

# Innovating English teaching: A new approach to EAP

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper I want to discuss a new approach to EAP curriculum and a key idea in the reform of our undergraduate programme at Hong Kong University: the idea of specificity.

First, some background. In September 2012, universities in Hong Kong launched a four-year undergraduate curriculum to replace the existing three-year system. This reduced the secondary school experience by one year and refocused on a more student-oriented approach to undergraduate education. This was

- To break from the old colonial system and align with four-year undergrad degrees in Mainland China, North America and Europe;
- to give students a broader academic experience, including more exposure to disciplines outside their major subject;

The change is a major shift in educational philosophy. It is an attempt to move away from a specialized British undergraduate curriculum and adopt a more holistic approach to the educational experience. Instead of selecting their major on arrival, students enrol in a broad disciplinary area and take a variety of first year courses before they choose a major. This first year “Common Core Curriculum” is a range of optional courses designed to facilitate the transition from school to university and to provide students with a humanistic education which “broadens their horizons beyond their chosen disciplinary fields of study” (HKU website). This was a huge leap in the dark – very few countries have totally restructured their secondary and tertiary education systems in such a radical way all at once. Almost 30,000 new students entered university in 2012 admitted under two different systems, following two different curricula and spanning two different time frames. As two American educationalists, Finkelstein and Walker (2008), said: ‘Hong Kong higher education is being asked to do nothing less than ‘re-invent’ itself – a tall order’.

English is the medium of instruction in HK universities, and central to students’ study and academic success (Evans, 2011; Evans & Green, 2007) although students often find study in English to be a struggle (Li, 2009). A major part of the new curriculum, therefore, is the provision of English. At HKU this was given double the amount of time and increased from 6 to 12 credits. The changes encouraged us to think about the kind of English that we should be teaching. What kind of English would most benefit our students? At the University of Hong Kong our answer to this question was to help them in their academic studies by taking the idea of specificity seriously. Half the credits students take in English were going to be in the form of “English in the Discipline”. This recognizes that because academic communication conventions differ hugely across disciplines, identifying the particular language features, discourse practices, and communicative skills of target groups becomes central to teaching English in universities (Hyland, 2014).

## 2 Curriculum Changes

Under the new curriculum all 3000 first year students at HKU take a Core University English course for 6 credits (Legg et al, 2014). This is a University-wide programme designed to bridge the gap between school-

based English and the disciplinary studies they will encounter in their second year. A growing literature has discussed various ways of integrating English more closely with faculty curricula in the Hong Kong context, using methods which include Problem-Based Learning (Legg, 2007), web resources (Cheung, 2008) and participation-based pedagogy (Littlewood, 2009). CAES prepared for the changes with a committed, research-led engagement with the reform process.

Here we want students to see that writing at university is very different from writing at school. We want them to take responsibility for clarity in their writing and give them the resources to do this. This means helping them to see that academic writing in English, compared with other contexts and languages tends to:

- Be more explicit about its structure and purpose
- Uses more citations to support arguments
- Focuses on actions rather than actors
- Uses fewer rhetorical questions than students tend to use in school essays
- Is generally intolerant of digressions
- Is cautious in making claims (lots of hedges)
- Packages processes as things using nominalisation
- Spells out steps in an argument and connections between sentences with metadiscourse

So in this course we introduce students to concepts like nominalization, impersonalisation, hedging, citation, and so on.

Thus CUE is a “bridging course” in English which brings students up to speed with general academic English. After the first year they take one of the 30 new ‘English in the discipline’ (ED) courses which focus on the specificity of the language they need for their disciplines. These ED courses either

- run parallel with a particular course or
- collect courses together from a particular discipline.

The idea behind this is to try and offer students a more discipline-sensitive approach to English through collaboration with faculties and research-informed course design.

### **3 A specific view of language teaching**

The importance of disciplinary specificity in academic literacy education is not new: Peter Strevens highlighted it as a defining feature of ESP in the early 1980s, for example, but there are still voices who deny the value of this kind of instruction, and instead argue for the teaching of general academic skills.

First, there is Ruth Spack’s (1988) view that language teachers lack the training, expertise and confidence to teach subject specific conventions, and that they should be left to those who know them best, the subject teachers themselves. Instead, EAP teachers should concentrate on general principles of study skills and rhetoric. Second, EAP is said to be too difficult for students with limited English proficiency, who need preparatory classes to give them a good understanding of ‘general English’ first. Third, is the view that developing skills and familiarity with specific schemata amounts to a *training* exercise (Widdowson 1983), a more restricted and mundane activity than *education*, which involves assisting learners’ to understand and cope with a range of needs. Finally, there is a widely held view that academic communication comprises a set of generic skills and language forms, which differ very little across the disciplines. Many EAP textbooks are based on this idea of a *common core* of grammar, and often courses are organised around themes such as ‘academic writing’ and ‘oral presentations’ which suggest that note-taking, essay writing and speaking skills are similar in all courses.

