The Three Ls Cafe - Learners, Language and Learning

University of Northampton 22nd June 2019

Final report by the host, Christina Healey, submitted 24thJuly 2019

ORGANISATION OF THE REPORT

This report inevitably includes an element of retrospection. My ideas have developed since I first made the proposal for a Cafe not least as a result of the events of the day itself (a most excellent PIM), more specifically by hearing Steve Kirk speak on **Knowledge** and also by reading and critiquing the 2017 Ding /Bruce book on the EAP Practitioner. I have modified the original organisation of the material to reflect this and to make it a more coherent read. The Report starts with some **Reflections** on hosting a cafe, then summarises the **Participant Feedback** under the four **Questions discussed** and finally proposes some **Action Points**

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF HOSTING A CAFE

I am delighted to have been invited to take part in this Knowledge Cafe. Previously I have participated marginally in some Doctoral Seminars and been appalled by how stultifying and hierarchical they were. I endorse the aim of the PIM *"to interrogate the position of knowledge in EAP with the intention of challenging the status quo and driving the field of EAP forward"* so it makes sense that a new format for this kind of discussion is needed. The comments that follow are not meant as criticisms but constructive suggestions as to how the format might be made even better.

 I'm not convinced of the value of writing on flipchart sheets. Comments were not always legible or comprehensible. It is possible that insightful gems could have been missed. They are also cumbersome to pack for reference later. I prefer my A4 sheets but they should only be in pale colours otherwise the writing is difficult to read. Perhaps next time a more electronic form of participant communication could be used so at least we wouldn't have any legibility issues. Sometimes the exciting arrows and squiggles which the people involved at the time thought were completely clear were not so clear to the outside reader coming to them cold. Also there could be quite a lot of repetition even within one group. To what extent does summarising the comments also entail editing these comments? And is there a danger that this editing process will privilege those opinions already favoured by the editor? Differences in length of different contributions ranged from one sentence to both sides of a piece of A4. One always has to remember that it was a Saturday. A very animated and rewarding discussion may only result in one sentence written down.

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There is also the issue about **Action points.** We were told that there's no point in identifying **Knowledge** without then doing something about it. I am happy to concur with this position but then how do I reach my proposed **Acton Points**? Do I attempt to recommend on the basis of a consensus of the participants' views? Not always easy (*see above*). Or do I just repeat my own views which may not differ from what I thought before the cafe occurred?

INTRODUCTION TO THE CAFE

PRELIMINARY READING: Wingate U. (2015) Academic Literacy and Student Diversity. The Case for Inclusive Practice, Multilingual Matters, Bristol.

Link to book review: https://www.baleap.org/resources/book-reviews/wingate_2015. NB. A more extensive review of this book has now been written by the host which was available at the Cafe and will, hopefully, soon be available on the BALEAP web-site book reviews.

Wingate's book needs to be read in the context of the recruitment and retention problems which can sometimes beset in-sessional if not pre-sessional EAP classes. This aspect of EAP delivery doesn't seem to be working very well. Wingate suggests an alternative based, as the title indicates, on three concepts central to the idea of the university in the early 21st century, namely 'academic literacy', (which includes oracy), 'student diversity' and 'inclusive practice'. Wingate's ideas can be treated as a response to certain observable phenomena in contemporary HE in the UK such as the (possible) decline of the 'international' student body in response to the government's 'hostile environment' and the rise of a more diverse 'home' student body. In the context of these changes it seems more relevant than ever to ask the Question: **"If EAP is a discipline in itself then what is its unique Knowledge base ?**

The answer propounded in this cafe i.e. the **three Ls (Learners, Language and Learning)** is the host's own and may be rather simplistic (well it was Saturday and we were supposed to be having fun.) But the ideas behind it are Wingate's. The cafe suggested that effective EAP tutors need certain specialist knowledge and that this knowledge can be explored under one of three Ls:

> knowledge about learners
> knowledge about language
> knowledge about learning

At the end of the cafe the consequences of this **Knowledge** and the issue of **Inclusion/Exclusion** were raised.

