

EAP – what is it and why is it becoming so popular?

Kat Robb looks at the four skills in an EAP context and how they differ from General English.

EAP: an overview

EAP distinguishes itself from general English because of its distinctly academic nature. While all four skills are developed in both, with EAP they are developed with the objective of reaching specific aims: to gain access onto an undergraduate or postgraduate course at an English-speaking university, and to provide learners with the study skills necessary to be able to carry out these studies successfully. There is often an absence of specific teaching time dedicated to learning grammar because students will already be expected to have at least an IELTS score of 5.0 before enrolling on an EAP course. This is not always strictly the case, and in some contexts students have an overall score of 4.0, which can present significant obstacles to being able to engage with study skills when they already struggle with language structure.

Writing

Many teaching professionals are under the impression that writing is the backbone of EAP, and while it is clearly extremely important, it should not eclipse the other skills. The essential element of academic writing is criticality, and critical thinking is not something that comes easily to many people, which makes it especially difficult to teach. I have found a coaching approach effective



to stimulate critical awareness in learners. I guide them through a thorough process that enables them to analyse and evaluate the literature they read, and therefore produce well-structured and coherent written discourse. The university writing tasks learners will be expected to undertake, will depend greatly on their chosen disciplines. Some will be required to write reports and policies, but all of them will be expected to have the required skills to produce a wide range of genres of essay, including: cause and effect, compare and contrast, and problem solution. Whichever the case may be, correct referencing is also imperative and again a feature of writing that learners may not be familiar or confident with.

Speaking

Oral skills in EAP are less focused on a communicative approach of interaction patterns but rather channelled towards presentation skills and the ability to interact in seminars and tutorials. The language used to successfully communicate in these contexts is markedly different from the interaction that takes place in a general English lesson. Presentations require clear signposting language to keep the audience engaged and support their comprehension of the content. Academic presentations on an EAP course are often assessed with a high emphasis on the delivery and language skills, and less on the content and ideas. The rationale being that students need

to gain confidence and practice at presentation delivery techniques and the language used to effectively deliver a presentation. While EAP courses include discussion-based activities, they will be focused on considering viewpoints regarding specific topics and the ability to justify the opinions given. The aim is to provide students with the essential skills to participate actively in seminars, and be able to lead them.

Reading

The essence of EAP reading is the ability to read authentic texts and thoroughly understand them. While this may appear straightforward, reading is often one of the biggest hurdles for EAP learners because of the complexity of the literature they are exposed to. Students are expected to have the ability to decipher the author's stance and the angle of the argument, in addition to differentiating the key points of the text from the peripheral information, not to mention having the capacity to comprehend a barrage of topic area specific lexis. Reading text is not something that stretches further than a tweet or IM for many learners these days, so expecting them to already possess an adopted habit of reading that they refine with an academic outlook is a tall order. EAP tutors often comment that the most challenging aspect of teaching for them is to encourage their learners to engage with academic literature. I find one solution is to try and harbour a nature of reading using portable electronic devices and pointing learners in the direction of websites that have been designed specifically with this purpose in mind, of which there are many.

Listening

Aural receptive skills in EAP are demanding because the discourse is complex and often confuses learners to the point where they are unable to clearly interpret what they are listening to. While on the one hand learners are being trained to develop their own presentation skills, on the other hand the lectures they are attending may not demonstrate model examples of how to present ones' ideas. This can result in students copying down everything that is said in a frantic attempt



to gain a sense of clarity regarding the content. Guiding learners to try different strategies for note-taking techniques will support them greatly when reviewing their lecture notes or using them as a springboard for a seminar discussion. It will also help them structure their thoughts and train them to be able to filter out the key points of the lecture.

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A shift in trends

EAP has always had a presence in the field of tertiary education in order to support students studying

in a university context, in a country where English is the first language, or one of the primary languages and the chosen one of instruction. With the current increasing migration trends, the desire for international students to study in English-speaking countries is increasing significantly. Many Asian nationalities favour the UK and Australia, while there is also an increasing demand in the Middle East for EAP, especially in contexts like the UAE that offers funding for national students to study tertiary education that is instructed in English. Another consideration is the career prospects that have become challenging for school leavers. With the current scarcity of work placements, students feel they need a university education to set them apart from the rest, so there is a higher demand to study and to further one's studies. There is no doubt then that EAP is on the increase and teachers will need to develop the appropriate skills to teach it.



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