the contexts of their studies (Hyland, 2006; Lea & Street, 1998). The research skills applied in academic writing in the EAP course can also be regarded as part of study skills (Jordan, 1997). The study skills approach was established to accommodate student

writing. Study skills such as organising, synthesising and using information can contribute to academic competence in academic settings (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002). In the context of EAP, the nature of the course is to accommodate the students to the writing competency required by their faculties.

In addition, EGAP approach can also be associated with the pragmatic perspective of EAP. Pragmatism is the mainstream approach in EAP, applied linguistics and L2 writing (Canagarajah, 2002; Santos, 2001). Santos asserts that by taking the pragmatic stance, the pedagogic approach to writing especially in EAP should focus on preparing students to write their assignments. She believes that the focus of language learning in EAP should be kept on the language skills without allowing the students to decide how the learning should cater to their academic needs. Canagarajah (2002) asserts that in this approach, the practitioners should have a normative attitude to knowledge, which means that they should encourage students to accept academic knowledge out of their own interests and experiences. The pragmatic approach is to satisfy the faculty expectations; questioning among the practioners as well as the students is not encouraged.

Relating this to the findings of this study, it appears that although the lecturers have not been well exposed to EGAP and ESAP, many are ready to venture into learning and using ESAP approach in their teaching. This is something that should be addressed by the faculty to ensure that the EAP course meets its objective to fulfill the students' academic needs.

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it was revealed that the EGAP-based approaches and the study skills model that have been embedded in the EAP course may have influenced the EAP instructors in making their comments about the course. Their explanations about the teaching approaches in EAP were all related to the notions of general skills needed by the students to meet the faculty requirements, and their roles as the provider. In all interviews, none of them shared views reflecting the notions in ESAP such as disciplinary specificity or specialism. Working closely with subject specialists, a practice in ESAP, was also not seen as an option by any of the instructors. It shows that academic writing at the language centre in this study is only associated with the EGAP and the study skills model of student writing. Additionally, there was also no indication of the notions of the academic socialisation and academic literacies models being applied in the course, even by the senior instructors. For example, ideas to induct students into the culture of the faculty, the use of genres in teaching (academic socialisation) and power relations in discourse practices (academic literacies) were never mentioned or suggested. This limited perspective calls for a new orientation to expand the course to encompass other perspectives, at least as far as academic writing is concerned.

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