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Facilitating internationalisation in Brazilian higher education contexts: developing expertise in teaching English for academic purposes

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Facilitating Internationalisation in Brazilian Higher Education contexts: Developing expertise in teaching English for academic purposes

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Abstract

Internationalisation in higher education has brought with it the increasing use of English for academic communication between expert academics and for students in English and the concomitant need to support academic staff and students in using English for academic purposes (EAP). This in turn raises the need for teachers of EAP. However, there is little in the way of EAP specific teacher education or research into EAP teacher needs. The research presented here investigated experiences and views of EAP instructors, both novice and experienced in one university context, the University of Sao Paulo (USP), Brazil. We aimed to identify challenges faced by instructors delivering four types of EAP provision at USP along with skills, knowledge and experience required for these roles. In doing so, we wanted to propose courses that might be added to the English Major curriculum and to a framework for structured EAP teacher education at USP.

A qualitative approach employing focus groups and interviews was taken asking participants to reflect on their EAP teaching experiences. This was complemented by insights from the pedagogical coordinator of three of the programmes. Prompts for discussion were

informed by three theoretical frameworks: Ferguson's (1997) specialised teacher knowledge, Schulman's teacher knowledge base (1986) and the BALEAP EAP teachers competency framework (2008). A framework analysis (Parkinson et al., 2016) was employed to identify codes and themes.

We found a range of challenges, some specific to the provision and level of experience and some common to all. We identified aspects of EAP teacher knowledge that elicited little if any attention, e.g., understanding of disciplines and writing as social practice. Together the findings provided us with valuable information to inform frameworks for EAP teacher education for example, the 'Letters' curriculum[1].

Acknowledgments

About the Research Team

Principle investigator & Brazilian researcher: Profa Dra Marília Mendes Ferreira (Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics), Department of Modern Languages, USP.

Profa Dra Ferreira has been working with academic literacy in English for over 12 years. She created and runs the Laboratory of Academic Literacy, one of only 3 such centres in Brazil, where tutoring on academic writing is offered to the USP community. She has extensive experience with course and material design, teaching EAP for different fields and investigating the challenges of Brazilian students learning academic discourse in English. She has developed research with Prof. Hugo S. Santiago, University of Bath, on feedback provision and its relationship with language awareness.

She has also worked as a consultant on EAP issues for the international office and the Graduate School of USP. Currently her main interests are the challenges English teachers have when teaching EAP and their relationship with the academic discourse.

UK researcher: Dr Carole MacDiarmid, EAP Manager (Teacher Development), English for Academic Study, University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK.

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[1] Based on the findings we present also of a number of 'EAP Teacher Toolkit' tasks.

Dr MacDiarmid's expertise lies in the area of teacher development and specifically in English for academic purposes (EAP), TEAP curriculum design and online learning. She has innovated and evaluated curriculum developments in English for academic purposes and Teaching EAP at the University of Glasgow where she runs the postgraduate TEAP course. She is an assessor for the BALEAP accreditation scheme and is also a BALEAP Senior Fellow, Mentor and Assessor (BALEAP TEAP Fellowship Scheme). She has extensive experience in teacher education at a range of levels (pre-service to PhD supervision) and mentors practitioners in HE and Teaching EAP fellowship schemes. Her current research interest focus on spoken academic discourse and approaches to EAP teacher development.

Introduction & Background to the Research

Internationalisation in higher education has brought with it the increasing use of English for academic communication, both between expert academics and for students in English as a medium of instruction (EMI) contexts. This in turn has increased the demands on English language instructors tasked with providing specialised English for academic purposes (EAP) support. Although EAP is a burgeoning practical specialisation within English language teaching (ELT) with a significant amount of research into academic genres and learner needs (see for example Biber, 2006; Biber et al., 2002; Hyland, 2000; Nesi & Gardner, 2012), there is still, somewhat surprisingly, relatively on EAP teacher needs. This in turn means there is also still little in the way of structured and informed EAP teacher education programmes.

This small-scale qualitative research project investigated experiences and views of both novice and experienced EAP instructors working on four types of EAP teaching provision in one university context, the University of Sao Paulo (USP), in Brazil. We aimed to identify challenges faced by instructors at USP along with skills, knowledge and experience required for these roles and compare these with existing, albeit limited, conceptualizations of EAP teacher knowledge. In doing so, we wanted to propose courses that might be added to the Letters curriculum and to a framework for structured EAP teacher education at USP.

The summary report here provides a brief summary of the theoretical background related to EAP teacher needs and indicative references, the methodology employed in this small scale qualitative study and our key findings. These findings led to specific project outputs in the way of EAP Teacher toolkits.

A fuller discussion of the background, methodology and findings will be presented in a later research article.

