

## Challenges of English for Academic Purposes in Asia

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**Abstract:** Currently, there is a heated debate on whether English for Academic Purposes (EAP) should take the place of English for General Purposes (EGP) (known as College English at the tertiary level in mainland China) in the foreign language field in mainland China. Some researchers contend that EGP cannot prepare students for their academic study in the new globalized context. However, some researchers argue that EAP may be implemented at some universities with English as the medium of instruction. It should not be generalized at all universities and replace EGP in mainland China. However, little research has been done on the readiness of implementing EAP courses at mainland Chinese universities. A review of literature studied the challenges of EAP that some Asian countries are faced with in terms of the EAP learners and instructors. It hopes to give some perspectives when policy makers make the decision to implement EAP courses for the EFL learners at Chinese universities. Effective EAP practice could be enabled when the challenges are negotiated and corresponding strategies are identified.

**Keywords:** English for Academic Purposes; English as a Foreign Language; challenges

### Introduction

The teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is not a new topic worldwide. Nevertheless, it gains a growing amount of attention just recently in mainland China. Nowadays, there is a heated debate on whether English for Academic Purposes (EAP) should take the place of English for General Purposes (EGP) (known as College English at the tertiary level in China) in the foreign language field in mainland China. Cai and Liao (2010) and Long (2011) argue that EGP cannot prepare

students for their academic study in the new globalized context. They contend that EAP should be the orientation of the college English in China. According to Wang and Yao (2013) and Wen (2014), it is an appropriate and pragmatic practice that EAP courses are taught at some universities with English as the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, it should not be generalized at all universities and even take the place of EGP in mainland China. Other researchers state that teaching of general English and English for liberal education rather than teaching of English for Academic Purposes should be the orientation of college English education. They argue that both the humanistic and instrumental features of EGP justify its position in the English education at tertiary level in mainland China (Hu & Xie, 2014).

Despite the different voices, Tsinghua University, an elite university in mainland China, initiated its transition from the college English education to the EAP teaching for the undergraduate students since Sept. 2011 and reported positive results (Zhang, Zhang & Liu, 2011). The new Guidelines for College English Teaching- A National Syllabus issued in 2016 by the Chinese Ministry of Education for the first time states that the content of college English is composed of EGP (English for General Purposes), EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and Intercultural Communication. The Shanghai Advisory Committee on College English Teaching - SACCET took a further step. It issued A Framework of Reference for EFL Teaching at Tertiary Level in 2015, stipulating that EAP is a compulsory course for all the first year undergraduate students at Shanghai universities. Many universities start to integrate EAP in their English curriculum in one form or other regardless of the challenges they may encounter.

The talk about EAP seems ubiquitous in the mainland China at the moment. In this context, this article reviews the challenges of EAP in some Asian countries to illustrate the common tension felt by the Asian countries. It hopes to give the policy makers some perspectives when they implement EAP courses in China.

The present study examines the challenges of EAP in Asian countries through a review of the EAP practices in some Asian countries. Two questions are raised and addressed in the review.

1. What are the challenges of EAP in Asian countries with respect to EAP learners?
2. What are the challenges of EAP in Asian countries with respect to EAP instructors?

### **What is English for academic purposes?**

English has become the international language for people to interact with each other in their social life, academic context, and workplace. English for academic purposes (EAP) has emerged out of the broader field of English for specific purposes (ESP), defined by its focus on teaching English specifically to facilitate learners' study or research through the medium of English (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). Hyland (2006) defined EAP as a "specialized English language teaching grounded in the social, cognitive and linguistics demands of academic target situations, providing focused instruction informed by an understanding of texts and constraints of academic contexts" (p2). Recently, Hadley (2015) described EAP as "tertiary level English instructional training that enables learners to improve their language proficiency within higher educational institutions, irrespective of the country within which that instruction takes place" (p. 23).

### **Who is learning EAP in Asia?**

Initially EAP was taught for the academic success of the overseas students at universities in some Anglophone countries. Nowadays, with the internationalization of higher education, many countries where English is used as the second or a foreign language are aware of the importance of EAP and start to integrate EAP courses at

their universities. In this sense, there emerged the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) about 40 years ago.

According to Flowerdew et al. (2001), the countries that implement EAP courses can be classified into four types.