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LEARNERS

 ". . widening access to higher education has . . . not been accompanied by a sufficient understanding that student populations are now more diverse and less prepared for academic study than . . . the highly selected student intakes in previous elite systems." *(Wingate 2015 p.1)*

Question discussed in the cafe

How relevant for effective EAP teaching is a knowledge of learner differences of personality, language and culture and also of differences in individual experience?

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

There were 13 different group responses. Words like 'crucial', 'highly relevant' and 'essential' came up in response to this Question. However it was pointed out that this could vary depending on what kind of course one was teaching. The issue was also raised of whether there was the time to acquire this knowledge

Concepts like 'pluralism' and 'translanguaging' came up. One response emphasised the 'universal principles of inclusivity'. Barriers needed to be broken down. Another warned against stereotyping: "Do we over-generalise about certain groups of learners and miss/neglect differences of personality and individual experience including experience at secondary school? This information can be drawn from the students themselves "

It was suggested that the presence of 'home' students made for a different dynamic.

It was pointed out that many EAP practitioners have taught overseas and have developed a good understanding of different languages and cultures –'intercultural competence'. "We understand how and why it is important to modify and grade language and also what is involved in communication with others."

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LANGUAGE

Wingate (p.6) refers to Hymes (1972) in order to re-define 'academic literacy' as 'academic communicative competence within an academic discourse community.'

She argues that the development of such competence is as much needed by home as by international students. She quotes Bourdieu and Passeron (1990:115) as arguing that

academic language is 'never anyone's mother tongue, even for the privileged classes'
(Wingate p.11).

She emphasises that "this competence includes knowledge of the discipline's epistemology
and socio-cultural context" (Wingate p.161). She then uses the logic of this definition to
argue that such competence is best developed within discipline-specific curricula and in the
closest collaboration with subject tutors.

Questions discussed in the cafe:

Given that EAP tutors favour a descriptive rather than a prescriptive knowledge of
language, how relevant to effective EAP teaching is:

- **a knowledge of the differences /similarities between different languages**
- **a knowledge of the nature of subject-specific academic language**

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

There were 12 different group responses. Not surprisingly there was an overlap in the
answers to the two questions so editorial discretion has been used.

General point raised: Do we really just describe or do we also PREscribe sometimes?

Q.1 What is the impact of tutors' knowledge of the differences /similarities between
different languages? And is it relevant?

Many responses stressed the importance of 'awareness' of student languages and their
differences/similarities over actual 'knowledge'. Knowledge of language differences may be
helpful to an extent but people were not sure about this. Would this lead to more use of L1
in the classroom and would this be a good thing or not? One response argued that raising
the awareness of the differences/similarities between different languages would give
students tools to analyse language and structure. 'Tools not rules'. Several responses argued
that tutor knowledge of the differences /similarities between different languages could
enhance intercultural communication and the benefits of this needed to be communicated.
One pointed out that students from certain European language backgrounds may have
difficulty understanding criticality.

Q. 2 What is the impact of tutors' knowledge of the nature of subject-specific academic
language? And is it relevant?

 Some of the responses to Q.2 mirrored those to Q1. i.e. awareness of the nature of
subject-specific academic language was important but not necessarily in-depth. Others
argued that students needed to learn which hat/ identity /role to wear/assume when using
different languages or the 'same' language in different contexts. One response warned that

bottom-up language work was as important as top-down. It is important for tutors to be able to guide students to an awareness of what are the common academic language features in their own disciplines. One group advocated the use of mini genre analyses using texts from the disciplinary reading list. However another had found teaching inter-disciplinary rather than mono-disciplinary groups very rewarding. As one response put it 'Academic language is about elite codes. Quote Bourdieu "Academic language is no-one's mother tongue." In this way they said EAP tutors can help to form a community of practice.