Research into Teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

With English as one of the main foreign languages in academia in Brazil and indeed internationally, the linguistic demands imposed on academics (both professional academic and students) has increased as has the demand for EAP teachers. As noted in the introduction, specialized support for EAP teachers is still limited as is an understanding of EAP teacher needs. This is not particular to Brazil. A small number of reviews on EAP teacher education overseas exist identifying challenges of transitioning into EAP and the need for specific development or training (e.g., Basturkmen, 2017; Campion, 2016; Ding & Campion, 2016). The

majority of research into EAP in the Brazilian context has been relatively recent and emerged out of Language without Borders (LwB) NUCLI (NUCLI is how these language centers are named) initiatives, which commenced in 2014. This research can be grouped under three foci: in one EAP teacher education is articulated in terms of GE education as the recommendations given are deemed suitable for both contexts (e.g., Dellagnelo et al., 2015; Gimenez & Passoni, 2016) a second group refers to the theoretical perspectives that frame the studies reported, for example the communicative approach (e.g., Guimarães et al., 2014). A third focus relies on the object of investigation of the LwB nuclis studies and includes material development (e.g., Oliveira; Vieira; Souza, 2016), teachers´ beliefs (Rodrigues; Souza; Andrade, 2017), and actions to promote teacher education in the nuclis (e.g. Kirsh & Sarmento,2018).

In brief, LwB stimulated the field of teaching EAP education in Brazil with a variety of theoretical perspectives and foci of investigation. However, these perspectives could also be applied to General English teachers and are not EAP specific.

In relation to identifying the knowledge and skills EAP teacher need three theoretical frameworks can be of use. In developing components of teacher knowledge base in general, Schulman (1986) identifies content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge. Specifically in relation to EAP, Ferguson (1997, p.85) identifies the need for specialized knowledge for language for specific purposes (LSP) teachers, comprising 'a knowledge of disciplinary cultures and values', of 'the epistemological basis of different disciplines' and of 'genres and discourse'. This would be part of Shulman's content knowledge. The BALEAP Competency Framework (2008) also provides insights into practical competencies that an EAP practitioner may aspire to, including knowledge of student needs, learning contexts and again relevant academic discourse and practices. This EAP specific framework, however, was designed primarily within a UK setting and may be more or less relevant/applicable to different contexts.

Given the lack of research into more varied context or of EAP teachers specifically, we identified a need to discover more about the lived experiences of teachers currently working in EAP at USP. This can provide insights into challenges faced, the nature of the provision offered and in doing so it should then be possible to comment on areas of teacher knowledge underdeveloped or not yet identified.

This will then provide more solid information to inform the English Major curriculum (development and provide suggestions for continual professional development (CPD) frameworks.

Research Aims & Methodology

Aiming to gather insights from key stakeholders within four EAP teaching contexts, we were guided by the following research questions:

1) What are the challenges teachers face when transitioning to EAP teaching?
2) What skills/knowledge/experience needs to be developed?

In order to explore these issues focus group (FGs) and interviews were conducted with participants from the following EAP providers in USP: the Language Center (LC), Language

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without Borders (LwB) NUCLI, tutors from the Laboratory of Academic Literacy (LLAC), and from Language Education at USP (LEUSP)[2]. Covering the four groups ensured data were generated from instructors with varying degrees of experience in ELT and/or EAP teaching and of personal engagement and socialization with academic practices (e.g., from undergraduates to post-graduate researchers).

Four focus groups (Menter et al., 2011) and for practical reasons four individual interviews, were held with **18** participants in total. In order to prompt discussions, general 'tell me about' guiding prompts were used.[3] These were followed up if necessary with schematics outlining aspects of specialised teacher knowledge, teacher knowledge base and the BALEAP EAP teacher competency framework. Once the recordings had been transcribed and anonymised, a framework analysis approach (Parkinson et al., 2016) was adopted. This allowed for themes to emerge but also acknowledges theoretical frameworks that can inform the analysis.

Key Findings

We present here the most prominent findings in this summary report as space does not allow for a full discussion. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, we report on overall findings related to specific themes. Five overarching themes with a number of sub-codes were identified: Linguistic & discourse/genre (A); Knowledge of disciplines (B); Pedagogic: Learner/teacher needs (C); Professional Development (D); Emerging (reflection/time/recognition) (E).

A core competency of EAP teachers is specialised content knowledge. Regarding linguistic aspects (A), specialised EAP content knowledge relating to the knowledge of specific genres and discourse is challenging. In particular, the analysis suggests academic writing is understood at different levels, with these instructors focusing primarily on organisation and development and lexico-grammatical features, especially vocabulary. In talking about discourse/genre, the instructors were concerned with overall organisation/ structure of the written work and on helping student express meaning. However, while the purpose and concept of genres (almost exclusively written) is known to an extent, much less was said linking genre-specific representative lexico-grammatical features, nor tying these to the disciplinary practices that each may be reflecting. In developing their knowledge and understanding of academic communication, instructors' own socialisation into academic practices was a key source. In relation to knowledge of disciplines (academic practices, genres and epistemology), while it was acknowledged this may be important, it was not seen to be either realistic or necessary to have an in depth understanding of different fields.

