Chapter 6

Assessing EAP (English for Academic Purposes)

Traditionally, entry to English-medium tertiary-level degree programs has been conditional upon applicants demonstrating an appropriate level of proficiency on high currency 'gatekeeping' tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. However, there are questions concerning the suitability of such tests given that they do not serve to specifically assess applicants' conversancy in the particular academic literacy practices of their future disciplines and thus as reliable indicators of their linguistic preparedness to undertake degree studies. In this chapter, the author considers the implications of this for the nature, structure and delivery of EAP provision, and the creation of collaborative and productive relationships between EAP tutors and academic content lecturers working in the disciplines.

Introduction

This chapter takes as its point of departure assumptions, often made by academic staff and English for academic purposes (EAP) teachers working in English-medium universities, concerning the language needs of students studying on degree programmes for whom English is not their first language. These assumptions can be evidenced in the kind of feedback students typically receive from their lecturers on their writing, as well as in the nature of pre-entry preparatory and post-entry academic English language support programmes. With regards to the former, and invoking the formative work of Lea and Street (1998), Wingate (2018) reports that lecturers' feedback on student essays tends both to focus on surface features of language, such as structure, grammar and spelling, and to be characterised by negative and vague statements, with little or no advice on how to improve; for example, 'You did not answer the question', 'This is not relevant', and 'Essay displays very little criticality' (Wingate 2012). In terms of the latter, academic English programmes tend to be comprised of instruction in generic rather than discipline-specific academic English, often together with study skills such 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. I will argue here that these things indicate an incomplete understanding of the needs of students entering higher education and that this has implications not just for how academic literacy is taught and to whom, but also for who teaches it and the suitability of high-currency gatekeeping tests, such as IELTS and TOEFL, widely used assess students' linguistic readiness for degree-level study.

Academic literacy

It is common knowledge that despite meeting their receiving universities' English language requirements, a significant proportion of students still struggle with the demands of their studies and will typically end up being directed to in-sessional English language support

programmes offered centrally by English language units or by cognate departments such TESOL and Applied Linguistics departments. These programmes are generally seen as serving the needs of non-native speakers of English, particularly international students, and as such they represent a remedial model of English language provision that positions those students they serve as being in deficit and provide them with support classes that traditionally focus on a combination of English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and study skills. While these classes may be of some value to students, any such value is necessarily limited, and students' inability, often, to fully engage with their studies and achieve to their potential is likely to be in large part a consequence of not having developed the kind of comprehensive skills set associated with the academic literacies approach articulated by Lea and Street in their seminal 1998 article. This approach sees language and its appropriate use as something fundamentally embedded in the culture of the discipline; it both shapes and is shaped by the discipline and, as such, learning to communicate within the discipline is essentially a process of socialization that reflects an emergent understanding of and ability to participate in its traditions of meaning-making. As Rex and McEachen (1999) 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, p.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, p. 11); and in learning to do these things they gradually become bona fide members of their disciplines' respective communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 2010). The acquisition of conversancy in the academic literacies of their disciplines is, therefore, tantamount to a rite of passage of sorts and enables student to effectively and legitimately engage with and influence knowledge and its creation and interrogation, both orally and in writing.

The kind of generic academic English that is the focus of preparatory courses and the staple provision of universities in their efforts to support their students' English language needs post-entry fails to take account of the fact that each discipline has associated with it a particular repertoire of academic literacy practices that are not necessarily – and, in fact, may well not be – transferable to other disciplinary contexts. Because it reflects a view of language that emphasises its surface features rather than one that sees it as part of a complex ecology in which knowledge and meaning are created, expressed and represented in particular ways, shaping the individual in the process, it fails to provide students with what they need to navigate their coursework and achieve optimally in assessment. It may be for this reason that in-sessional English language support classes often experience high levels of student attrition (Lobo & Gurney 2014): rather than developing their conversancy in the particular academic literacy practices of their disciplines, these classes instead

typically focus on the kinds of generic skills associated with EGAP[1] and in which students are already well versed as a result of having had to demonstrate a sufficient level of language proficiency on tests such as IELTS and TOEFL as a condition of entry to university. Students are pragmatic and if they feel that language instruction is irrelevant to their immediate need to navigate coursework and achieve good grades, they will vote with their feet and invest their time elsewhere.