*English for Academic Purposes is carried out in four main geographical domains, each of which exhibits particular characteristics and purposes. It is carried out, first, in the major English-speaking countries (the US, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand), where large numbers of overseas students whose first language is not English come to study. It is conducted, second, in the former colonial territories of Britain (and less importantly the United States) where English is a second language and is used as the medium of instruction at university level. It is conducted, third, in countries which have no historic links with English, but which need to access the research literature in that language (the countries of Western Europe, Japan, China, Latin America, Francophone Africa and others). And finally, EAP is now increasingly being offered in the countries of the former Soviet-bloc, as they seek to distance themselves as participants in the increasingly global economy and academic community (p.8).*

Recently, Bolton (2013) has stated that globalization has affected Asian education greatly. To be more competitive in the more globalized world, many Asian countries devote much effort to promote their bilingual education, which gives rise to the English medium instruction. Though it is widely used all over the world, English medium instruction is still in its early stage in Asian countries. It is gaining increasing attention from the academia and also support from the government in those countries. In this case, English for academic purposes becomes the focus of the university English education as English is not only taught as a subject but also as a medium for students to be academically successful.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education (MoE) in China initiated the implementation of bilingual education at tertiary level to advance the internalization of higher education, meet the challenge of globalization and technological innovation. It proposed that EMI courses should account for 5 to 10% of the total courses within three years. Many colleges have offered bilingual courses in the subject areas of physics, chemistry, biology, engineering business, law, etc. since then (MoE 2001). In 2007, the Chinese MoE listed one of its recommendations to further Chinese-English bilingual education in tertiary institutions. It encouraged universities and colleges to employ overseas academics to teach the subject matters in English. It also encouraged Chinese teachers with overseas educational background to teach in English as well. In so doing, it hopes to improve the students' English proficiency (MoE 2007). Another major motivation for the learning of English by Chinese students is the desire of many young people to study overseas, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. From 1978 to 2003, a total number of 700,200 Chinese students and scholars studied in 108 countries and regions all over the world, covering almost all disciplines. From the 2013 Chinese Education yearbook by the Chinese MoE, a total number of 399,600 Chinese students and scholars chose to study in foreign countries in 2012. Of the 155,340,000 Chinese who studied in foreign countries in that year, 113,700,000 enrolled in programs at all levels from diploma program, undergraduate program, postgraduate program, postdoctoral program or visiting fellow programs. By the end of 2012, the total number of Chinese who studied in foreign countries amounted to 264,470,000.

In Japan, EMI courses are also supported by the government in order to meet the needs of globalization. Now, MEXT (2004) reported that 46% of universities in Japan offer some content courses in L2, primarily English (as cited in Brown & Adamson, 2011).

With the much effort to promote bilingual education by their governments, many Asian university students are exposed to the English language in their education, in one form or another, whether by listening to their lecturers or, at the very least, through such written forms as presentation slides, class notes, and textbooks (Sanderson, 2011). Gunning (2009) gives a more extreme point of view by arguing that all tertiary English education in Japan should fall under the rubric of ESP/EAP. University education is supposed to be primarily academic in form, which means developing and using academic skills.

The number of EAP learners is growing fast. Students take EAP courses either out of their own desire to function well in an English academic context or because it is a compulsory course.

### **Challenges of EAP in Asian counties with respect to the EAP learners**

For EAP learners, language proficiency is no doubt the biggest challenge. Other than that, this review identifies that inadequate study skills and deficit in digital literacy are two major challenges that the EAP learners in Asian countries are faced with. However, they have not got the deserved attention from the curriculum developer or instructor.

#### *Inadequate study skills*

Adequate study skills are especially critical for school success. Today study skills tutorials or workshops are also offered at universities to prepare both indigenous and overseas students ready for university. The inclusion of study skills is essential as part of EAP courses offered in the western countries. Jordan (1997) lists the study skills required in EAP programs: listening to lectures, talks/seminars, participating in tutorials and discussions, working under supervisions, conducting practical, laboratory work, fieldwork and private study, reading reference material, etc. With adequate study skills learners become more independent and have higher learner

autonomy so as to be more likely to be successful academically. Generally, East Asia students are known to be silent in class (Kim, 2006). One of the reasons is because with the Confucius ideology in some Asian countries EFL learners tend to be obedient and teacher dependent (Pham, 2010, Brown et al., 2011). The other reason is because those study skills needed in an academic context are not given much weight in many Asian countries. Evans and Morrison, (2011) did a longitudinal study at an English-medium university in Hong Kong and found that the students' principal sources of difficulty were comprehending and using specialist vocabulary, understanding their professors' academic requirements, and processing and producing key disciplinary genres. Cai (2012) did a survey on a total number of 927 first year to fourth year undergraduate students at Fudan University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Tongji University and Shanghai University of Finance and Economics in mainland China. His list of the most challenging tasks of the Chinese students included lack of academic words, making oral presentation at conferences and participating in seminar talks, understanding professors' lecture talks and making effective notes in their academic study.

