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## Interdisciplinary EAP: Moving Beyond Aporetic English for General Academic Purposes

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this short piece, which can be qualified as speculative and provisional, is *not* primarily to try to enter into the considerable long-standing dichotomous and ideational discussions of the merits and shortcomings of English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) and English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP). Rather, this thought piece documents and reflects on our attempts to reimagine, rethink and move beyond the often rather uninspiring and emaciated tropes that characterise arguments for EGAP.

To achieve this, we initially review some of the most frequent and substantive arguments that dominate EAP with regards to, firstly, ESAP and then EGAP. Particular attention is paid to the largely aporetic nature of arguments for EGAP in order to reimagine EGAP from within an interdisciplinary framework.

We then draw on our experience of developing interdisciplinary preessional EGAP programmes at the universities of Leeds and Nottingham to reflect on the affordances and constraints of adopting a distinctive interdisciplinary framework for EGAP.

Thirdly, and briefly, we consider theoretical and ideological issues, from a largely social realist perspective, around notions of disciplinarity, 'normal' vs 'hyper' interdisciplinarity, and we question the frequent equivocation of disciplinarity with specificity.

In lieu of a conclusion, we return to aporia – the sense of doubt, puzzlement, impasse and perplexity – that frames much of the discussion of specificity and EGAP and, in the spirit of a thought piece, invite you to contribute to our understanding and development of interdisciplinary ESAP.

### 2. ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC ACADEMIC PURPOSES

The issue of specificity in EAP and ESP more generally has been a longstanding preoccupation for practitioners and researchers alike that stretches back to at least the 1980s (e.g. Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) and the 'notion of specificity is at the heart of most definitions of EAP' (Hyland, 2018: 17). Hyland claims:

The issue of specificity ... challenges EAP teachers to take a stance on how they view language and learning, and to examine their courses in light of this stance (Hyland, 2016: 17).

As such, specificity, for all EAP practitioners, is a central concern not just in terms of course design, teaching and rationale but also, equally fundamentally, in terms of practitioner identity, agency and recognition. Two recent review articles (Flowerdew, 2016, and Hyland, 2016) outline the handful of the most persuasive, persistent and frequent arguments for ESAP. Unsurprisingly, their respective review of key arguments overlap considerably and are briefly outlined below.

Perhaps the most persuasive and central argument for ESAP relates to the multifarious differences between disciplines. These differences are seen as so fundamental that they preclude any satisfactory generic approach to teaching EAP. Hyland states that 'disciplines are largely created and maintained through the distinctive ways in which members jointly construct a view of the world through their discourses' (Hyland, 2016: 20-21). The notion of community, and specifically communication *within* a disciplinary community (Hyland, 2006), is central to ESAP. Differences between disciplines provides the basis for justifying ESAP. These differences can be summarised as follows (synthesised from Hyland, 2006):

- Disciplinary forms of argument;
- Knowledge attribution (from actors in the field, to schools of thought through to non-attributed canonical forms);
- Writing style (e.g. relative readability, sentence length, use of sub-technical lexis);
- Citation practices;
- Rhetorical structure(s);
- Stance and voice and,
- Writer engagement strategies

This partial picture of differences *between* disciplines can be further complicated by differences *within* disciplines where, for example, disciplines display non-cumulative knowledge structures (in Kuhn's (1970) terms 'pre-paradigm' or in Bernstein's (2000) terms 'horizontal knowledge structures') where knowledge is more segmented and such disciplines are typically 'a series of approaches that develop by adding another approach alongside existing approaches' (Maton, 2011: 63). In these cases, disciplines (such as sociology) are likely to display some or all of the differences bullet pointed above in part because there may be competing theoretical orientations and commitments (including fundamental differences in ontological and epistemological beliefs, methodologies and methods, ideological orientations...) *within the discipline*.