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[2] The Language Center offers EAP courses for undergraduate and graduate students of USP; instructors hold either a master or a Phd degree. LwB Nucli is the name of language centers affiliated with the LwB system; instructors are undergraduate students of Letras, pursuing a teaching certificate in English Language Teaching. LLAC is a research center offering academic writing tutoring sessions; instructors are all postgraduate students involved with research on academic literacy. LEUSP focus on IELTS preparation courses; instructors are also postgraduate students researching either language or literature in English.

[3] E.g., tell me about your role/your learner needs/what helps or hinders you in your role

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In relation to learner needs (part of C, pedagogical knowledge), the instructors were all aware of the need to address learners' needs and of ways to identify these for example through traditional needs analysis surveys. The analysis of learner´s knowledge (C2) revealed that leaners are seen by the instructors as holders of disciplinary knowledge and relevant genres which confer them a special status in EAP classes. Teachers indicated desire for more specific input and opportunities to develop EAP specific pedagogies, lesson planning and materials design and development competencies.

Aspects related to teacher understanding of assessment and course design, both identified as competencies within the BALEAP CF (2008) were limited apart from by the highly experienced instructors. This reflects not only the types of courses/provision, but also the varying levels of experience and teacher education that the instructors had been exposed to.

The instructors were also asked to talk about forms of professional development they engage in and find beneficial. Although they benefited from locally organised workshop meetings and in some cases courses, all groups recognised a lack of formal training and education for EAP teachers. They also recognised the value of professional networks for sharing and developing expertise.

Discussion

The results are obviously context specific but since instructors were involved in a variety of types of provision and with differing levels of provisional experience, a number of tentative conclusions can be drawn that might be of interest beyond this specific context.

Firstly, the role of instructors' previous learning can assist their EAP teaching. Both experiential and scholastic types played an important role here. Personal engagement with academic literacy experiences helped shape instructor development as an EAP teacher and should be considered in the development of an EAP component of a curriculum. Among the key themes, the genre/discourse and knowledge of academic disciplines were found to be the most challenging. CPD can assist in suggesting frameworks to access elements of disciplinary cultures and, as a consequence, not to rely solely on learners' assumed (possibly limited) knowledge. A 'Letters' curriculum and EAP CPD should also provide opportunities for students/instructors to carry out discourse and language analysis of texts linking language and disciplinary discourse and practices. Consideration can then be given on how to transfer this skill and knowledge to real world needs, such as EAP class preparation and materials evaluation and development.

The participants showed a very positive attitude towards CPD and although it is not institutionalized in the university studied, the instructors could benefit for such activity. Agency on their part in this regard is crucial as it can enable them to seek forms of self-development and mutual support. Institutional support may also overcome a sense of under-appreciation of their work by the university, which is also attested by the literature (e.g., Bruce & Ding, 2017).

Implications & Impacts

This study has scientific, economic and societal impacts. In relation to scientific, the impacts are as follows. The study also contributes to gaps in our understanding of EAP teacher needs in a variety of contexts (e.g., tutors/literacy brokers, novice teachers and experienced teachers), while at the same time corroborating findings in the literature for example in relation to teacher cognition. Specifically, the investigation of teachers' rather than students' needs and contexts of work that are not extensively studied. The economic impacts of this study refer to the input obtained from teachers and how this information can help inform CPD actions and policies for formal professional development.

Concerning suggestions for curricular change in the USP English Major curriculum, this study provides recommendations, for example creating a departmental policy for feedback provision to the students and for the assignment instructions. The curricular recommendations can also be adopted by other English Majors in Brazil with local adaptations.

The study produced a workshop for EAP teacher development for which three EAP teacher toolkits were designed to assist the audience to 1) reflect on the nature of their experiences with academic discourse 2) to raise awareness of the role of specialized knowledge in EAP (whether as genres or as cultures), 3) to foster teachers' autonomy to seek CPD, i.e., agency. In the near future, the study in the form of a manuscript will be submitted to an international journal and provide a more detailed explication of all aspects of the research project.

This project also enabled the development of academic ties between the University of Sao Paulo and the University of Glasgow. We also intend to develop this work through another future research project investigating a wider range of contexts and practical instantiations of teaching EAP and EAP education.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Themes & Codes

A: Linguistic aspects
A.1 – Genre/discourse

A.2 – Lexico-grammar (sentence level)

B: Disciplinary knowledge
Has /not

C: Pedagogical aspects
C.1: Learners' needs

C.2: Learners' knowledge

C.3: Teacher needs

C.4: How to teach

C.4.1: EAP/ELT specific items

C.4.2: General pedagogical skills

C.4.3: Assessment & feedback

C.4.4: Course design

C.4.5: Materials (use, adaptation, creation)

D: Professional development
D.1: Positive or negative attitude towards it

D.2: Engaging in Continuing Professional Development activities

D.3: Engaging in research /scholarship

E: Emerging topics
(reflection on practices, contexts/internationalization/ time pressure/ conception of EAP)