EAP Needs Analysis in Higher Education: Significance and Future Direction

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Abstract

This paper is prompted by the growth and demand for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which has increased immensely in the global higher education sector. It provides an overview of some issues pertaining to the conduct of EAP needs analysis in ESL and EFL contexts. This paper consists of four sections. The first section tries to review the development, description and categorization of EAP. The second discusses the different situations in which EAP courses are conducted according to the status of the English language in respective countries. The third focuses on the most essential issue in EAP, that is, the content or curriculum of EAP courses. The paper concludes by looking at the rationale and focus of conducting needs analysis at the tertiary level.

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

English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

The growth of EAP is derived from the awareness of ESP practitioners that all the tertiary level students possess different learning needs and this cannot be fulfilled by teaching them the same type of English language. Sabariah and Rafik-Galea (2005), for instance, see the development of EAP as a result of dissatisfaction with the lack of generalizability of ESP courses. In a needs analysis conducted in Hong Kong to find out the tertiary students' English language needs , Evans and Green (2007) found out that most of the undergraduates "not only require language support at university, but also that this support should be oriented towards academic rather than general English" (p.5). In addition to that, Hyland (1997) also realises that students generally see the value of EAP classes as they recognize that proficiency in English is an important determinant of academic success in an English-medium environment.

EAP was once called English for Educational Purposes (EEP) in the past. This term was used when the concept was first introduced, and it is seldom used now after being replaced by the term EAP. Coffey (1984, cited in Sager, 1998), describes EAP as a student's need for "quick and economical use of the English language to pursue a course of academic study" (p.4). Whereas for Wei and Flaitz (2005), EAP is like a 'key responsibility' in assisting ESL (English as a Second Language) students to develop the kind of English language proficiency that will lead to success in their academic endeavours.

During 1980s, both EAP and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes) were grouped together. This is seen when Carver (1983) identified three types of ESP (English for Specific Purposes): (i) English as a restricted language, (ii) English for Academic and Occupational Purposes, and (iii) English with specific topics. It is noted here that EAP and EOP are categorised as the same type of ESP. This idea is in line with Hutchinson and Waters's (1987) view that EAP and EOP is not a "clear-cut distinction as people can work and study simultaneously and it is also likely that in many cases the language learnt for immediate use in a study environment will be used later when the students takes up, or returns to, a job" (p.16). Therefore, it can be implied that both EAP and EOP are geared towards the same purpose or outcome – to prepare learners for their future professions. However, this idea is not accepted by some ESP researchers like Sabariah and Rafik-Galea (2005) and Jordan (1997).

English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) & English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)

Jordan (1997) defines ESP clearly as two main strands: English for Occupational/ Vocational/ Professional Purposes (EOP/EVP/EPP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Under the strand of EAP, it is subdivided into two sub-strands: 'English for Specific Academic Purposes' (ESAP) and 'English for General Academic Purposes' (EGAP) (Blue, 1988a cited in Jordan, 1997). An example is given to distinguish

EOP/EVP/EPP and ESAP. For instance, doctors are put under EOP/EVP/EPP, medicine is listed under EAP or specifically ESAP. In the EOP/EVP/EPP, training for the doctors will be focussing on the practice of doctor-patient interaction during consultation. Conversely, under ESAP, practice is specially designed for medicine students to carry out academic tasks such as reading medical journals and writing clinical reports. Thus, EOP is the language needed in a real working environment; and subject-specific English or ESAP is the language required for a particular academic subject, e.g. medicine and law, where its contents include the language structure, genres, vocabulary, the particular skills needed for the subject, and the appropriate academic conventions (Jordan, 1997).

In describing English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), Jordan (1997) asserts that "a large proportion of the common core element is more usually known as "study skills" plus other elements of a general academic English register, incorporating a formal, academic style, with proficiency in the language use" (p.5). These study skills include areas such as effective lecture listening comprehension and note-taking, writing in the appropriate academic register, reading effectively for study purposes, participation in discussion and library research. This is not a subject-specific type of English language and its main objective is to equip learners with the necessary skills to complete tasks in a general academic setting, for instance studying for the first degree at higher learning institutions and preparing postgraduate students in writing dissertation. In EGAP, strategies for reading, writing, speaking and listening for all academic subjects will be taught in the programme while in ESAP, vocabulary and skills specific to a subject of study will be emphasized. So, in distinguishing EGAP and ESAP, Sabariah and Rafik-Galea (2005) point out that the differences between the two sub-strands lies in the level of specificity and the assumptions made about them. They further explain that, in EGAP, student's performance, whether good or bad, is not dependent on the topics(s) related to his/her discipline while in ESAP, student's performance will be different depending on the nature of the topic(s) included in the course. For this, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) conclude that the difference between ESAP and EGAP is that ESAP courses focus on the actual tasks that students have to carry out while EGAP courses select more general contexts.