In response, there are a number of objections to the EGAP position. For one thing, EAP teachers cannot rely on subject specialists to teach disciplinary literacy skills, as they generally have neither the expertise

nor desire to do so. Second, the argument that weak students need to control core forms before coping with harder specific features of language is not supported by SLA research, which suggests that learners acquire features of the language as they need them, rather than in the order that teachers present them. Third, there are serious doubts over the existence of a ‘common core’ of language items. Focusing on a formal system ignores the fact that any form has many possible meanings, depending on its context, and by incorporating meaning into the common core we are led to the notion of specific varieties of academic discourse, and to the consequence that learning should take place within these varieties. Finally, it has been difficult to pin down exactly what *general* academic forms and skills actually are or how a set of common core features might help address students’ urgent needs to operate effectively in particular courses even if we could identify it (Hyland, 2002).

#### **4 Examples of disciplinary specificity**

Specificity underlines our programmes. But up until now this paper has been a bit abstract. I will illustrate what I’ve been talking about by discussing some features of academic writing in a series of studies I’ve done over the past few years. These were of a 1.5 million word corpus of research articles in 8 disciplines and 4 million words of student dissertations.

##### **4.1 Lexical differences**

First of all, disciplines have different ways of talking about things, which makes it difficult to identify a common academic vocabulary. At the obvious level of content words, a quick study of chapters from 5 textbooks in applied linguistics and 5 in biology shows that students encounter completely different items. Less obviously, perhaps, in a study into an academic corpus of 3.5 million words, for example, Polly Tse and I (Hyland & Tse, 2007) found that so-called universal semi-technical items in Coxhead’s *Academic Word List* (Coxhead, 2000) actually have widely different frequencies and preferred meanings in different fields. For example:

- “*consist*” means ‘*stay the same*’ in social sciences and ‘*composed of*’ in the sciences.
- ‘*volume*’ means *book* in applied ling and ‘*quantity*’ in biology.
- ‘*Abstract*’ means ‘*remove*’ in engineering and ‘*theoretical*’ in social sciences.

So words which seem to be the same, have different meanings across different fields.

Similarly, Ward (2009) compared lexical items in textbooks across 5 engineering fields and found that *gas, heat and liquid* occurred almost exclusively in chemical engineering. He also found items like *system, time, value* and *factor* which were very high across all engineering fields, but they collocated very differently, giving these words different technical meanings (*settling time, critical value, load factor*). Thompson (2006) found similar variations in the distribution of the top 20 content words in the BASE lecture corpus: 60% of occurrences of ‘*economy*’ were in the social sciences, 65% of ‘*vary*’ in the physical sciences, and 50% of ‘*respond*’ in life sciences.

##### **4.2 Genre differences**

Rhetorical choices also vary enormously across disciplines because they express very different epistemological and social practices. So students learn their disciplines as they learn its discourses. I do not have the space to discuss disciplines in detail so I’m going to refer to hard-soft fields. This distinction is a blunt instrument, but illustrates some of the ways rhetorical choices are related to disciplinary understandings and how writers take different positions towards their material and their readers. For

example, the Table shows a few of these differences based on the analysis of 240 research articles of 1.4 million words from the ten leading journals in 8 disciplines.

Table 1: Selected features across fields (per 1000 words)

Fields	Self-mention	Citation	Self-citation	Hedges	Boosters	Directives
Arts/Humanities	34.2	11.1	0.4	17.5	6.9	1.2
Science/Engineering	12.1	5.8	0.6	10.25	4.5	2.5

#### 4.2.1 Self mention

Perhaps the most obvious difference in disciplinary writing is the use of self-mention. This concerns how far writers want to intrude into their texts though use of 'I' or 'we', or use impersonal forms. To some extent it's a personal preference determined by seniority, experience, confidence, personality, etc. but my 240 research articles, once again show broad disciplinary preferences with 2/3 of cases in the social sciences & humanities papers (Hyland, 2001).

Table 2 Self-mention in research articles (per 1,000 words)

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Philosophy	5.5	Physics	4.1
Sociology	4.3	Biology	3.4
Applied Linguistics	4.5	Mechanical Engineering	1.0
Marketing	5.5	Electrical Engineering	3.3
<b>Average</b>	<b>5.0</b>		<b>2.9</b>

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Now it's clear that writers in different disciplines represent themselves, their work and their readers in very different ways, with those in the humanities and social sciences taking far more personal positions than those in the sciences and engineering.

