

# **Dialogue in the EAP classroom: practitioners' and learners' collaborative knowledge- Building**

**Albert Cleisthenes Wong**

The complex ways in which English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners articulate their professional identity have recently been called into question (Ding & Bruce, 2017; Campion, 2016). In the absence of an extensive range of teacher preparation options specifically tailored to those seeking to enter the profession, EAP instructors often begin teaching on academic literacy or university preparation programmes such as pre-sessionals with a general language teaching qualification such as a DELTA (Martin, 2014). This sometimes presents undue challenges for those entering classrooms targeting English language use in specific academic disciplines where the focus is on English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) in areas such as business, humanities and sciences. Here, the basis upon which language pedagogy is applied in such circumstances would be conditioned by the transfer of knowledge about teaching and learning in general ELT and general academic English (EGAP) classrooms to an ESAP context. However, with prevailing research in EAP still focuses predominantly on academic discourse and the linguistic dimensions of academic publications or the “what” of EAP, far less is known about the “how” of EAP in relation to learners and teaching in the classroom (Todd, 2003).

The recent growth of EAP as a theoretically grounded interdisciplinary field (Hyland, 2018) demands a contextualised examination of how teachers are to engage with the practice of EAP in the context of specific academic disciplines. It is indeed important, for instance, to situate this inquiry in the arena of classroom interactions and dialogue. The perspective from which to examine the practice of ESAP classroom pedagogy is derived from the rich tradition of classroom interaction and dialogue research that sees active participation in learning processes as fundamental to the acquisition of knowledge (Wells & Arauz, 2006). It posits that classroom interaction is pivotal to the construction of knowledge built upon shared understanding (Mercer, 2005). This requires us to regard the articulation of EAP teaching and learning as a process of collaboration between the learners as teachers in the ESAP arena. On the one hand, EAP teachers play an indispensable role as language experts working to assist learners in their efforts to gain access to “distinctive ways members jointly construct a view through discourses” (Hyland, 2002, p.390). However, it is also evident, given the potential lack of expertise in specific disciplines, that learners in ESAP contexts would have to contribute their subject

knowledge to the classroom dialogue to facilitate academic literacy instruction if they were to transfer the skills acquired through such instructional efforts to their own written and spoken academic work. This division of labour between learners and teachers in respect of knowledge and skills depends on the effective execution of dialogic strategies used in the ESAP classroom that I have explored in a previous research effort (Wong, 2019a). Specifically, in the world cafe session at the BALEAP PIM “Knowledge in EAP”, practitioners were challenged to tackle a series of questions relating to how the co-construction of knowledge fundamental to ESAP instruction should take place through classroom dialogue:

1. What forms of **collaboration** should be expected between learners and the EAP practitioner in the discipline-specific EAP classroom?
2. How much **content preparation** should be expected of EAP practitioners?
3. How can teachers make use of **classroom interactional strategies** to engage learners in the production of content knowledge that supplements their own?
4. How should EAP teachers understand their **role in promoting academic knowledge construction** in the process of classroom teaching?

### **Collaboration between learners and practitioners: teachers as lead team players**

The major forms of collaboration that participants found essential between learners and EAP practitioners can be conceptualised as teacher-learner team-playing, joint problem-solving and collaborative engagement in academic texts. Participants regarded team playing as being key to effective collaboration whereby they encourage learners’ active attempts at negotiating with the ESAP teachers, who are managers of learning expectations and promoters of information exchange, the kinds of discipline-specific knowledge that would make learning relevant. Situating teachers as a learning member within the ESAP classroom context, it is then possible to understand knowledge co-construction as a process whereby learners and teachers are jointly engaged in problem-solving insofar as the handling of discipline specific content in academic literacy instruction is concerned. The collaborative “unpacking of specific academic discourse or text”, in particular, can be attempted to allow for the expertise of both students and ESAP practitioners to be recognised and effectively utilised. Collaborating over assessment was also suggested as a form of learner-teacher joint venture envisionable in the ESAP classroom. It

was less clear, however, how this was to be realised at the level of classroom practice but the assessment for learning (AFL) literature does point to dialogic practices to promote information exchange on the part of teachers (Black et. al., 2004).