EAP in Higher Education

EAP is needed not only for tertiary educational studies in countries where English is the native language, but also in the countries where English is the official language and medium of instruction in the higher learning institutions (Jordan, 1997). The concept of EAP is interpreted and implemented differently based on the needs and situation of respective country's educational policy. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:34) outline four types of EAP situations at the tertiary level: (1) An English Speaking country such as UK or USA; (2) An ESL situation, such as in former British colonies in Africa or in South East Asia; (3) A situation where certain subjects are taught in English and the remaining in the national language; (4) A situation in which all subjects are taught in the national language and English plays an ancillary role. For the Malaysian EAP situation,

for instance, it is considered to fall within type 3 after revising the university contexts in the country (Faiz, 2005).

The expansion of the demand of EAP to suit the particular needs of tertiary students and the development of higher education varies according to the particular country's situation. For example, in Malaysia, it is due to the consequence of gradual shift of medium of instruction from Malay language to the English language in most of the areas of study. This situation would be different in the country where English is the native language. Liyanage and Birch (2001) state that if English language is not the native language of the students, EAP classes are often attended and needed by almost all the students who are from a range of different academic disciplines. They also reveal that EAP in such countries are usually conducted as ESAP courses catering for the needs of individual academic departments and their students. For instance, undergraduates who sign up for accountancy, management and banking programmes will be undertaking different EAP courses although they are from the same faculty. On the contrary, when English is the official first language of the country, the international students who are from the non-English speaking countries or ESL students will be attending EGAP courses instead of ESAP classes. This is because the students are from a range of academic disciplines and the numbers is insufficient for the institution to conduct ESAP courses for the students according to their academic disciplines. To conclude, there is a clear difference between the needs of EAP students in the two contexts mentioned above.

Having either ESAP or EGAP courses by considering the status of the English language in the particular countries is not a fixed idea as the nature of the EAP courses is still dependent on the generalised objective of having it after identifying the needs of the students. Even in an ESL context, if the intention of the institution is to assist the students to study effectively at the tertiary level with the abilities in handling academic tasks such as referencing skills and study skills, EGAP courses would be more relevant to the students instead of ESAP. Thus, Liyanage and Birch (2001) argue that most EAP courses, in most institutional setting, are likely to continue to be of the EGAP rather than the ESAP variety.

The future development of EAP in higher education has been widely discussed by ESP practitioners. For instance, Mo (2005) predicts that more attention will be paid to EAP at pre-tertiary levels in the future as there are already many researches on EAP needs that concern students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Early exposure of EAP skills is believed to be useful for the pre-tertiary or pre-university students to build a strong academic English language background which will then assist them to learn more effectively at a higher level. When reviewing the present development of EAP in both EFL and ESL contexts, Hamp-Lyons (2001) assures that the English language skills of non-native English speaking academics will develop as the demand is getting higher. Besides that, Liyanage and Birch (2001) comment that there has been little attention given in EAP research which with regard to the problems and complexities of EGAP instruction in English-speaking contexts.

The Focus of EAP

The content of EAP courses largely relies on the students' English language needs in a particular learning context. Hence, in order to know what kind of content area of EAP courses that would closely match with the students' needs, it is necessary to review the different ideas of EAP experts or practitioners. Liyanage and Birch (2001) strongly stress that any English courses that are designed to prepare students to cope with the demands of university study has to focus on what Cummins (1982, cited in Liyanage & Birch, 2001) refers to as 'context-reduced' language which is rather more abstract and rely less heavily on an immediate context; and it has to be different from the content of general ESL courses that focuses on the 'context-embedded' language which emphasizes mainly on everyday interaction. They conclude that general ESL and EAP are two different modes of curricula in terms of student clientele, course content, objectives, and instruction.

