

Should we know what we're talking about?

Susie Cowley-Haselden (sch33@leicester.ac.uk)

EAP Tutor at the English Language Teaching Unit, the University of Leicester.

Extended abstract:

As an EAP practitioner I have often questioned how far we should be concerned with 'content'. In 2002 I attended a session at the IATEFL Conference in York entitled 'The Shape of the Teacher' (Gabrielatos, 2002) which encouraged participants to think about how equilateral their triangle was (whereby each side represented an important facet of an effective teacher; namely, their personality, knowledge of methodology and their knowledge of the language). Since then I have often visualised my shape and often reflect on my classes in terms of whether I was more isosceles than equilateral, or worse still, scalene.

Now I am an E(S)AP practitioner I see myself as a square rather than a triangle. It is knowledge of the academic discipline underlying the ESAP programme that makes up the fourth side. Personally, I believe my teaching is more effective when I feel interested and knowledgeable about the academic content on which the materials used in my classroom are based. My first experience of teaching subject specific EAP was with a group of Finance students. Many novice E(S)AP teachers are reassured that they do not need to know about the students' discipline; that the students are 'experts' in their chosen field, "this strategy however, involves a high degree of risk for the trainers, particularly in terms of their credibility with the learners" (Bell, 1996:1). It is clearly not the case that students are 'experts' in their field on a pre-session programme and if E(S)AP tutors are not at the very least interested in the discipline the validity of the programme becomes dangerously undermined.

There are those who feel that an EAP practitioner is *solely* a language teacher. I have purposefully chosen that adverb, as often such declarations are measured with adverbs of *only* or *just* as if it is a

lofty notion to involve oneself in the academy. A clear result of this is that “ESP teachers are all too often reluctant dwellers in a strange and uncharted land” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987:158). But such reluctant positioning misses the point; “the ESP teacher should not become a teacher of the subject matter, but rather an interested student of the subject matter” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987: 163). This is what reinvigorates the E(S)AP classroom. If EAP practitioners cannot be exemplars of enquiring minds then we are doing our students a disservice.

It is evident that our students’ “primary concern is success in their chosen specialty areas” (Brennan & van Naerssen 1989:204). As such the EAP teacher needs to embrace the role of intermediary, a bridge between the student and their academic destination. Having foundations in both is what makes for a truly effective E(S)AP teacher and a purposeful academic language programme. To this end innovative inter-disciplinary projects co-delivered by ‘academics’ and EAP practitioners such as James Donohue’s whereby the EAP practitioner is regarded as “a participant in the teaching and learning” (2011: 5) are the most positive direction E(S)AP teaching can go in.

This session concludes with the discussion of two key questions:

1. With pre-sessional programmes looming, how can EAP tutors feel comfortable with the academic content within some sessions e.g. discipline specific project classes?
2. What are some ‘creative’ ways in which E(S)AP practitioners can work with academic departments in institutions?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bell, T. 1996. Do EAP Teachers Require Knowledge of Their Students' Specialist Academic Subjects? *The Internet TESL Journal*. <http://iteslj.org/Articles/Bell-EAPRequireKnowledge.html> accessed on 6/6/12

Brennan, M. and van Naerssen, M. 1989. Language and content in ESP. *ELT Journal*. 43 (3), 196-205.

Donohue, J. 2011. Using systematic functional linguistics in academic writing development: An example from film studies. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. 11 (1), 4-16.

Gabrielatos, C. 2002. 'The Shape of the Language Teacher' in Pulverness, A (ed.) *IATEFL 2002: York Conference Selections* pp. 75-78. Whitstable, Kent: IATEFL.

PDF:<http://www.gabrielatos.com/Triangle.pdf>

Hutchinson, T. and Waters, A. 1987. *English for Specific Purposes; A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Hyland, K. 2002. Specificity revisited: how far should we go now? *English for Specific Purposes*. 21 (4), 385-395.