Consequently, the oral classroom activities like the classroom presentation, group discussion and even raising questions that are often used in the EAP classrooms in the western countries become demanding for the Asian students.

The instruction of study skills is an indispensable part of EAP in the western countries. It improves the learner autonomy, which will subsequently promote the learner efficiency. Some research has started to identify the importance of study skills in the process of learning in Asia. However, the integration of study skills training in the EAP course still needs to be carefully planned. What study skills are most needed for a particular group of learners? What methods will be applied for that particular group? Those questions should be addressed when an institution start to implement its EAP courses.

### *Digital deficit*

In a world where technology is developing at a very rapid speed, language and language teaching has also been greatly influenced by technology. Walker (2014, p. 581) states that digital technologies are becoming part of the way that people communicate and part of the context in which language is used. Simpson and Obdaloargue (2014) argue for the inclusion of systematic development of digital literacies within the EAP curriculum.

In the Asian context, Mahmood and Reza (2013) examined Iranian English for academic purposes stakeholders' attitudes toward using the Internet in EAP courses and concluded that Internet is a way to expose learners to a wide range of materials including textbooks, journals, and online electronic sources related to their fields of study in order to widen their awareness of discourse and genre knowledge associated with specialized disciplines. Similarly, Dang (2012) studied learner autonomy with a study on Vietnam students online and offline environment and pointed out that computer proficiency has impact on learner autonomy. These studies identify a lack of integration of new technologies into tertiary EAP course curricula in the Asian countries. EAP instructors do not keep abreast with new technology in Asian countries. They do not use Internet-based activities in their classes. Thang et al. (2012) proposed a blended learning approach, which involved the use of a course book and an online component at a Malaysian university and found that the blended learning approach is well received by the learners. They argued that it could help enhance the quality of language learning, break the monotony of the traditional classroom and open a new avenue for learning.

On the one hand, technology-based skills provide learners more opportunities to exercise their learner autonomy in their learning process. With higher learner autonomy EAP learners will have better performance. On the other hand, in the



modern academic context, learners should be digital literate to be successful at universities. However, the above studies also point out that there is a gap between the learners' technology-based skills and what is expected of them. Therefore, it is proposed that the EAP curriculum developer and instructors should integrate adequate technology-based skills into the EAP courses.

### **Challenges of EAP in Asian countries regarding EAP instructors**

#### *Lack of needs analysis*

EAP approach to course design and teaching is characterized by the needs analysis (Hamp-Lyons, 2001). Western teaching methodologies are not applicable to local context or needs in many cases. Therefore, EAP teachers have the task of finding the needs of the learners and study situation locally so as to develop an EAP curriculum that caters for the needs of the learners. In the systematic curriculum development model proposed by Brown (1995), needs analysis is at the first phase in the whole system. By understanding the learners needs specific to their study situation EAP instructors make decisions on the delivery of particular linguistic knowledge, study skills and subject matters relevant genres etc.

Though many Asian countries have started their EAP courses, many studies report a lack of any needs analysis mechanism in place or even a lack of awareness (Chowdhury et al., 2014; Kafle, 2013; Sharma, 2013; Shing & Sim, 2011). In many Asian countries, teaching resources, teaching methods sometimes are used without evaluating the needs of the learners. In mainland China, some preliminary research has been done in the need analysis of the EAP learners. For instance, Cai (2012) does a need analysis at the four elite universities located in Shanghai. Two of them are from the C9 League and two are on the list of the Project 985 and Project 211. Luo and Chen (2012) conduct the EAP need analysis of the Science and Engineering student enrolled in the postgraduate level at one university for science and technology. They find that academic vocabulary is a big challenge for the students.

Many students are weak in oral presentation, participating seminar, reading English textbooks and references, listening to lectures in English. They also report difficulty in taking notes in English. If EAP is to be applied nationwide, more research needs to be done with respect to the varied learner cohorts in different academic context. For example, because of the different academic culture and language norms, learner needs of EMI universities like University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and New York University Shanghai would not be the same as those of universities where bilingual education is only part of the curricula.

### *Choice of EAP teaching methods*

The pedagogy of English teaching in some Asian countries has long been characterized by grammar-translation, aligning comfortably with, and fuelled by, a strong reliance on the security of rote learning of grammatical rules and memorization of vocabulary, translation of (mostly decontextualized) text, and written exercises at all levels (Chowdhury & Kamal, 2014). By this method, learners learn the language rather than use it. This is contrary to the nature of EAP, which is more about language use in an academic context than the learning of the language. Canagarajah (2014) found that teachers in Sri Lankan universities tend to be more product-oriented. They are not even familiar with teaching methods widely used in the western countries, like models such as community of practice. At many Japanese universities the ESP courses are taught often in stereotypical teacher-fronted, large class-size lessons (Brown et al., 2011).