Assessment

This combination of the widespread phenomenon of students struggling to cope with the language demands of their degree courses and the frequent lack of alignment between the content of English language development programmes and students' actual language needs post-enrolment, places a spotlight on the suitability of gatekeeping tests. Globally, IELTS, TOEFL and PTE are the most widely used and thus most widely recognised such tests used by universities to measure applicants' linguistic readiness to begin a degree course. Their currency is, it seems, continually increasing, in part because of the fact of higher education having become a global enterprise (Altbach & Knight, 2007; King, Marginson & Naidoo, 2011) in which institutions vie to secure market share by showcasing their 'international' credentials and offering more and more programmes delivered in the medium of English – so called EMI programmes (see, for example, Dearden 2014; Macaro, 2018). Indeed, one might argue that the rate and spread of influence of these tests has become an unstoppable force, with institutions having become so invested in them that, regardless of how critically universities and the testing organisations that produce them may reflect on their purpose and the extent to which they fulfil that purpose, there is perhaps little motivation for them to change them for the better, if and where deemed necessary.

So, we might ask, to what extent *are* these tests fulfilling their purpose given that students often still struggle to cope with their studies despite having met English language entry criteria? One way of answering this question is to look at what empirical studies tell us about the predictive validity of gatekeeping tests in terms of students' future performance on their degree programmes. The problem here is that findings are very mixed and far from definitive, with some indicating quite high levels of predictive validity and others low or non-existent levels (see, for example, Light, Xu & Mossop, 1987; Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Kerstjens and Nery, 2000; Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Ingram & Bayliss, 2007). One of the main confounding factors for such studies is the fact that numerous intervening variables come into play in students' lives that may have an impact both on their overall performance in their studies and on their English language development post-entry, making it difficult to establish a secure causal link between the test (and students' associated test preparation activity) and subsequent academic performance (Bellingham, 1993; Allwright & Banerjee, 1997; Cotton & Conrow, ibid.).

Another complicating factor concerns the way in which receiving universities set their English language test entry thresholds. With the competitiveness and marketization of higher education – both a cause and consequence of globalisation – there is certainly an

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[1] In her study of 167 UK universities, Haghi (2019) found that 32% of in-sessional programmes focused solely on EGAP, 43% on a combination of EGAP and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP – what I refer to hear as the academic literacies approach), and 25% on ESAP only.

incentive to acquire market share by setting more lenient English language entry standards (Murray 2016, p.55). In addition there is the questionable but widespread practice of institutions benchmarking their English language entry standards against those of their competitor institutions rather than, first and foremost, setting standards that are appropriate for the particular courses in which students wish to enrol and the linguistic demands they place on students. Yet while the practice of benchmarking against other institutions may, in part, be a product of not wishing to be out of kilter with their competitors and thereby jeopardising enrolment targets, it may also be the result of a lack of assessment literacy on the part of those within the institution responsible for setting standards (ibid., pp.104-105). That is, the individuals or committees concerned may not necessarily have a sufficient understanding of the tests over which they adjudicate, and in particular, an adequate appreciation of what test scores represent in real performance terms. It can be easier, therefore, to simply base their decisions on those of other institutions – institutions which, in reality, may also be making insufficiently informed decisions. In this regard, Arkoudis, Baik and Richardson (2012) have stated:

> All staff involved in setting and administering English language requirements should be made aware of the meaning, limitations and relationship of test scores on different standardised tests, including their limited predictability for future academic performance (p. 36).

Then there is the well-recognised issue of the security of high-stakes tests such as IELTS and TOEFL (Murray, 2010; Roever, 2001). In recent years, there have been concerns expressed over the vulnerability of such tests, particularly where they are computer-based, and these have arisen largely as a result of multiple instances of abuse. While testing organisations are responding to this risk by adopting biometric security measures, breaches continue nonetheless and this undermines the confidence of test-users, in this case receiving institutions.

