

EAP in English-medium universities: the role of the teacher

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Abstract

English language teachers in English-medium universities in Asia may have a number of overlapping roles. They work to develop the students' language skills, focusing on the particular skills (reading, writing, lecture comprehension etc.) needed at university. They may also work to develop the students' language competence in the specific discipline which they will study at university. Another focus may be assisting the student in transition from school to university, especially if there is a wide cultural gap between these institutions. This paper will outline and discuss these roles to discern how language tutors fit into the scheme of learning and teaching in an English-medium university, and how their role can best be adapted to the benefit of the university community.

Keywords

English-medium university (EMU); English for academic purposes (EAP); English for specific academic purposes (ESAP); transition year; roles of teachers.

Introduction

In many English-medium universities (EMUs) English language teachers work mainly with students in their first year or in pre-sessional courses. They may endeavour to boost the students' level of English and to acquaint them with the language of their specific field of study, and also work to assist them in adapting to the new world of a university.

1 Getting students ready for university: working with language and content

1.1 Getting students to work on language

In an examination of two consecutive studies of students' reactions to the language support offered in university, Bright and von Randow (2008:1) report that first-year students did not engage fully with the support on offer, even when they had a clear need for language development. The second

study revealed that students looking back after first year stated that they would have worked harder on the language needed for university study if they had the opportunity again. Teachers will normally strive to motivate their students and attempt to create enthusiasm for and commitment to their courses among their students. Perhaps in the case of EAP, English teachers (and other university teachers) should recognize a special need to work on 'selling' and marketing EAP courses to students who may not realize how vital language development is for their success at an EMU. The low value sometimes given to quality of English language in assessed work by academics may weaken this message (Evans and Morrison, 2011:207). English teachers whose L1 is not English can be vital role models and guides here. In an enlightening observation on one facet of their special contribution, Mueller (1997:338) noted that they are more likely (than teachers whose L1 is English) to insist on the use of English in the classroom.

1.2 Helping students to work on content.

BALEAP (2008:4) notes that EAP teachers should have the ability to "work with materials and tasks from different subject areas and engage with the ideas they present". Brandt (2008:2), however suggests that ESAP (English for specific academic purposes) may lead English teachers out of their depth. Studies in US schools note how the English teacher can help students to gain competence in academic reading (NCTE, 2006:3) on the way to meeting the requirements of academic courses, for example by having them read a simpler text or a text in their L1 on a difficult topic before engaging with a difficult academic text. It might be expected that schools would be more sensitive to the stages of language development through which students pass than universities. Their methods might be usefully employed at EMUs, even if focus there may be on the type and content of material which the students will have to master in their university studies, rather than on material suited to their actual stage of development.

Dudley-Evans (2001:226) proposes that the effectiveness of the EAP teacher in ESAP depends

on cooperation with the subject teacher and that this cooperation should extend beyond needs analysis and shared work on ESAP tasks and syllabus to team teaching in the ESAP course.

2 Preparing students for transition from school to university

The first year at university is important as a transition year and as a year in which new students learn to adapt to the new environment and cope with its demands. Evans and Morrison (2011:199) note that the researchers on school-university transition seem to have little influence on researchers on EAP, and vice versa, which they find puzzling, given that the first year is often the year in which most time is devoted to language enhancement. They also to adapt to the new environment, students rely more on peer support and networking than on EAP courses.

In several Asian countries, students are under considerable pressure as they prepare for high-stakes examinations which determine university entrance. When they arrive in an EMU where time spent in class (or lectures) is much less than in schools and where they are expected to develop autonomous control of their learning, some go astray. One way to help them adapt successfully is to define the role of EAP teacher as being something between the role of a school teacher, setting and following up homework and monitoring students' preparation for class, and that of a lecturer. The English teacher can prepare the students to take responsibility for their learning.

3 Between whole-class teaching and individual mentoring

The trend in language teaching has been away from the transmission model and whole class teaching towards a perception of the teacher's role as facilitator and as someone who is more likely to interact with students in small groups, participating in and aiding discussion, or with individuals, mentoring and advising, albeit in a whole class framework. The questions of the best ways of deploying the teacher for the benefit of all and of maximizing opportunities for student speaking arise here. An ESAP course may demand a considerable amount of whole class teaching and the role of the teacher may be different from that of a teacher in a general EFL class.

While English support in the first year in an EMU may be provided mainly by EAP or ESAP classes, in subsequent years the support may be provided in short one-to-one meetings at the request of individual students. The teacher's role here, given the great diversity of content and genre in

individual disciplines and the variety of individual needs can be very demanding, and it may be difficult to fulfil it in a satisfactory manner.

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