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Some key terms in ELT and why we need to disambiguate them

Neil Murray and Amanda Muller

Variation in the use of terminology in the field of ELT can make dialogue difficult, if not impossible, with significant implications for sharing knowledge, structuring language provision, and, ultimately, teaching practices. Furthermore, it has the potential to influence negatively the perceptions of stakeholders both within and outside of the field, for it can convey a sense of disparateness and disunity which can seriously undermine the ability of ELT professionals to appear credible, to influence, and to pursue their work effectively. This is particularly true of terminology closely associated with the teaching of English within tertiary settings. This article looks at six terms, differentiating them and reflecting on their scope and areas of overlap.

Introduction

In this article, we seek to differentiate six concepts that come into a natural juxtaposition in the tertiary education sector. These concepts are: general English, English for general academic purposes, English for specific academic purposes, academic literacies, study skills, and professional communication skills. Through our own work on English language policy and provision in Australian universities (e.g. Murray, 2016; Murray & Muller, 2018) — in response to new government regulation in respect of English language standards in tertiary institutions — it quickly became evident that efforts to bring about institutional change were often thwarted by the fact of different key stakeholder groups either misunderstanding or having little shared understanding of what these concepts refer to. This was true of both EAP practitioners as well as Deans of Teaching and Learning, senior management, programme directors and academic content lecturers from whom buy-in was essential to success. For example, efforts to embed academic literacies in the curriculum revealed confusion as to what academic literacy was and how it was different from study skills; confusion which, in part, reflects a degree of inconsistency in the way in which these and other terms are used by authors and EAP practitioners, something we discuss further below. Ultimately, a clear delineation of these concepts, their scope and areas of convergence and divergence, proved crucial in gaining the confidence of those involved in approving and implementing change and forming a clear and unambiguous model of EAP provision.

With this in mind, we seek here to clarify these six concepts on the basis that, not only within the context of institutional change and innovation but also that of the evolution of the field, conceptual clarity and consistency in the application of concepts is essential to coherent and joined up discussion and debate.

General English

General English is a general competence enabling the individual to negotiate the demands of everyday communication in primarily social contexts. It approximates to

Cummins notion of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) (1980) and refers to a set of generic skills encompassed within parameters variously articulated in accounts of 'communicative competence' (see, for example, Canale & Swain, 1980). It typically includes: an operational understanding of grammar and syntax; an awareness of the socially appropriate deployment of language according to context; an appreciation of the broader discourse structures to which language conforms; and the ability to negotiate meaning and compensate for obstacles to communication. Thus, a student with a general communicative competence will, to differing degrees and with different levels of fluency, have the capacity to apply these knowledge and skill types receptively and productively in authentic interactions, whether spoken or written.

Murray (2016) discusses the concept of general English in relation to the teaching of English in academic settings, and higher education in particular, and argues that students may be highly proficient users of general English but lack the kind of English needed to cope with the linguistic demands of their academic studies. General proficiency, he claims, is a prerequisite to the development of both academic literacy and professional communication skills because students require an upper-intermediate to advanced level of general proficiency if they are to acquire — through formal learning and/or natural exposure — the language and concepts that arise in academic and professional contexts. In this respect, language development can be seen as vertical in nature. However, a student's ongoing general proficiency development will both inform and be informed by their developing academic skills, and in this respect language development can also be characterized as horizontal.

English for General Academic Purposes

English for academic purposes is a type of English for specific purposes and comprises two main subsets: English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and multifaceted English for Specific Academic Purposes (discussed in the next section). The acquisition of both requires a level of GE language proficiency approximating to a B1-B2 minimum on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

EGAP is characterized by the generic academic English preparation found in both pre-university courses as well as many post-entry in-session programmes, and it focuses on common academic vocabulary, genres, tasks, and communicative conventions. It has a cross-disciplinary focus designed to provide students with a broad understanding of the principles of language use that apply to most, if not all, academic disciplines, and typically prioritizes the arts and humanities and social science disciplines over the pure sciences. While EGAP might be seen as something of a blunt instrument, it is nonetheless a valuable one, particularly where students are seeking to improve their language skills in preparation for university study but have yet to decide in which discipline they wish to study, or where university English language units may have limited resources and are therefore unable to offer more resource-intensive discipline-specific support.

University gatekeeping tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, and PTE are essentially tests of English for General Academic Purposes and as such are only crudely attuned to students' particular disciplinary language needs. It is partly for this reason that some

writers, such as Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson (2012), argue that students who meet or even exceed the English language entry requirements of their receiving institutions may still struggle subsequently to cope with the language demands of their disciplines. This disjoint also provides an explanation for why attendance of in-session classes that focus only or primarily on GE tend to experience high rates of student attrition (Lobo & Gurney 2014).