As I mentioned a few minutes ago, the reason for this is that in the sciences writers are interested in establishing the objectivity of what they report uncontaminated by human activity. They're concerned with generalisations rather than individuals, and this is done by distancing the writer from interpretations in ways that are familiar to most teachers of English, using:

*The passive:*

A bright spot of incident IR light was observed at the input coupling grating.  
(Phy)

*dummy it subjects:*

It was found that a larger stand-off height would give a smaller maximum shear strain when subjected to thermal fatigue...  
(ME)

And by *attributing agency* to inanimate things like tables, graphs or results:

The images demonstrate that the null point is once again well resolved and that diffusion is symmetric  
(Phy)

By subordinating their voice to that of nature, scientists rely on the persuasive force of lab procedures rather than the force of their writing.

In contrast, in the humanities and social sciences, the first person allows writers to strongly identify with a particular argument and to get credit for an individual perspective. By marking your views with the first person, you leave readers in no doubt of your stance while claiming credit for what you are saying. It is a powerful way of demonstrating an *individual contribution* and establishing a claim for *priority*. Research also shows that these differences are repeated in undergraduate essays, post graduate dissertations and textbooks, thereby influencing what students read, write and are assessed on.

#### 4.2.2 Citation

Similarly, citation practices also differ enormously, reflecting the extent writers can assume a shared context with readers. 'Normal science' produces public knowledge through cumulative growth; problems emerge from earlier problems which allows writers to rely on readers recovering the significance of the research without extensive referencing. They are often working on the same problems and are familiar with the earlier work (Hyland, 1999).

In the humanities and social sciences, on the other hand, research is less linear, the literature more dispersed and the readership more heterogeneous, so writers can't presuppose a shared context to the same extent, but have to build one far more through citation.

#### 4.2.3 Self-citation

This also helps account for the much higher proportion of self-citation in the sciences (12.5% of all citations in the sciences compared with 4.3% in the humanities). The linearity of research means that scientists are constantly building on their previous work far more than writers in the soft knowledge fields.

#### 4.2.4 Hedges and boosters

The table also shows that hedges and boosters index disciplinary practices, with both occurring more frequently in the arts and humanities papers (Hyland, 1998).

**Hedges** are devices which withhold complete commitment to a proposition; they imply that a claim is based on plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge while **boosters** stress certainty and commitment to statements. Because these forms represent the writer's direct involvement in a text, they are more common in the social sciences than in hard sciences. One reason hedges are more common in the soft fields is that there is less control of variables, more diversity of research outcomes, and fewer clear bases for accepting claims than in the sciences. Writers can't report research with the same confidence of shared assumptions so papers rely far more on recognizing alternative voices. Arguments have to be expressed more cautiously by using more hedges. But because methods and results are also more open to question, writers also use more boosters in some circumstances to establish the significance of their work against alternative interpretations, using forms like *definitely*, *prove* and *certain* to restrict alternative voices.

In the hard sciences positivist epistemologies mean that the authority of the individual is subordinated to the authority of the text and facts are meant to 'speak for themselves'. This means that writers often disguise their interpretative activities behind linguistic objectivity. Scientists put greater weight on the methods, procedures and equipment used rather than the argument to suggest that results would be the same whoever conducted the research. Less frequent use of hedges and boosters is one way of minimising the researcher's role, and so is the preference for modals over cognitive verbs.

Modal verbs can more easily combine with inanimate subjects to downplay the person making the evaluation. So we find more statements like this in the social sciences:

It seems sensible to assume the men concerned were probably not unreflective about this patterned conduct. (Soc)  
We believe it might have been better to have presented the questionnaire bilingually.(AL)

And find far more modals used to hedge statements in the sciences:

This could be interpreted as reflecting the dynamics of fungal colonization. (Bio)

The deviations at high frequencies may have been caused by the noise measurements (EE)

Modals, then, are one way of helping to reinforce a view of science as an impersonal, inductive enterprise while allowing scientists to see themselves as discovering truth rather than constructing it.

#### 4.2.5. Directives

The final feature reflects the difference between hard and soft knowledge areas regarding the extent to which succinctness and precision are valued, or even possible: directives. These instruct the reader to perform an action or to see things in a way determined by the writer and are expressed through imperatives (like *consider*, *note*, and *imagine*) and obligation modals (such as *must*, *should* and *ought*).