It has been argued that both language and literacy are not generalisable across disciplines (Murray, 2016) and, therefore, by focusing on specificity, students are gaining knowledge directly relevant to, for example, the epistemology, genres conventions and language of their discourse community (Anderson, 2014; Wingate, 2018). This is reflected in the philosophical perspective of social constructivism, which argues that communicative practices, more specifically how discipline-specific views of the world are jointly constructed through discourse within communities, both create and maintain these disciplines (Basturkmen, 2003). Understanding of and exposure to this is crucial for students to gain membership of their specific communities of practice and disciplinary communities.

A common argument is that subject lecturers (Flowerdew, 2016; Hyland, 2016; Prior, 1998) lack either or both the expertise and the inclination/time to teach or develop the specific disciplinary literacy skills that their students require. In addition, subject lecturers may also consider academic and disciplinary conventions to be transparent or self-evident. Flowerdew (2016) considers this scenario as an opportunity for EAP practitioners to engage

in a useful division of labour with subject lecturers whereby EAP practitioners engage with the writing/language in the discipline and the subject lecturers focus on the content. Flowerdew (2016) claims that the substantial body of ESAP research on disciplinarity can then be integrated into teaching ESAP classes where students can be enculturated and socialised into the discursive conventions and practices of their discipline (Swales, 1990). This ESAP approach also enables practitioners to obtain greater professional recognition, improve self-esteem, reach equity with 'academics' and engender greater practitioner motivation (Flowerdew, 2016). It requires more qualified practitioners and 'elevates' the importance of their work (Hyland, 2016). An additional argument for ESAP is that it has face validity for students and is therefore a source of motivation (Basturkmen, 2003; Flowerdew, 2016; Hyland, 2016).

### 3. ENGLISH FOR GENERAL ACADEMIC PURPOSES

When compared to ESAP, the discussions of EGAP are generally uninspiring, possibly outdated and occasionally defensive, with the main justifications for EGAP relating to 'contextual exigencies' (Hyland, 2016:23) such as financial and logistical barriers to teaching ESAP. Alexander et al. (2008: 26) claim 'most EAP classes... must be general because they contain a mixture of subject areas', with literature often citing student numbers, resources and issues with accessing subject specific content as the main reasons for taking an EGAP approach (Flowerdew, 2016).

As with ESAP there is a common core of a handful of arguments for EGAP and, with a few exceptions, most of these arguments are historical and seem less plausible as more research has emerged within ESAP. The first of these arguments, again summarised largely from Flowerdew's (2016) and Hyland's (2016) recent reviews of ESAP and EGAP, suggest that there is no need for practitioners to teach the specialised language of the disciplines as these special features will be taught by content lecturers or learned once the students are studying in their respective schools and departments. Instead, practitioners can more usefully focus on those features of language that make up a 'common core' across all disciplines (Bloor and Bloor, 1986). Significant at the time, Hutchinson and Waters' 1987 book also argued strongly for this approach. This approach entails teaching generic features of academic language such as register (e.g. lexical density, nominalisation) and including aspects of language such as metadiscourse and hedging. These ideas about generic features of language have had a prolonged life (perhaps beyond their credibility) in part due to just how amenable these ideas of generic academic language are to publishers of highly lucrative academic study course and text books bought by many students around the world. In addition, a common trope is that students at lower levels are not yet ready for specificity (Hyland, 2002).

Similar to generic features of academic language there is also an argument for identifying skills and study activities (such as note-taking, listening to lectures, paraphrasing) deemed common to all disciplines which can then be operationalised in a range of contexts and disciplines (Hyland, 2016). Again, it is not difficult to envisage the commercial appeal of such arguments.

As disciplinary strangers, it has also been argued (cf. Spack, 1988; Sloan and Porter, 2010) that EAP practitioners have neither the confidence nor the expertise, nor, indeed, the qualifications to deal with the specificity of subject/discipline specific language and content and therefore Spack (1988:29) argues that practitioners should teach 'general principles of inquiry and rhetoric'. Raimes (1991), in a similar vein, suggests that academic writing should be located within the liberal arts and, by doing so, this would raise the profile and professionalism of the practitioner instead of adopting the 'butler's stance' by being subservient to disciplinary demands and power.