English for Specific Academic Purposes

English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), like EGAP, requires a good level of GE proficiency but also encompasses the specific language needed to engage appropriately and effectively with the specific discipline in which one is studying or working. Common examples of ESAP are Nursing English, Medical English, Business English, and Tourism English, for each of which there exists a particular type of discourse or set of communicative conventions shared across those multiple disciplinary contexts in which language is employed, and characterized by certain genres, a common lexicon (jargon and terminology) and discipline-specific interpretations of frequently-occurring linguistic structures and speech acts. For example, and in relation to the variation in meaning attributed to lexical items, while in linguistics the word 'discourse' refers to a piece of connected speech or a style of language, in sociology it refers to particular perspectives and ways of knowing. Similarly, while in general everyday parlance the word 'significant' means important, in statistics-based disciplines it refers to a result or difference unlikely to be caused by chance.

ESAP can, then, best be defined according to quite narrow, language-based parameters specific to the discipline, and this is reflected in ESAP textbooks and materials which tend to be informed by knowledge of the types of written and spoken discourse — and their embedded linguistic features — encountered most frequently in contexts pertinent to that discipline; knowledge that is increasingly based less on authors' intuition and more on corpora that offer greater veracity and thus promise increased authenticity in teaching materials. What is frequently left unaccounted for, however, is the interaction of language with the individual's ability to engage in the knowledge-forming practices of a discipline, use critical thinking skills and skilfully and appropriately sequence their ideas. The EAP practitioner may prepare and support the learner in their language development and performance, but linguistic skill alone will not fully account for successful academic performance, which requires social acculturation into the relevant discipline.

Academic literacies

The term Academic Literacies (AL) recognizes that language reflects both the discipline's subject matter and the practices through which it is expressed, explored, analysed, and contested. In this respect, it incorporates linguistic, social, and cognitive elements and so embodies Halliday's idea, central to Systemic Functional Linguistics, that language develops to serve the particular purposes for which its users choose to employ it (Halliday 1978). In so doing, it accounts for the intimate relationship between the language of the discipline (the primary focus of ESAP, as discussed above) and the

individual's socialization into the discipline and membership of its community of practice.

Academic Literacies is a pluralistic concept that is closely associated with the work of Lea and Street (1998: 159), who speak of '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'. Using language appropriately within a given discipline constitutes a key part of a process of socialization into that discipline through participating in its traditions of meaning making. As Rex and McEachen note, those traditions:

... include not just concepts and associated vocabulary, but also rhetorical structures, the patterns of action, that are part of any tradition of meaning-making. They include characteristic ways of reaching consensus and expressing disagreement, of formulating arguments, of providing evidence, as well as characteristic genres for organizing thought and conversational action. (Rex & McEachen 1999: 69).

In becoming socialized into their disciplines, students are learning both how to communicate in particular ways and to 'be' particular kinds of people: that is, to write (or indeed speak) 'as academics', 'as geographers', 'as social scientists' (Curry & Lillis 2003: 11).

Given that the way in which AL and ESAP are defined and positioned can depend on the perspective of the individual or collective (Leung & Lewkowicz 2017: 171), the ELT practitioner tasked with addressing the language needs of students seeking to communicate successfully within a discipline may naturally be inclined to focus on the elements of lexis, grammar, syntax, and knowledge of genres associated with ESAP, while their academic literacies-oriented counterpart will view such linguistic proficiency as necessary but not sufficient for successful communication in the discipline. Critically, though, one cannot be taught in isolation from the other.

Study Skills

Delineating the scope of EGAP, ESAP, and AL raises the question of how Study Skills (SS) are positioned. We believe that 'study skills' has become a rather nebulous concept that has come to mean different things to different people. This may be because it pre-dates other concepts such as academic literacies and therefore originally covered a broad range of activities a number of which have since been encompassed by other terms, leaving it as a somewhat ambiguous remnant of the 1970s. Thus, Lea and Street, for example, appear to position it as virtually synonymous with EGAP and contrast it to study skills, whereby 'literacy is a set of itemised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts' (ibid.: 158). An alternative view of study skills, and one to which we would subscribe, sees them as not essentially connected with language but instead with the organizational and strategic dimensions of learning in general within tertiary education, and indeed other education sectors. As such, they promote behaviours for improving effectiveness and efficiency in learning by focusing on such elements as time management, test-taking strategies, motivational techniques, the use of library resources, accessing materials online, independent learning, reading techniques, efficient note-taking, and memorization techniques.