Finally there is the problem of universities accepting alternative forms of evidence of language proficiency other than those high-currency tests to which I have made reference. In 1999, Coley cited 61 forms of evidence accepted by universities as fulfilling their English language entry requirements, and this leads one to question the veracity of the assessment underlying these indicators of proficiency and their comparability with those more universally recognised and appropriately validated counterparts such as IELTS, TOEFL and PTE. What, for example, does a 'Grade B' on a university English language foundation programme tell a receiving institution or department about a student's actual competence in language, and how can it be compared meaningfully with, say, an IELTS 6.5?[2]

While all of these factors I have outlined raise questions regarding the suitability of gatekeeping tests and/or the way in which they are used by universities, and in doing so offer potential explanations for why some students struggle with their studies despite having met the English language requirements of their receiving institutions, there is a strong argument in support of the idea that a key reason lies in the dissonance between the language focus of high-currency gatekeeping tests and the actual language that students require post-entry. As I have indicated, at the heart of this dissonance is the distinction

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[2] See Davies et al (1999) and Taylor (2004) for a discussion of the problems of establishing test equivalence.

between English for general academic purposes and the notion of academic literacies. As its name suggests, EGAP essentially provides students with a set of generic academic English language skills on the assumption that they are transferable across different contexts of use, specifically the different academic disciplines into which students will be entering. While this may be true for some of what is taught on EGAP courses, this approach fails to account for the fact that each discipline has associated with it a particular set of literacy practices in which those studying in that discipline need to become conversant and which help define and, to some extent differentiate it from other disciplines. Becoming conversant in the relevant academic literacies means understanding language as more than merely understanding the surface features of language in the manner described by Lea and Street (1998); it means understanding language as a reflection and instantiation of the particular communicative practices that give the discipline its identity and shape its community of practice.

What gatekeeping tests do not and, arguably, cannot easily do is assess whether and to what extent students have developed conversancy in the particular academic literacies of their future disciplines. To do so would mean devising tests tailored specifically to each and every discipline, or at least (and somewhat less satisfactorily) each set of related disciplines. However, this is unlikely to happen due to the cost involved and the fact that to galvanize testing bodies and induce change would require the collective support of and agitation by a tertiary sector that seems fairly content with the status quo. Perhaps more critically, though, all tests assume that students have had the opportunity to develop the skills and abilities they are seeking to measure; after all, there is no point in testing what has not been taught. The problem is that academic literacies are best acquired within the context of the discipline (Curnow & Liddicoat 2008, p.2) and this is unlikely to have happened at all or to a sufficient degree prior to students entering university (Bohemia, Farrell, Power & Salter, 2007; Curnow & Liddicoat, 2008; Percy & Skillen, 2000; Wingate, Andon & Cogo, 2011, Murray & Nallaya, 2016). Where students have had opportunities to develop the literacies they will need, these will be uneven given today's diverse student demographic and the various education systems from which students originate. Furthermore, in some cases, subjects available for study in tertiary institutions may not even exist in secondary education curricula, thus effectively depriving students altogether of opportunities to acquire the literacies relevant to their future studies. In effect, these factors mean that regardless of the views of testing bodies and the tertiary education sector, assessing students' academic literacy at point of application is neither sensible nor equitable. As such, it may be that the current EGAP-oriented testing regime adopted by most universities is a pragmatic compromise that for the most part functions reasonably well as a filtering mechanism, despite being a somewhat blunt instrument. This argument for maintaining the status quo acquires added potency when one considers that if, as has been argued, academic literacies are fundamental to the discipline, then they should, anyway, be embedded in the curriculum in order to ensure that *all* students (domestic and international, native-speaker and non-native speaker) develop them; and this obviates the need to assess them pre-entry.

Embedding academic literacies in the curriculum: a collaborative enterprise

If academic literacies need to be acquired by all students, and within the context of the discipline, the question then arises as to how best to embed them in the curriculum and

who should be responsible for developing students' conversancy in them. In answer to the second question, there is a strong argument for academic lecturers imparting academic literacies to students as it is they who have the best knowledge of them and the disciplinary contexts in which they most naturally arise in delivery of the curriculum, and thus where they are most appropriately taught. Of course, the same literacies are likely to arise at multiple points in the curriculum and they therefore need to be carefully scaffolded to ensure that learning is optimal. Curnow and Liddicoat (2008), report on this process of embedding as implemented at an Australian University in an Applied Linguistics major, and they stress the need to start with assessment by asking which academic literacies students are expected to have mastered by the end of the course and should, therefore, feature in assessment activities. In their particular programme, Curnow and Liddicoat identified the following key academic literacies, which together were seen to support a view of academic literacy as 'the capacity of students to be consumers and producers of language-focused research' (ibid, p. 3):

- Critical reading of research
- Analysis of research writing
- Synthesis of research from multiple sources
- Constructing an argument using the research of others
- Analysing language data
- Constructing an argument from language examples
- Understanding the process of research development
- Designing and implementing research projects

Only when the relevant literacies have thus been identified, can the process of embedding begin in earnest.