One of the most striking theoretical justifications for EGAP focuses on the differences between education and training, arguing that EGAP is the former, and ESAP the latter (Widdowson, 1983). Education, here, is defined as preparing students for a wide range of needs, and thereby having a wide focus, with training seen as providing students with a 'restricted competence to deal with defined tasks', due to focusing solely on specific skills and schemata, thereby having a narrow focus. Huckin (2003) claims that ESAP forecloses creativity and promotes a dull and rigid conformity to convention entailing the reproduction of unimaginative and formulaic texts without preparing students for their less predictable future communicative needs.

Thus far, the arguments above both for EGAP and against ESAP will be very familiar to practitioners and will also perhaps seem rather tired and unhelpful. The few more positive reasons for adopting EGAP are discussed below.

Feak (2011; 2016), an advocate for EGAP who highlights the growing trend towards interdisciplinarity within higher education, justifies EGAP, especially for taught post-graduate students, with the rationale that it is the students', rather than the practitioners' responsibility to notice, and thereby understand, their disciplinary conventions. Expanding on this, this paper centres on the rationale for EGAP with an interdisciplinary focus, arguing that this approach enables students to gain the benefits from and beyond ESAP, highlighting that perhaps disciplinary identity is further developed through contrasting disciplinary differences, rather than focusing solely on one. A similar argument is made by Swales and Feak (2012) who encourage students to compare their disciplinary experiences through contrasting rhetorical analysis of disciplinary texts.

Bruce (2005) offers a principled approach to developing an EGAP writing course based on a cognitive discourse model operating with the four most commonly recurring rhetorical types; rhetorical focus, gestalt structure, discourse patterning, and principal internal discourse patterning (Bruce, 2005: 244). This approach entails developing an analytical syllabus organised using the non-discipline specific discourse unit of the cognitive (rather than social) genre. Bruce provides a theoretically rigorous and practical approach to develop an EGAP writing programme. However, perhaps due to the prevalence of arguments for ESAP and also possibly due to the fact that understanding and adopting Bruce's approach requires some effort (compared to most of the arguments above for EGAP) and investment to understand the theory behind this approach, it is unfortunate that this cognitive genre approach to EGAP has not been as influential as it should have been.

An emerging theoretical framework that is beginning to re-orientate ideas about teaching and framing EAP is Legitimation Code Theory (LCT). LCT, rooted in social realism, building on Bernstein's work and aligning with SFL, is complex, rich and dynamic and focuses on knowledge in terms of its epistemic and social relations:

LCT aims to provide concrete tools to research and to change educational practices by investigating the underlying codes that are at the heart of what is considered 'legitimate' in knowledge practices across institutions and disciplines (Monbec, 2018:90).

Work in this area is only just emerging but work by Brooke (2017), Ingold & O'Sullivan (2017), Kirk, (2017/2019) and Monbec (2018) may soon provide enough confidence and evidence to invigorate the reshaping, rethinking and development of what has been to date often rather emaciated arguments for EGAP.

Our final observations on EGAP are also true of ESAP (although probably less damning) and they relate to critical strands within and beyond EAP which perceive EAP practices from a hierarchical and often binary ideological perspective. EGAP does not come out well from these perspectives. Critical approaches to EAP tend to operate with the trope of EAP as 'taught by unreflective instructors blindly resolved on enforcing orthodoxy' (Hyland, 2018: 383) in which:

Both academic literacies and Critical EAP invite practitioners to adopt a 'transformative agenda' (Lillis & Tuck, 2016:30) rather than the dominant 'normative' orientation in EAP (ibid.) and a failure to adopt such an approach implies adopting an 'accommodationist ideology' (Benesch, 1993: 711) entailing 'political quietism' (Benesch, 2001:41) and fulfilling a colluding 'technician' role (Morgan, 2009) working against the best interests of students (Hyland, 2018). (Ding, 2019: npng)

Recently, for example, Jenkins (2016) has labelled 'general' EAP courses as 'Traditional' with:

[r]esearch and publications at this end of the conforming scale (particularly EAP materials for students) tend to be concerned with standards, to assume and/or focus on idealized native English academic norms, and not to question whether these norms are the most appropriate globally or why they should still be considered in some way better than other possibilities (Jenkins, 2016: 49).

From an ELFA perspective EGAP would suffer criticism for promoting idealised native academic norms. ESAP, through genre and corpus approaches, would be less susceptible to the harshest of these criticisms but would nonetheless be considered a conformist rather than challenging approach to teaching EAP (Jenkins, 2016).

The choice then is not simply between a narrow ESAP or generic EGAP approach to framing and teaching EAP but, more broadly, situating praxis within the critical discourse in and beyond EAP that provokes deeper discussions about the purposes and practices of EAP. These rather binary and absolute options regarding the ideological orientations and theoretical commitments of EAP have, historically, mirrored dichotomous debates over the relative merits of ESAP and EGAP. However, there is a sense now that ESAP and EGAP is less about binary choices and more about situating options and choices on a spectrum (Hyland, 2016): 'the choice between one or other side [ESAP or EGAP] depend[ing] upon practical circumstances more than ideological positioning' (Flowerdew, 2016: 8). Hyland, however, although acknowledging that EGAP approaches have some merits they are nonetheless second best:

Essentially, however, these [EGAP] can only bridge the gap between the kinds of language students learn and use at school, which are typically often proficiency-focused personal essays, to the specific demands of disciplinary writing (Hyland, 2018: 391).

#### 4. REFLECTIONS ON AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FOCUS IN AN EGAP PRESESSIONAL PROGRAMME

*This section was written by the first author Jenna Bodin-Galvez and is based on her experience of developing and leading a preessional EGAP course at the University of Leeds. Her observations echo many of the experiences of the second author, Alex Ding, during his time at the University of Nottingham developing a similar course.*

Approaching EGAP with an interdisciplinarity focus enables disciplinary content to be addressed with mixed disciplinary groups; with students focusing on the same goals but from different disciplinary perspectives. This approach meets the increasing trend towards interdisciplinarity in universities (Feak 2011), and enables EAP practitioners to facilitate, but not to lead, the students' understanding of their discipline specific knowledge, thereby addressing the second of the BALEAP (2008) competencies, disciplinary differences, to 'guide students to investigate the genres and expert practitioners of their specific discourse communities'. In addition, as Hyland (2002) notes, although disciplines view knowledge and the world differently, students are often expected to cross boundaries, for instance when discussing problems and conducting research, and therefore need to develop complex skills to operate in a wide range of social and academic environments. Addressing content in a multi-disciplinary environment enables students to work on interdisciplinary communication, and to begin to understand that, throughout their academic careers, they will encounter diversity.

Through this approach, students are able to develop their disciplinary knowledge – possibly through rhetorical consciousness raising (Hyland 2002) – as in ESAP, which can aid student motivation (Feak 2011). It has been suggested that, through working with students from different disciplinary backgrounds and contrasting how their disciplines function, students may more easily be able to see how their discipline views and constructs knowledge (Hyland 2002; Swales and Feak, 2000), for example by examining the way cognitive genres are constructed across disciplines (Bruce 2008). Therefore, it could be argued, students on a EGAP programme with an interdisciplinary focus can develop a stronger disciplinary identity than through ESAP. As Alexander et al (2008: 26) note;

EAP is principally an endeavour in which students acquire the generic tools to research the language and culture of their academic discourse community for themselves and this can be achieved in mixed or subject specific groups (Alexander et al., 2008: 26).