SS is of potential benefit to all students entering tertiary education, who may, to differing degrees, be unfamiliar with its demands and require effective strategies for dealing with them; for example, domestic students may come ill-equipped with the critical and analytical abilities required at university as a result of pre-tertiary education which is often largely exam-driven and target-oriented. So too with students who are the focus of the increasingly prominent widening participation agenda in higher education, which seeks to improve access for those traditionally denied it. As a result of this agenda, a proportion of new enrolments are arriving at college or university from non-traditional and/or disadvantaged backgrounds and consequently lack the cultural capital required to navigate its demands effectively. Yet, it is often students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) who are seen as the primary target for SS provision, the assumption being, perhaps, that they are less likely to come equipped with the capital needed to function optimally in Western educational contexts. It may be that this close association of study skills with NESB students is one reason why EGAP, AL, and SS are sometimes treated synonymously; yet in reality such students may have excellent study skills since these are essentially independent of linguistic proficiency.

Professional Communication Skills

Professional Communication (PCS) skills refers to a number of inter-related skills, competences, and orientations that enable the individual to communicate in a manner responsive and appropriate to the professional contexts in which they work, and which enable them to most effectively achieve the communicative purposes relevant to their role. As with ESAP and AL, PCS skills reflect the contextually situated nature of language (see, for example, Hyland 2007) and the variation that may exist between different professions and between the different situations that arise within a given profession. In order to perform well, the learner will need to have the lexicon, linguistic fluency, knowledge of genres, and ability to perform relevant speech acts in an unambiguous and situationally appropriate manner. Fluency, intercultural pragmatic competence and code-switching take on particular significance in work contexts and may be severely tested; for example, during clinical placements, such as those that form a key part of nursing degrees and where they are critical to functioning effectively and safely (see, for example, Bramhall 2014).

Murray (2016: 87-91) sees PCS in rather broader terms, where 'conversancy in the discourses and behaviours associated with particular domains of use' comprises one of a number of elements including intercultural competence (where culture is interpreted in its broadest sense to mean the practices associated with any community of people and which they themselves and others see as identifying them as a cohesive group); a cultural relativistic orientation; interpersonal skills; non-verbal communication skills; and group and leadership skills. Essentially, however, PCS reflect a shift from the realm of education and talking about the discipline to the actual communicative practices of a range of different stakeholders in the workplace.

Figure 1 indicates how the six concepts we have discussed sit in relation to one another.