Other comments:

- corpus linguistics can be one way/approach to helping students to learn more about subject-specific languages.
- a knowledge of disciplines, disciplinarity and disciplinary knowledge building is very important because disciplinary practices inform knowledge production.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LEARNING

This is the most difficult form of knowledge to define and one which can't easily be extracted from the pages of Wingate.

 Questions discussed in the cafe:

Q.1 How much does our knowledge about learning come from theory and research i.e. psycholinguistics and neuroscience and how much from experience?

 Q.2 How relevant for effective EAP teaching is a knowledge of specific learning differences /difficulties (SpLD) such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, autistic spectrum and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)?

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

There were 10 different group responses. Interestingly most of the responses answered the two Questions together. This may be because Q.1 was too abstract for a Saturday morning. A warning to Cafe hosts to phrase their Questions with care. Again, because of occasional issues of illegibility /incomprehensibility, editorial discretion had to be used.

Q.1 How much does our knowledge about learning come from theory and research i.e. psycholinguistics and neuroscience and how much from experience?

Both are important: knowledge of underpinning theory but also, as a teacher, one's own actual experience and schemata. One comment was that there was insufficient time (presumably during the working week) to refresh knowledge of theory and research. One

comment wondered whether theory and research might be more influential in some areas than others e.g. listening. *Teaching Listening* by John Field was recommended.

Q.2 How relevant for effective EAP teaching is a knowledge of specific learning differences /difficulties (SpLD) such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, autistic spectrum and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)?

One comment was that this Question needed to be discussed with the first one about our Learners - "they're the same as these are learner differences. A student can have an SpLD as well as a language and cultural barrier to learning. " The issue of inclusivity and diversity came up several times in the responses. It was suggested that an appreciation of different learning preferences enabled classroom techniques and learning environments to be accommodated to these differences.   One response stressed that both a knowledge of learning style and a knowledge of discipline –specific ways of knowing were both important.

As far as Specific Learning Differences (SpLD) were concerned participants were interested but said their knowledge was lacking, Is it harder to diagnose L2 students? (We are not sure.) The general point was made that EAP practitioners need time and opportunity to inform themselves and keep updated. One point which was made is that language and 'SEN' issues can sometimes be conflated. Is it an issue of 'diagnosis' or of 'late onset'? Dyslexia among L2 learners can be quite high. How does knowledge of specific learning differences /difficulties (SpLD) then play out in the classroom?

Alternative assessments were advocated. "Don't base perceptions of dyslexia on a deficit model." The Learning Contract at the University of Sheffield which explains SpLDs was cited as a possible model to follow.

The issue was raised that certain terms for learning differences, ADHD for example, meant different things in different contexts e.g. in the US, psycholinguistics terms may not be used in the same way as in the UK. One group mentioned mental health issues even though this had not been specified as a 'learning difference' in the Question. "Mental health issues are important but awareness of mental health issues seems lacking in some countries students come from."

So what? THE QUESTION OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

Wingate (2015 p.152) emphasised that academic communicative competence within an academic discourse community "includes knowledge of the discipline's epistemology and socio-cultural context"   She then uses the logic of this definition to argue that such competence is best developed within discipline-specific curricula and in the closest collaboration with subject tutors.

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Question discussed in the cafe:

If EAP tutors equip themselves with this knowledge about Learners, Language and Learning how can they then collaborate with:

- **mainstream tutors**
- **other kinds of 'academic support' practitioners?**

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Will Nash @sheffield is gathering case studies. The 'greggs sausage roll' anecdote (Clare Maxwell@leeds) was mentioned but not expanded upon. It was felt that subject lecturers sometimes 'scapegoated' language as the problem. Perhaps the distinction is overdrawn between literacy , numeracy and other kinds of academic aptitude indicators. Collaboration was advocated as a way forward. General changes could be made which were positive for all. There needs to be better communication between different units of the university. Perhaps a practical Guide to the collaboration could be provided to promote awareness of the important considerations.