The Academic English for Postgraduate Studies (AEPS) Level Three preessional course at the University of Leeds follows such a model. This ten-week course runs three times each academic year, to three different cohorts of students with a minimum English language proficiency entry level of IELTS 5.5. It centres around a different ambiguous and abstract theme each term, for example 'risk' or 'time'. Students address the theme in relation to their discipline, writing a paper, presenting at a conference and participating in a seminar. For example, with risk, students addressed the question 'What role does risk play in your discipline?' in both the paper and at the conference, based on their interpretation of the question and their readings. Following the conference, students then conducted a seminar in which they discussed how attending presentations in a range of disciplines at the conference developed their perspectives and understanding of 'risk'. Throughout the term, students work towards these goals, developing their academic language and literacy in their discipline, whilst also developing their interdisciplinary knowledge.

This approach entails a number of the benefits of ESAP and gives the course face validity (Hughes 2003). For instance, students are developing both their disciplinary knowledge and identity, starting to gain membership to their particular communities of practice and are writing in appropriate cognitive and social genres (Bruce 2008) developing their disciplinary language and literacy. However, due to the interdisciplinary element, there are additional benefits, including enabling a mixed-disciplinary group to be focused on the same goals, while approaching these from different angles, and students beginning to gain a greater understanding of their own discipline, through a comparison with others. This also allows them, as mentioned above, to analyse how knowledge is constructed, for instance whether it is empirical and objective, or explicitly interpretive (Kirk 2015), and to understand how language is used in their discipline when compared to others; thereby developing a stronger academic identity. It also aids students in their development as independent learners, such as developing the ability to mine texts for appropriate discourse and language features, and to find their own sources, rather than these being provided, which is often the case in ESAP.

The course at Leeds has been successful, as evidenced in the report from the external examiner, who commented that 'students in this level have the opportunity to really engage with language, literature and ideas in their particular discipline which offers the best preparation for their academic future', and feedback from students, with 98% of students agreeing, in the most recent feedback, that the programme prepared them for post-graduate study, including comments such as 'the course is so beneficial on our Master's degree' and 'It is good to think deeply about my discipline'. However, although overall the course has generally been a success, there are still a number of challenges.

The first is that this approach, unlike ESAP, relies on students having disciplinary knowledge, which is not always the case. Those that do not have a solid base in their discipline often find the course overly challenging, leading to them focusing on trying to pass, rather than focusing on the learning process. Moreover, it does not always match with students' expectations, with them regarding a preessional course as a 'language course', rather than one that aims to help students to develop both academically and linguistically. This often leads to students not fully understanding the benefits until on their Master's programmes, with feedback at the end of term, such as 'I think teachers should remember we are pre-sessional students, not Master's students', developing into 'The course developed my academic skills...many students have a misconception about such a programme to only help their general English' when on their Master's programmes. However, the biggest challenge is that this approach can lead to an anti-scientific bias, as the genre of their main writing task is an essay, when, as Gardner et al (2018) note, in physical sciences, the majority of assignments are reports. In addition, practitioners are drawing on their previous writing experience when guiding students, which is often humanities based. It, therefore, relies on the students having a good understanding of scientific writing, or being prepared to challenge the writing expectations and 'norms' in the EAP classroom.

#### 5. IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION : DISCIPLINES, INTERDISCIPLINARITY, HYPER-DISCIPLINARITY, SPECIFICITY, AND APORETIC EGAP.

Neither of us would suggest that the EGAP course described above resolves the perennial issues of ESAP or EGAP and, in a number of key ways, we acknowledge that much could still be developed and refined on this course. However, experience of teaching and developing this interdisciplinary approach to preessional EGAP has made us think much harder about; interdisciplinarity, disciplines and specificity. This thinking has taken us beyond the EAP literature and into the realms of social realism and the sociology of knowledge. Our first set of observations are based on a chapter by Moore (2011).