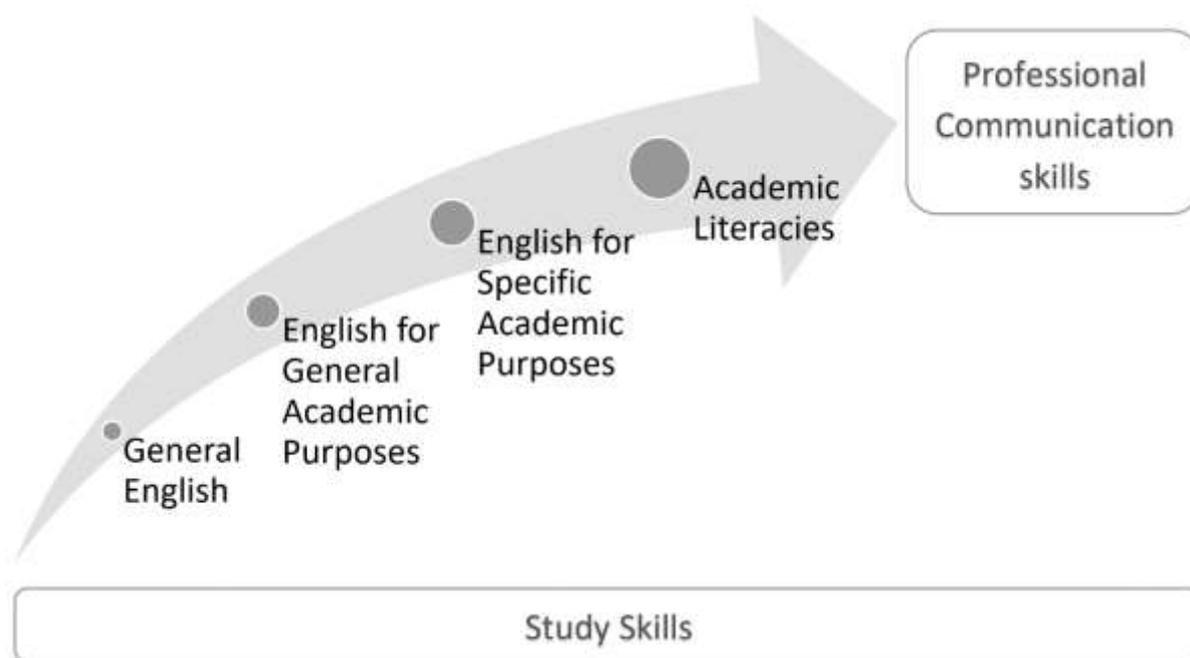


Figure 1: The relationship between ELT concepts

The importance of a shared understanding of terminology

As we have indicated, the significance of having a shared understanding of these terms lies in being able to meaningfully and usefully engage in professional discussion and debate, confident that through invoking common points of reference, we are likely being understood as intended. The outcome of such discussion and debate is more likely, as a result, to build knowledge in a coherent and efficient manner. As we have also suggested, this has implications not only for theoretical debate among applied linguists but also for both ELT and AL practitioners responsible for designing and teaching syllabi. In particular, it has implications for those tasked with managing change and innovation and who need to ensure that they have a common understanding of the terms they use to articulate what it is they seek to do before they present it to those whose support is required to implement initiatives. In the absence of clarity around the use of these terms and how they sit in relation to each other, any support for change initiatives is unlikely to be forthcoming. Yet the significance of a common understanding extends beyond this to that of teachers' identity and the way they position themselves and engage in their work and their professional interactions with colleagues who may be subject academics, managers, or administrators. This, in turn, is likely to influence how those colleagues view them and their work. This can be especially important in a university environment where those engaged in the provision of English language support often are, or feel themselves to be, treated as 'second class citizens' who frequently work on disadvantageous contracts and are involved in activities that are peripheral rather than core to the main business of the university.

How the definition and common understanding of terms can influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviours also becomes apparent if, for example, one considers 'study skills' in the broadest sense in which it is sometimes used, namely as a conglomerate of EGAP and AL, and the kinds of strategies discussed earlier for improving effectiveness and efficiency in learning. While students can surely benefit from tuition in these areas — tuition that may ultimately be a crucial determinant of their success — this interpretation of the term can easily lead to study skills being seen as a remedial, bolt-on activity that is desirable rather than essential, and, by extension, to these same attributes being applied to those delivering the tuition.

Contrast this with ESAP and AL and the intimate alignment of language with academic disciplines and their respective discourses. If ELT/AL practitioners, subject academics, and others see English language as fundamental to the discipline and as extending beyond its vocabulary and genres to include meaning making, knowledge construction, and socialization, then the relevance of ELT and AL and its practitioners becomes far more apparent. This is particularly the case where academic literacy is embedded in the curriculum (Arkoudis and Starfield 2007) and as such becomes recognized as core to the discipline, and, as a consequence, ESAP and AL teachers themselves become more integrated into the life of the discipline and the department, with implications for how they are perceived by their academic colleagues. This effect can be magnified in those (as yet rare) cases (see, for example, Curnow & Liddicoat 2008) where, having been embedded in the curriculum via a collaboration between academic lectures and English language teachers, academic literacy is taught by academics, who are supported by English language staff who may undergo professional development, where deemed necessary, in order for them to discharge that role effectively.

The field of ELT has been subject to swings and cycles in the way it is conceptualized and practised, and this is particularly so at the tertiary level. At the same time, researchers and practitioners alike have sought to create new niches that showcase their own activity and interests, and associated with these are terms for what are sometimes little more than new labels for old concepts or ways of doing things, or for ideas that depart only very marginally and not necessarily significantly from those concepts already in existence. Sometimes, these differences may be subtle but significant. Together, these phenomena, along with the sometimes casual and imprecise deployment of terms, have meant that there can exist a lack of clarity in their meaning and use. This emphasizes the need for discernment in respect of whether and how new terms are introduced into the field and accepted by the profession. We believe the terms we have focused on in this article have been subject to this kind of imprecision, consequently making meaningful dialogue difficult and coherent development of the field problematic. We have attempted to offer what we hope is greater clarity around the six terms we have focused on and which intersect most particularly in the context of English language teaching and learning in tertiary education contexts. In doing so, we have also sought to highlight the importance for developing theory, for teachers and students, and for the reputation of the field, of a common understanding and use of terms and the concepts to which they refer.

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