As applied linguists, Curnow and Liddicoat were familiar with the concept of academic literacy and as such were arguably particularly well placed to implement the idea of embedding. This is supported by the literature (Jacobs, 2005), where there is evidence that academics in other non-language-related disciplines actually struggle to articulate the academic literacies of their disciplines. This is an interesting phenomenon, given that they are obviously themselves highly conversant in the literacy practices of their disciplines, and I have suggested elsewhere (Murray, 2016) that this 'blind spot' is analogous to that of a native speaker of a language, who is perfectly fluent in that language but unlikely to be able to articulate the rules that underlie his/her competence; that is they have procedural knowledge but lack the underlying declarative knowledge – Jacobs speaks of 'tacit' knowledge of their discipline's discourse conventions (Jacobs 2005, p.447). As members of their disciplines' communities of practice, academic staff have, over time, similarly internalised the academic literacies that underpin and help serve to legitimise that membership. The fact that it can be difficult to articulate the literacies of the discipline highlights the need for academic staff to work with English language teaching staff and with academic developers to identify the relevant literacies and to strategically embed them in the curriculum (see Murray & Nallaya 2016 for a discussion of this process).

Working collaboratively in this way to embed academic literacies can be a relatively unproblematic process; however, regardless of the soundness of the rationale for doing so,

requiring academic staff to impart those literacies to students at relevant points in the curriculum is likely to provoke resistance, even where senior management have mandated it (Murray & Nallaya, 2016). Academics typically do not see the development of students' academic literacy as part of their remit – an understandable reaction given that traditionally it has for the most part been treated as an adjunct, 'extra' activity outsourced to English language units. While the concerns of academic staff can be partially allayed through a professional development programme that furnishes them with the knowledge and pedagogical skills to impart academic literacies to the students, successfully negotiating this obstacle can, nonetheless, be both very challenging and time-consuming, particularly if the embedding initiative is to be implemented institution-wide; furthermore reluctant teachers are likely to be less effective teachers. This raises the question of whether there are alternative approaches to ensuring that all students receive the academic literacy instruction so crucial to navigating their degree courses successfully.

Decentralization of English language support

One possibility that retains the idea of embedding is to have English language teaching staff deliver academic literacy instruction at the appropriate times scheduled into the curriculum and to make it credit-bearing. Such an arrangement argues for the decentralization of English language support away from a single English language unit that serves the whole institution, to faculty-based English language teams that serve the needs of those departments within the faculty, where, for example, different EAP teachers have responsibility for different departments within the faculty. This approach brings with it a number of advantages. It allows EAP teachers to build their discipline knowledge and to gain familiarity with the expectations of the faculty departments, vis-à-vis the academic literacies of their respective disciplines. This, in turn, can guide syllabus design and pedagogy accordingly, thereby helping ensure relevance and with it student, engagement and success. Decentralization also facilitates the integration of EAP teachers into the local academic community and in doing so promotes their understanding of its structures, procedures, constraints, and opportunities that afford the development of students' language competence. Furthermore, greater integration allows for the establishing and nurturing of productive working relationships with academic and professional staff, thereby facilitating EAP teachers' capacity to operate effectively and better influence and support both academic staff and students through personal contact, committee membership, etc.