Rhetorically speaking, interdisciplinarity has often been accompanied by hyperbolic 'rhetorical inflation' (Moore, 2011: 90) whereby interdisciplinarity is associated with progressive political positions serving the disadvantaged and marginalised and can be neatly contrasted with elitist, conservative, reactionary disciplinarity serving the interests of the dominant class/group. Moore labels this form of discursive interdisciplinarity 'hyper-interdisciplinarity'. In addition, this discursive position claims that disciplines are arbitrary, historical, social constructions without any special or defining epistemological status. We would also argue that there are neoliberal variations on hyper-interdisciplinarity whereby the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity is a useful tool to reconfigure disciplines (and courses) into profitable commodities that can be sold to students and render the university more attractive to research funders through, for example, the trope of interdisciplinarity as a key means to solve (profitably) 'real-world problems'.

However, whether from a neoliberal or progressive perspective, this hyper-interdisciplinarity can be contrasted with routine, mundane interdisciplinarity. Abbot (2001) states that 'the emphasis on interdisciplinarity emerged contemporaneously with, not after, the disciplines' (Abbot, 2001: 132) and he suggests this emerged in the US in the 1920s. Interdisciplinarity is, then, routine, normal and an everyday feature of academic life and interdisciplinarity did not follow from disciplinarity but grew alongside. There is, in short, nothing special about interdisciplinarity.

Moore goes on to make three very interesting distinctions as to how disciplines can be understood which provide a much more nuanced understanding than is often the case in EAP. Firstly, disciplines can be distinguished by their ontologies and methodologies. Secondly, by how disciplines are located around the university. And thirdly, how disciplines are organised professionally through, for example, associations, conferences, papers and people.

The last point we would like to draw from Moore (2011) concerns the purpose(s) of interdisciplinarity. Moore, posits that the 'problem' defines the nature of interdisciplinarity. It might be case that disciplines are brought together to solve a problem and then disperse. This is not interdisciplinarity rather a temporary configuration of parts of disciplines. It is ad hoc and unlikely to have a permanent impact on the disciplines. Disciplines, however, need problems to continue and develop; they are integral to its stability, identity and continuation.

What does all the above have to do with ESAP or EGAP? Firstly, it suggests that EAP does not fully consider the routine and mundane nature of much of interdisciplinarity. *Specificity* especially as it tends to be equated/elided/confused with *disciplinarity* seems to produce terminology and approaches to framing ESAP (and EGAP) whereby the interdisciplinary lives and needs of students risk being occulted and neglected. Specificity (for students) may often not be located within but among the disciplines. Boundary crossing (Feak, 2016; Hyland, 2016) and the 'rhetorically complicated life' (Hyland, 2016: 23) of interdisciplinary studies are acknowledged occasionally but little significant pedagogic attention has been devoted to this. This observation points to a way forward moving beyond the rather aporetic history of EGAP with tropes of novice practitioners enacting emaciated study skills courses and unable to envisage EGAP as anything other than limited in effectiveness and scope and always second best to ESAP.

If we take the views here on interdisciplinarity seriously then we can begin to think of EGAP pedagogy and syllabi differently. It also, and finally, suggests that a vital component of an interdisciplinary EGAP programme must make visible the social dimensions of knowledge production. Students need to be aware of and consider the issues raised in this section, for example: to understand that knowledge can be framed through rhetorical hyperbole and ideological positioning, forms and iterations of interdisciplinarity may exist primarily to generate profit, and that interdisciplinarity may in some cases be quite ephemeral. Ultimately, students are members of and participants in the university not only apprentices being socialised into the disciplinary or interdisciplinary practices of their respective programmes and departments, and, as such, considerations of interdisciplinarity, as conceived here, enable conversations and perspectives to emerge as to the purpose and values of universities.

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