Jordan (1997) asserts that the academic curricula of EAP courses which are to cater for students who are taking courses of advanced study at university level has to be academic-oriented and presuppose solid 'literacy abilities'. This is very much similar to Liyanage and Birch's (2001) claim that the EAP curriculum has to build on student awareness towards a particular language of the academy, and certain ways of talking, reading and writing about ideas and texts. This implies that both the language and study skills are two important components in any EAP course. The inclusion of various language and study skills in the content of EAP would help the students to develop the 'literacy abilities' and that the 'academic literacy' will continue to be applied to the complex set of skills, not only to those relating to the mastery of reading and writing (Mo, 2005).

The language component of EAP is still very much on the teaching of grammar. Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) reveal that if grammatical difficulties interfere with language skills, EAP instructors should spend time to concentrate on the difficulties by teaching both the language form and usage. The grammatical forms here include tenses, voices, modals, articles and logical connectors. In addition to that, the usage of grammar that is beyond the sentence level in various contexts has to be highlighted too. Hutchinson and Waters (1987), on the other hand, emphasize on discourse analysis which they believe can raise learner's awareness of the underlying structure of a text and the way in which the language is organized to construct the structure. Besides grammar and discourse analysis, genre analysis is another important language skill (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). This skill can help learners to understand the organization and the language forms of different genres.

The instruction of study skills is an important component of EAP courses as they are not something instinctively acquired but something consciously learnt (Mo, 2005). Jordan (1997) outlines a reasonably comprehensive list of study skills in the study situations which are likely needed in EAP programmes: lecture / talks, seminars / tutorials / discussions / supervisions, practical / laboratory work / field work, private study, reference material, etc. Thus, all these skills need to be taught to the native speakers of English as well as the non-native (Robinson, 1991). Teaching the students various study

skills so that they are able to handle their study well is actually an idea which is derived from the practice of 'Learner Training' or 'Learning How to Learn' (LHTL). This is an area of methodology where students are encouraged to focus on their learning (Benson, 1995). EAP courses, based on this understanding, must highlight the features which are also included in the LHTL programme such as consciousness-raising, explicitness, use of task-appropriate strategies, learner-centredness, self-directed learning and learner autonomy (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). By promoting learner training or emphasizing on study skills, the students will become better and more independent learners and able to take more responsibility for their own learning (Teoh, 1995).

While some view study skills as central to EAP (Beard & Hartley, 1984; Robinson, 1980 cited in Liyanage & Birch, 2001), some researchers maintain that EAP does not entirely rest on study skills (Jordan, 1997) but on the things like general academic English register, incorporating a formal, academic style with proficiency in the language use in addition to study skills. However, he also mentions that in contexts where it is necessary to address the linguistics needs of specific disciplines, the focus on non-specialised language may not be adequate for students to handle functions and notions of discipline-specific language.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), in deciding what should be included in ESP/EAP syllabus, the awareness of the need of a target situation will determine what is considered as acceptable and reasonable content in the language course. Orr (2001) also claims that the content for ESP is not fixed but in turn it is enriched according to the requirements of the learning contexts. It is not "a monolithic whole, which can be acquired in totality, but rather it consists of countless components and combinations that have evolved over time to fulfil communication needs situated within a wide range of social, academic, and work-related contexts." (p.207). In conclusion, an ESP/EAP programme should not be misunderstood as consisting of limited language of words and expression selected from the whole language.

Needs Analysis in EAP

The design and implementation of any curriculum for EAP courses should take into consideration the different language needs of the target learners. Undoubtedly, by determining learners' language needs, a strong foundation pertaining to the whole idea of conducting the particular language courses could be formed. With that preliminary knowledge, the whole process of designing curriculum, from the construction of course objectives to the selection of course contents and learning activities can be made easier. This could provide assurance in the quality of the courses especially in making the learners to achieve the expected learning outcomes. To start collecting information on the learners' language needs, a needs analysis has to be carried out.

In clarifying what 'needs analysis' is, basically, all the ESP/EAP researchers and practitioners share the similar notion. For Weddel and Duzer (1997), needs analysis is just like a tool used to examine the kinds of English and literacy skills required by the

learners and at the same time to identify the literacy contexts of the target language in which the learners will function, what the learners want and need to know to function in those contexts and what they expect to obtain from the instructional programme. It can be observed here that besides the identification of the linguistic items, what the learners need to do in order to use those items and how those items will be used in the predicted context will be explored also in needs analysis. On the other hand, needs analysis is referred as 'the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of students" by Brown (1995:35).