They direct readers to 3 main kinds of activity:

- **textual acts:** direct readers to another part of the text or to another text
- **physical acts** direct readers how to carry out some action in the real-world
- **cognitive acts** instruct readers how to interpret an argument, explicitly positioning readers by encouraging them to *note*, *concede* or *consider* some argument in the text.

They are not only more frequent in science texts, but also function differently. So while directives represent a writer's intrusion into a text and so might be expected to be more frequent in the soft fields, they are also a potentially risky tactic as they instruct readers to act or see things in a certain way. If we exclude Philosophy, 60% of directives in the soft knowledge texts direct readers to a reference or table rather than telling them how they should interpret an argument. So examples like these are common:

*see Steuer* 1983 for a discussion of other contingencies' effects. (Mkt)

*Look at* Table 2 again for examples of behavioristic variables. (Mkt)

For transcription conventions *please refer to* the Appendix. (AL)

Those in the sciences, on the other hand, largely guide readers explicitly through an argument, emphasising what they should attend to and the way they should understand it:

What has to be recognized is that these issues..... (ME)

Consider the case where a very versatile milling machine of type M5... (EE)

A distinction must be made between cytogenetic and molecular resolution. (Bio)

This is because the linear, problem-oriented nature of the natural sciences enables research to occur within an established framework. Arguments can be formulated in a highly standardised code which presupposes a lot of background. Moreover, succinctness is valued by both editors - who take a bias to publish stance -

and information saturated scientists who tend to read for the bottom line. Directives allow writers to cut directly to the heart of matters while arguments need to be more elaborate in the soft fields.

## 5 Differences in tutor expectations

Another major disciplinary difference is tutors attitudes to writing and feedback. In a study I conducted at HKU (Hyland, 2013 and 2014) I found broad differences looking at the attitudes and practices of 20 academics, 5 from each of 4 faculties comprising 8 disciplines. All teachers set written assignments – always as assessment and often as the only assessment.

But soft knowledge tutors were agreed that this is not just a measure of quality control, but of developing skills of disciplinary argument as these respondents recognised:

Writing is absolutely key, it embodies the discipline: the main discipline product. Teaching History is about teaching students to write. What I expect them to gain ultimately, as well as the ability to express themselves, is the ability to engage more effectively with discourses in the past. You can't do that unless you can articulate precisely what the discourse means. (History)

I think writing is very important. It reflects the ways which students structure and express their thoughts. So, I am less concerned about correct spelling and grammar, what I am very concerned about is teaching them to write logical essays which take a research question and address it in a structured and thoughtful way with evidence and logical conclusions. (Business)

For teachers in the sciences writing was less important and the fact that students were writing in a second language was often treated as a minor issue:

If they have problems with language errors, that means they are not working hard enough. They are 21 years olds. I mean they should have a high level of ability already, not just what they have learnt since coming here. When I assess their writing I have to treat everybody equally so grade grammar less, a very small percentage, maybe 5%. (Engineering)

Looking at the feedback itself, this was typically less frequent and more cursory on the science assignments: just ticks or question marks and often just a grade. These texts seem hurriedly checked, rather than carefully read. Teachers in the social sciences offered more explicit commentary on language:

My edit here is a classic example of the clarity that can be achieved if you adopt a Subject-Verb-Object sentence structure. Check your original and see how this expresses your meaning more clearly. (History feedback)

Avoid long sentences. Before you have control over sentence structure use a single sentence for each point. This will allow readers to see your argument better. (Business feedback)

These comments were largely seen as aspects of disciplinary writing rather than just getting grammar right:

I suppose my feedback focuses on trying to help them clearly state a claim or idea and then how they can develop it in an appropriate style. So, it's about encouraging clarity of thought and clearly defining a question to discuss. (English)

In contrast, tutors in the hard sciences rarely required drafts and gave no feedback.

Actually I don't ask for a draft. Their report is an assignment and they are graded on this. If we give them a chance to write a draft, if we correct a draft, we are just giving a grade to our own work. We don't write their exams for them so why write their reports?

(Engineering)

For some, especially in the sciences, setting assignments was a way of seeing if students had understood the course. For these teachers, feedback had doubtful significance:

I don't think it makes a lot of difference to be honest. It all depends on the students. Some students will come and talk about it and will go away and change it. Some students seem not to care too much. I guess if the students thought it was helpful more of them would ask for feedback.

(Bio)

In fact, tutors often delegated feedback to teaching assistants:

Students have access to postgraduate demonstrators. I think it is the students' initiative whether they use them and it's obvious they are the ones which do much better, I think they obviously had some input.

(Bio)

They go to the postgraduates first and then to me if necessary. If the students send them their drafts then the demonstrator will give them feedback. But this isn't compulsory. It's up to them.