Unlike the general English, EAP is not only concerned with the language per se, it is more of an educational approach that centers on the learner and the situation. So the teaching of EAP cannot simply borrow from the teaching of the general English. The language should be attended to with an emphasis on how language is used in a particular academic context, such as lectures, seminars, oral presentation and research paper etc.

Therefore, the local instructors should first be aware of the focus of general English and English for academic purposes. Then they need to find a way of teaching that helps the learners to use the language in an academic context.

### *Scant professional development*

The instructors' opinions about who would shoulder the responsibility for designing and teaching EAP courses have never reached consensus (Gao & Bartlett, 2014). In an academic context, EFL learners need both a proficiency of academic English and certain subject matter knowledge to help them cope with their study in an academic context. On the one hand, in Asian countries the EAP instructors are mainly graduates from English language. This practice is questioned because of the EAP instructors' limited specific subject knowledge. It is challenging for the instructors to design and deliver the EAP courses in a more effective way. Gao et al. (2014) discuss that EAP instructors should at least have passable subject matter knowledge to cope with their teaching. On the other hand, Brown et al. (2011) also point out that the ESP courses are taught by teachers with little or no TESL/TEFL training or background at many Japanese universities. This would also be difficult for the teachers without enough linguistic knowledge and English teaching qualification.

The inadequacy of professional development (Gautam, 1998) is one of the factors that have impact on the quality EAP delivery. Professional development will be needed to help the available and new instructional workforce to develop and establish productive balance between instructors' dual roles as learners and teachers (Gao et al., 2014).

It is advisable to provide EAP instructors with progressive training of the subject area knowledge relevant to their teaching and the EAP theories and pedagogy fundamental to the EAP course delivery. The collaboration between general English

instructors and subject content instructors is proposed to be a way to improve the EAP delivery quality. However, how and to what extent the instructors in the two areas collaborate with each other still need to be further explored.

### *Large class size and inadequate teaching resources*

Studies in the Asian context have identified the challenges faced in EAP classrooms like large classes and lack of adequate teaching resources (Giri, 2010; Brown et al., 2011; Canagarajah, 2014).

In the western countries, EAP classes are usually small. Learners get more individualized instruction and have more opportunities to be exposed to English and use the language. However in many Asian countries, large classes are common. For economic reasons and large student population, class size cannot be reduced in a short time. In this context, teaching methods applicable to large size classes should be a research question for the local instructors and academics.

In addition, adequate resources to design tasks and activities accessible to the EAP instructors in many Asian countries are scant. EAP instructors use sample texts of a certain discipline (i.e., geography or biology) in class and provide comprehension exercises to students Canagarajah (2014). Though authentic materials, these texts cannot simply be used without any adaption to the needs of the learners. It is not possible for the instructors alone to find strategies to overcome the two structural challenges. Support from the administration will help to enable a positive outcome for the EAP courses.

### **Conclusion**

Though there are still heated debates on the feasibility of implementing EAP courses at Chinese universities, the new Guidelines takes an even-handed attitude for how to settle this issue, proposing to integrate instrumental with humanistic values as

well as ESP with EGP in College English Teaching (Xu & Fan, 2016). No matter what, EAP practice has been initiated at some mainland Chinese universities, but is still in its early stage in terms of teaching practice and research as well. Issues will come along with its rapid development. With a view of the challenges of EAP faced by the Asian countries, it is hoped that Chinese EAP instructors and policy makers may better attend to the issues when having the EAP in place.

This review examines the challenges of EAP in some Asian counties in terms of both the learners and instructors. For the Asian EAP learners, inadequate study skills and digital deficit are found to be the two common challenges that may affect their success at universities. Those skills help to promote the learner autonomy, but have not yet got the deserved attention in the EAP courses in Asia. Lack of needs analysis, choice of teaching methods, scant professional development and the large class size and inadequate teaching resources pose challenges for the Asian EAP instructors locally.

When everyone is talking about whether EAP should take the place of EGP and how to reform the college English education in mainland China, one thing should be kept in mind. That is the challenges of EAP practice that the Chinese universities may be faced with. China, to some extent, shares similar rationales for implementing EAP courses at its universities with its Asian counterparts. By looking to the other Asian countries, China can predict the challenges ahead and try to identify effective strategies to overcome them.

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