Some consequences for pedagogy and practice.

This was not specifically highlighted in the three L's Cafe although it was elsewhere. However certain responses were received which seem worth recording separately:

- the topics of personality, language and culture can all be used within our teaching.
- the description (of language) can become a prescription as we make materials and content can become fossilised'.
- foster an 'enquiring 'disposition.
- there is a need to understand how experts in SpLDs translate insights into pedagogies. And use these to enhance EAP practices.
- students should be asked if we can talk about an issue with other members of staff
- the possibility was suggested of moving away from an English/anglocentric model of instruction.
- encourage independent learners leading to learner autonomy.
- tutorials can be an important source of knowledge about learners

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CONCLUSION

The Wingate book mentioned above has been inspirational in the thinking behind this cafe. At the same time the host takes full responsibility for any misinterpretations or misunderstandings. At the end of the day I was still convinced that the three L's approach to describe EAP knowledge is an effective one not least because it is immediately understandable to anyone. One way of achieving the stated aim of the day to '***drive the field of EAP forward'*** is to develop ideas dialectically, one in reaction to the other. Partially as a result of Ding and Bruce (2017), EAP practitioners are now inclined to buck the 'butler stance' more and to claim a discipline-specific body of knowledge with its related pedagogies. Perhaps one reaction would be to use our developing awareness of our own discipline to better understand the, perhaps different but equally valid, bodies of knowledge and pedagogy pertaining to other disciplines. Out of such understanding could come collaborations based on equality of esteem - to the benefit all our learners. The writer of this report is currently negotiating with the Editors of JEAP to co-edit a **Special Issue** of **JEAP** on **Collaboration. E**xpressions of interest to participate in the co-editing warmly received at c.healey@sheffield.ac.uk

PROPOSED ACTION POINTS

Many EAP practitioners, certainly those willing to give up their Saturday to participate in a Cafe, are hungry for more knowledge. But where is it to come from? And we don't have much time to devote to acquiring it. An MA in Applied Linguistics is great but you can only do it once. And it gets out of date. And many EAP tutors are starting off in the field with only a CELTA. Or not even that but they are just considering EAP as one career option.

JEAP is evolving into a top-class international journal featuring the best in current research. This is great. But there is also a need for something concise and accessible along the lines of " What you need to know to be an effective EAP practitioner"

These ' **EAP - need to know' Handbooks** might cover general fields like:

- explaining the current UK/international university scene
- demystifying key concepts and constructs around Learners, Language and Learning.
- exploring what are the pedagogic consequences of this knowledge

From the feedback @the Northampton cafe (22nd June 2019) likely specific topics might include:

Inclusivity in HE

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Dyslexia and second-language learning
Student well-being in an inter-cultural context
How to identify discipline-specific academic language.

These Handbooks might start off as articles on the BALEAP web-site and then evolve in short practical Handbooks available to all members. They might be supplemented by BALEAP sponsored training sessions which could bring in income.

References:

Ding, A. and Bruce, I. (2017) The English for Academic Purposes Practitioner Operating on the Edge of Academia, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.

Hymes, D. (1972) On communicative competence. In J.B.Pride and J.Holmes (eds) Sociolinguistics (pp. 269-293) London: Penguin.

Wingate U. (2015) Academic Literacy and Student Diversity. The Case for Inclusive Practice, Multilingual Matters, Bristol.

AUTHOR'S BIODATA

Christina Healey (c.healey@sheffield.ac.uk) has had a long career in ESOL / EAP in FE/HE . She is also a specialist study skills teacher. Recently she was identified as dyslexic and this has influenced her practice. She now tries to blend the two areas of EAP and SpLD in her teaching and writing, hopefully to the benefit of the learners. Her major research interests are academic reading and collaboration (desilofication) both between EAP and other academic disciplines and between EAP and other 'central services'.