(Chemistry)

Several respondents did not see improving students' disciplinary literacy as their job:

How helpful is the written feedback for improving students work? I've no idea. I don't teach them how to write. They go to academic writing classes I think. I don't think my feedback would help them to write.

(Eng)

Others consider alternative priorities:

"We shouldn't fool ourselves. This is a research university where the expectations are quite clear. Research is at the top. Teaching is number two and administration is number three. Some of us sometimes feel that administrative work is number two and teaching is at the very bottom. We don't have as much time to help students as we would like".

(History)

## 6. Differences in assignment types

Perhaps specificity is most obvious in the *kinds* of writing that students are asked to do. In fact, different fields value different kinds of argument and set different writing tasks so that in humanities and social sciences, analysing and synthesising multiple sources are important while in the sciences, activity-based skills such as describing procedures, defining objects, and planning solutions are needed. We also know that different fields make use of different genres, so that chemists typically write lab reports and computer scientists write program documents.

A recent large scale corpus study of 30 disciplines by Nesi & Gardner (2013), for instance, found 13 different "genre families", ranging from case studies through empathy writing to reports, and these differ in social purpose, genre structure and the networks they form with other genres. Similarly, even in fairly cognate fields students write quite different texts. In looking at the assignments given to medical students, for instance, Gimenez found that nursing and midwifery students were given very different writing assignments.



Of course we are not going to teach all these genres in our new curriculum at HKU, but it helps show there are different ways students are assessed and different expectations of how they should write (Hyland, 2013).

## **7 Theory into practice**

That is the research, let's go back to HKU and I want to give you just one example of an English in the Discipline course to show what specificity means in practice.

*English for Clinical Pharmacy* is a third year course focusing on common spoken and written genres in drug information. In parts of the course we teach specific word knowledge and strategies for learning and applying new terms so that students can select the vocabulary and arguments they need to write drug information genres and cite information from different sources to give drug recommendations. Learning is through a drug information project which was jointly devised with the Pharmacy Department. Drug evaluation is a basic part of a pharmacist's career as many of the documents they write have to be based on some form of drug evaluation. So students, working in pairs, evaluate and recommend two drugs that can be used to treat the same medical condition. To make sure the exercise is meaningful, the drugs assigned to the students are selected by the Pharmacy Department. The Pharmacy department also advised us on the writing task – this is a hospital bulletin article – as this is a common genre for clinical pharmacists who are working in a hospital.

Thus the project provides an opportunity for learners to develop and practice useful and highly disciplinary specific research and academic writing skills. They have to search for and select relevant drug information from reliable sources, compare drugs, and write a comparative drug evaluation article for publication in an online pharmacy bulletin. To ensure the authenticity of all this, the project has not only been jointly designed by Pharmacy and English tutors in partnership, but is also co-assessed together.

## **8 Conclusions**

Clearly there contexts which do not allow us to specify students' needs clearly or in which we are seeking to introduce students to university study, as in the CUE course described above, and here we may want to teach a General EAP programme. But there are considerable advantages to language instruction which is research led and based on students' disciplinary needs.

The idea of discipline has become important in EAP as we have become more sensitive to the ways students write as members of social groups. Essentially, we can see disciplines as language-using communities, and the term helps us join writers, texts and readers together. Communities provide the context within which students learn to communicate and to interpret each other's talk, gradually acquiring the specialized discourses of the group. It has to be admitted that the notion of discipline is not completely clear (e.g., Gergen & Thatchenkery 1996), but successful academic writing does not occur in an institutional vacuum. Instead, it largely depends on the individual writer's projection of a shared context as they seek to embed their writing in a particular social world. Wells was aware of this 25 years ago when he said:

*Each subject discipline constitutes a way of making sense of human experience that has evolved over generations and each is dependent on its own particular practices: its instrumental procedures, its criteria for judging relevance and validity, and its conventions of acceptable forms of argument. In a word each has developed its own modes of discourse.*

(Wells, 1992)

To work in a discipline, then, we need to be able to engage in these practices and, in particular, in its discourses. So disciplines structure academic work within wider frameworks of beliefs and practices, but they also provide the conventions and expectations that make texts meaningful. This means that we need to understand the distinctive ways they have of asking questions, addressing a literature, criticizing ideas, and presenting arguments, so we can help students participate effectively in their learning.

I hope to have shown in this paper that the ways that we use language are situated in domains of knowledge and ways of talking about knowledge which differ across disciplines. The bottom line here is that EAP has nothing to do with topping up generic language skills. It is about developing new kinds of literacy: equipping students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic cultures.

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