Nonetheless, some participants also raised the point that subject knowledge and language proficiency could also have an impact on the extent of collaboration. It is certainly important to acknowledge the challenges of maintaining a fruitful dialogue whereby students' content area knowledge is insufficient or that they lack the necessary proficiency to express themselves effectively to assist teachers with their understanding of the academic content of their discipline.

### **Content preparation for EAP teachers**

An issue that has previously been discussed in the ESP literature (see, for instance, Dudley-Evans, 1997; Robinson, 1991 & Ferguson, 1997), the extent of content preparation or specialisation has yielded varied responses. Some participants of the session were of the view that teachers do not require the same level of knowledge as their students and should be seen as equals or engaged in learning partnership that fosters a level playing field. In fact, consistent with my earlier inquiry into ESAP teachers' understanding of their own professional identity (Wong, 2019b), some believed that it would be better for teachers not to "know too much" about the content of the target discipline. In fact, what would be more important is not to know "answers" but the "right questions to help students come up with their answers". This is a perspective that emphasises questioning techniques that are helpful for promoting students' own initiative to develop their own academically appropriate responses to problems arising from their discipline. Other participants have gone as far as pointing to the "danger" of misunderstanding concepts and knowledge in students' content area with which they are not readily familiar, echoing Belcher's argument that teachers may do more harm than good in "approximating what community insiders know and do" (Belcher, 2006, p. 140). Being honest about one's own learning as a teacher of ESAP, on the other hand, was thought to be a potentially empowering strategy for practitioners.

In general, there was little disagreement as to the need for some content knowledge. However, it was not apparent from the discussion how far content knowledge can be adequately measured for the purpose of ESAP instruction. Communicating with fellow practitioners with

some experience in teaching English to students of a particular discipline was considered vital.

### **Classroom interactional strategies conducive to motivating learner contribution of content knowledge**

In contrast to interactional strategies that can be attempted between learners and teachers as identified in my research (Wong, 2019a), most participants suggested pedagogical strategies that would stimulate interactions among learners. Specifically, students could engage in pair or group work that could inform or sharpen understanding of academic tasks at hand drawing upon their knowledge about the expectations of their faculty teachers or research supervisors. This might require the deployment of what some participants regarded as “listening strategies”. Effective learner-learner interaction does in fact call for effective use of such strategies in the course of knowledge exchange. Learners can be assigned information gap activities where they would have to facilitate knowledge exchange amongst themselves. Yet, less discussion was geared towards how teachers would also involve themselves in such kinds of dialogue and to position themselves strategically to scaffold academic skills.

In a similar vein, academic reading circles can also be introduced in ESAP classrooms, as some suggested, although it is hard to envisage the benefits without knowing how the teacher would use the outcomes of such a pedagogical activity for discipline-specific academic literacy instruction. More research into academic reading circle pedagogy would be needed to support the idea that the approach leads to gains in disciplinary knowledge among learners. Overall, it remains to be seen how an all-round approach to understanding teacher-learner interaction can help to address the issue of content knowledge exchange as well as how the awareness among ESAP practitioners can be enhanced.

### **ESAP teachers’ understanding of their role in promoting academic knowledge construction**

It is interesting to note that the participants of the sessions varied considerably in their understanding of the roles of ESAP teachers in promoting the construction of academic and content area knowledge pertinent to specific disciplines. Stressing the role of ESAP teachers as partners, fellows or critical friends, the equality between students and teachers in terms of knowledge status was emphasised. Close to this end of the continuum was also the facilitator or

enabler role teachers were thought to assume in handling the scaffolding of textual competencies associated with an area of study tackled by an ESAP module. It was also apparent that some were ready to recognise EAP teacher as mediating between students and discipline experts, a point consistent with what one of the teacher participants expressed in my earlier research project (Wong b, 2019). EAP teachers were also seen as listeners and questioners. Although such identity positions still assume partnership of some kind between learners and teachers, they do have the effect of highlighting differences that would reflect the division of labour and collaborative nature of the relationship highlighted above.