The idea of English language teaching staff delivering academic literacy instruction within the curriculum via such a devolved model of provision, and making it credit bearing, runs into at least three major difficulties, however. Firstly, it would likely be almost impossible to find a common slot in which to locate academic literacy instruction that all students within a faculty on multiple timetables could attend[3], and to have multiple such slots would require English language personnel resources on a scale that universities would be unlikely to fund. Secondly, catering as it would be to the academic literacy needs of students studying in multiple disciplines within the faculty, any such approach would necessarily be less tailored than if academic literacy instruction were built into the curriculum and taught by academic staff exclusively to those students enrolled in their departments and who, therefore, shared

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[3] This would be particularly problematic where programmes have highly prescriptive curricula and timetables, such as in the case of healthcare-related subjects that include clinical placements, for example.

similar needs. Finally, as we have seen, the optimal arrangement is for academic literacies to be taught simultaneously with the relevant degree course content so that they are learnt 'authentically' at the points where they are most relevant. Under a devolved arrangement where EAP teachers provide the academic literacy instruction, this could certainly not happen optimally, regardless of whether those teachers were to gradually develop knowledge of the disciplines for which they were responsible and to contextualize academic literacy instruction within authentic and relevant subject content.

Embedding academic literacy instruction in the curriculum and making it credit-bearing would appear, then, to present significant challenges, irrespective of who provides the instruction, and it may be that the most practicable approach is to retain the idea of a decentralized model and implement a combination of embedded provision (for those departments where conditions are conducive to doing so – see, for example, Bohemia et al., 2007; Morley, 2008; Curnow & Liddicoat, 2008; Paxton, 2011) and non-embedded provision provided by EAP teachers.

Non-embedded provision can take various forms as an extra-curricula activity. One option is academic literacy classes that students are strongly encouraged to attend. Depending on the particular institutional context, making attendance compulsory can be problematic as there is often no way to effectively secure compliance; however, if the importance of academic literacy and its relevance to students' coursework, assessment, and thus ultimate attainment is made sufficiently clear to students – and reflected in actual EAP course content and delivery – levels of attendance are likely to be high. Furthermore, making attendance voluntary promotes learner autonomy and places partial responsibility for their learning in the students' own hands. Instead of or in addition to the provision of such classes, a programme of academic literacy workshops can be offered cyclically throughout the academic year. Such classes and workshops can be augmented by one-to-one consultations with EAP tutors, where resources permit, and by a well-developed website that hosts student resources including, for example, exemplars of particular genres, practice tasks, model essays, and advice on how to review, think and write critically within one's discipline. For it to function optimally in helping develop students' conversancy in the academic literacies of their disciplines, any such website arguably is best organised according to faculty; that is, the home page provides the student with the option of selecting their faculty and therefore being routed to those resources most relevant to their needs. Seeing as this is a broad-brush approach given that even within a single faculty the constituent disciplines will vary in terms of their literacy practices, ideally and over time, online resources can be developed and refined further such that they reflect an even more tailored approach that reflects the particular language requirements of the individual disciplines that make up the faculty. Accordingly, it is envisaged that upon landing on the English language support home page, students would click on the relevant faculty link, and once there, would then select the relevant departmental link though which they would have access to resources especially tailored to their disciplinary literacy needs.

Conclusion

The globalisation of higher education in recent years has meant that tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, which are widely used by universities around the word as determiners of applicants'

linguistic suitability for degree-level study, are certainly 'high stakes' tests that perform an increasingly important and prominent role. It is right, therefore, that their efficacy in fulfilling that role should be subject to scrutiny if universities are to be confident that they are behaving ethically by only accepting those students whose language skills suggest that they have a reasonable chance of meeting the demands of their studies and successfully graduating. One of the problems in ascertaining this is that there are multiple variables that come into play above and beyond the tests themselves, such as the way in which those tests are understood and used by institutions, and the basis on which universities invoke them in setting threshold levels. Nonetheless, as I have argued, there is a lack of alignment between what these tests seek to measure – and thus what students study in preparing for them – and what their degree courses will demand of them vis-à-vis the particular academic literacies in which they will need to become conversant. And 'become conversant' is perhaps key here in that, for the reasons I have mentioned, gatekeeping tests such as IELTS and TOEFL realistically cannot (or will not) cater to the literacy sets associated with each and every discipline, and this means that such conversancy needs to be developed post-entry, in parallel with students' degree studies. Under these circumstances it can be argued that these tests generally function quite well and are an acceptable compromise. The fact that they *are* a compromise places a moral imperative on universities to ensure that all of their students have an equal opportunity to develop the literacies they require, whether via an embedded model or otherwise.

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