With reference to what should be focused in needs analysis, Wei and Flaitz (2005) perceive it as something which is subjective as learners' needs in several skills or only a specific skill can be examined. They also report that in conducting needs analysis to identify students' academic language needs, researchers can collect data to identify the tasks students will encounter in university content classrooms and also to analyse the skills the students need to perform those tasks successfully. The latter focus is actually concerned with the student learning styles and strategies which is seen as an important aspect in needs analysis as well by Kavaliauskiene and Uzpaliene (2003). Thus, needs analysis can be regarded the process of establishing what and how of a language course (Mo, 2005).

Cowling (2007) observes that there is often a lack of awareness of the existence of needs analysis as a tool in EFL course design and many have overlooked course planning as an area in syllabus design. He even expresses his criticism on the use of textbook as the whole syllabus by some institutions:

> "Such an outlook eliminates the need of a time consuming and often expensive syllabus design process…such an approach ignores the specific learning needs of the target students, something that could be examined through a needs analysis process…One area that has a higher regard for needs analysis is ESP as students' needs are often clearer and of such a nature that a published textbook would not adequately fulfil their needs." (Cowling. 2007:427).

As a result, using such a short-cut approach of determining course syllabus will pose risks to both the instructors and students because the quality of learning might be questioned. Therefore, in developing curriculum for any language courses, a little effort must be put in to conduct needs analysis so that any doubts pertaining to the quality of the curriculum could be avoided.

To come back to the roles of needs analysis in language curriculum design, Mackay and Mountford (1978, cited in Muhammad Nadzri, 2004) speculate four main purposes. Firstly, lecturers will be more acquainted with the sponsoring institution and the requirements of the course. Secondly, needs analysis is able to identify how learners will

use English in their technical fields. Thirdly, needs analysis gives the instructor initial insights about the prospective students' current level of performance in English and fourthly, needs analysis provides an opportunity to collect samples of authentic texts, spoken and written, which will be used by them in the target environment. To sum up here, Muhammad Nadzri (2004) holds the view that needs analysis will enable the instructors to translate the language needs into linguistic and pedagogical terms which in turn develops good curriculum for the courses and offers effective guidance to the instructors who are teaching the courses. With these four strong justifications, needs analysis can be certainly viewed as an integral part in language curriculum development especially in EAP.

The inclusion of needs analysis in language curriculum development should be as early as possible where Keita (2004) suggests that it should be in the first step. This can be seen also in the systematic curriculum development model (refer figure 1) proposed by Brown (1995).
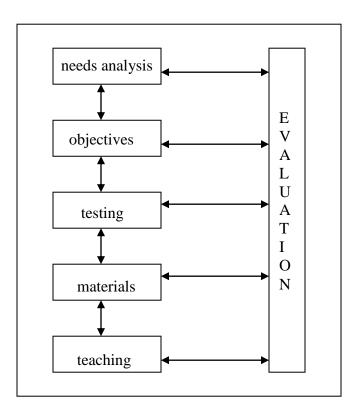

Figure 1: The systematic curriculum development model (Brown, 1995)

In this model, it is noted that needs analysis is placed as the first phase in the whole system. This is then followed by the other five phases: objectives, testing, materials, teaching and evaluation. Kumazawa (2006) states that it is in this initial phase that administrators collect and analyse all the necessary information about students' language needs in order to develop the course objectives, testing methods, instructional material and teaching methodologies. It is also noted in the model, after the fifth phase or a course

has been implemented, a needs analysis has to be re-conducted. This shows that curriculum development, therefore, is actually a cyclical system and needs analysis is also an on-going activity.

In conclusion, needs analysis can be described as "what learners will be required to do with the foreign language in the target situation, and how learners might best master the target language during the period of training" (West, 1994 cited in Cowling, 2007:427). Needs analysis, as observed by Grognet (1996), is the most crucial of all the steps in curriculum design because the remaining steps are based on it. In this study, needs analysis is carried out to examine the students' weaknesses and strengths in using English language in their academic studies and also their preferable learning methods. In the next section, the procedures for needs analysis will be discussed.

Conclusion

In the effort to determine the learners' academic language needs in the target literacy contexts, 'needs analysis' is undoubtedly the most practical and effective platform. Although needs analysis plays an important role in curriculum development, many higher learning institutions still lack awareness of or have overlooked this component and that the language support that is provided to the learners tend to be on an ad hoc basis. Based on the literature, very few local studies have been conducted to find out the EAP needs among the tertiary students with particular reference to the context of EGAP. Most of the researchers' interest lies in the areas of EOP and ESAP which only involve respondents from a specific education or working background.

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