By contrast, from the responses recorded, it is clear that some were prepared to see teachers as having the necessary strength to perform roles such as mentors, consultants, tour guides or trainers (of academic discourse analysts). These were labels that appear to affirm some kind of specialist status on the part of the ESAP practitioner despite their lack of training in the content of the target discipline in question. Using the metaphors of cattle prodders and shepherds, some went as far as asserting positions that effectively equate ESAP teachers with gatekeepers that serve to define certain standards of academic discourse.

### **Concluding remarks**

Overall, the world cafe session examined in some depth the role of EAP practitioners in addressing discipline specific demands through classroom dialogic practices in co-constructing knowledge with learners. As such, it also afforded a valuable opportunity to critically assess the potential contribution of EAP classroom interaction research in establishing a viable framework for understanding the place of classroom dialogue to promote knowledge exchange. Most participants were willing to recognise productive partnership as a way of overcoming the long-standing issue of the lack of teacher expertise in ESAP instruction especially where teachers are expected to handle unfamiliar content in their teaching. Further, while it was especially fruitful to notice the transfer of general ELT pedagogy to EAP instruction in a variety of contexts, the fact that classroom interaction among learners seemed to be a dominant concern may suggest that practitioners could explore alternative avenues of fostering interaction that would recognise the centrality of knowledge co-construction between learners and teachers. It would be crucial to consider more broadly and comprehensively, for instance, the impact of specific kinds of language pedagogy and their implications for EAP teaching as well as evaluating their potential for inculcating a dialogic atmosphere that could enhance the exchange of expertise in

the ESAP classroom.

## References

Belcher, D. D. (2006). English for specific purposes: teaching to perceived needs and imagined futures in worlds of work, study and everyday life. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 133-156.

Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B., & Wiliam, D. (2004). Working inside the black box: Assessment for learning in the classroom. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(1), 9–22.

doi:10.1177/003172170408600105

Campion, G. C. (2016). 'The learning never ends': exploring teachers' views on the transition from general English to EAP. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 23, 59-70.

Ding, A. & Bruce, I. (2017). *The English for academic purposes practitioner: Operating on the edge of academia*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Dudley-Evans, T. (1997). Five questions for LSP teacher training. In R. Howard & G. Brown (Eds.). *Teacher education for LSP* (pp. 58-67). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Ferguson, G. (1997). Teacher education and LSP: The role of specialised knowledge. In R. Howard & G. Brown (Eds.). *Teacher education for LSP* (pp. 80-89). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Hyland, K. (2002) Specificity revisited: how far should we go now? *English for Specific Purposes*, 21, pp. 385-395.

Hyland, K. (2018). Sympathy for the devil? A defence of EAP. *Language Teaching*, 51(3), 383-399. doi:10.1017/S0261444818000101

Martin, P. (2014) Teacher in Transition: The Road to EAP. In P. Breen (Ed), *Cases on teacher identity, diversity and cognition in higher education*. (pp. 287-316). Pennsylvania, USA: IGI Global.

Robinson, P. (1991). *ESP today: A practitioner's guide*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Mercer, N. (2005). Sociocultural discourse analysis: analysing classroom talk as a social mode

of thinking. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1(2), 137-168.

Wong, A. (2019a). *Dialogic classroom discourse analysis of the discipline-specific EAP classroom in a Hong Kong University*. (Unpublished master's Thesis). University of Stirling, Stirling, UK.

Wong, A. (2019b). *Articulating EAP Practitioner Identity Through Engagement with Discipline-Specific Classroom Dialogue*. Paper presented at the Norwegian Forum for English for Academic Purposes 2019: Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway.

Todd, R. W. (2003). EAP or TEAP? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 2, 147-156.

Wells, G., & Mejía Arauz, R. (2006). Dialogue in the classroom. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 15(3), 379-428.