

An academic literacy course: Making choices

A B S T R A C T Academic Literacy (AL) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses have been initiated at various South African Institutions of Higher Education to assist English Second Language students in their tertiary studies. This article presents the choices that may confront course or materials designers when developing such courses for mainly rural students. The choices mainly lie between English for general purposes or for specific purposes; whether to focus on academic literacy or on study skills; which approach or method is most appropriate for teaching English in an academic literacy course to speakers of vernaculars particularly in a rural context. Whether to adapt the level of complexity of the course and the materials to the level of language skills and proficiency with which rural students enter the university or to expect them to cope with a set standard, also needs to be considered. The choices made for the context of this study were based on the findings of a study of the development of evaluation criteria for tertiary in-house EAP materials for first-entering students at the University of Limpopo (UL), but could also apply to any institution hosting learners from impoverished English input contexts such as rural Limpopo.

Keywords: choice; course content; language materials development; English for Academic Purposes; Academic Literacy; interculturality.

Introduction

The growing range of the global markets, the growth of English as the leading language for the dissemination of academic knowledge, and the greater internationalisation and globalisation of higher education has led to the need for courses worldwide that teach academic discourse (Hyland 2006: 2). Added to this, student populations are becoming more diverse, in particular, in terms of their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and educational experiences. At South African universities, the growth of academic literacy as a discipline since the eighties has coincided with universities opening up to educationally disadvantaged students, usually first language speakers of African languages (Mabokela 1998; Parkinson et al. 2008). This has had implications on teaching and learning at institutions of higher education. Besides the difficulties many English second language (ESL) students experience in doing a degree in a

second language, many have attended schools which place little stress on reading and writing (Taylor & Vinjevod, 1999; Probyn, 2006). Tertiary learners are now confronted with a broad range of modalities and presentational forms which they have to master in addition to written communication. Where English is the university language of instruction, many non-native English-speaking learners are faced with having to master academic discourse in English. As needs and demands differ from context to context there cannot be a one-size-fits-all Academic literacy (AL) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. AL courses, or those more specifically focused on English, termed EAP, offered to first-entering students should be “systematic, locally managed, solution-oriented approaches that address the pervasive and endemic challenges posed by academic study to a diverse student body by focusing on student needs and discipline-specific communication needs” (Hyland 2006: 4).

Academic Literacy has different definitions. In this article it is used to mean the literacy designed to initiate first-year students in the ‘literacies’ that a tertiary institution (academe) requires of them. The distinction between EAP and AL in this article is thus primarily one of language (and this could be open to debate) – an AL course may teach the required skills in any language whereas in an EAP course the focus is on English academic language skills.

South African tertiary institutions may find that they need context-tailored ‘Academic Literacy’ courses because of their different student populations, each catering for students of varying language abilities with different language needs and their different infrastructures with fewer or more available resources. Context-tailored EAP/AL courses could also result in offering a second year EAP/AL course as additional support for the students.

Many students at South African universities, such as the University of Limpopo (UL), come mainly from rural homes frequently in remote rural areas (cf. McCabe 2008: 8-33). They also come from impoverished backgrounds and many have had little or no exposure to spoken or written English. The following is an example of first year student writing before any teaching intervention.

I'm from M village and I have financial problems, but my uncle is the one who is a Gurdian, he help me just a little bit to further my studies. I have obtained symbol “E” second lang HG so I just have a little bit of knowing English and another things I'm afraid to Express myself, so my requesting to you try to make me to know better. (TN)
(at least 10 errors of punctuation, spelling, number, concord, sentence structure, and expression.)

A ‘rural student’ in this paper is viewed to be a student who has attended a school outside an urban area, often in a remote area far from shops, clinics and libraries and irregular or no access to electricity (and thus no access to computers or photocopiers) or running water; has been taught mainly by means of code alternating or code switching (Mother tongue and English) and is academically underprepared (Masenya 1995; Zulu s.a.) for university. The paragraph below comes from one such a student. She describes her rural context and the problems faced by many rural students when entering university:

The village I come from is found in a rural place, Ruled by kings and chiefs. Its such a small village with less resources and underdeveloped place. It is occupied by people

of the same origin following the same culture. The people make a living by cultivating their farms; breeding animals; and selling them or selling their meat. When it comes to schooling its very difficult for us as learners in getting used to new things when we are at university level. For those parents who have noticed this, they try to send their children to model c schools in towns to try and make things a little easier for them. Living in the village is not that bad, as the chances of getting corrupt are little.

This article looks at the choices available to course and materials designers when developing an institution-specific English academic literacy course bearing in mind the context and background of the majority of students enrolled for their particular academic literacy course. It draws on data from a study of rural tertiary students' language learning materials needs and evaluation criteria (McCabe 2008).

Rationale

The suggestions in terms of content for the course and the materials and specifically the choices presented in this article emerged from the results of a study which developed evaluation criteria to evaluate the appropriateness of in-house materials. The criteria were developed to ascertain the particular needs of the UL first-entering students (McCabe 2008) – 74% of the sample registered for the EAP course because they wanted to improve their English proficiency. Sixty-four percent registered because it is a prerequisite for their degree programme. This prerequisite indicates that staff believe their students need an AL or EAP course because of their poor English language skills in their various disciplines based on students' written work: tests, assignments, and responses to examination questions.

The study was a cross-sectional once-off survey as described by Nunan (1994), Brown (2003) and Dörnyei (2003). Data were gathered by means of quantitative and qualitative methods in order to establish the key criteria for the evaluation of the coursebooks for the two EAP modules of first-entering UL students from the perspective of the users – students and teaching staff. To increase the reliability of the investigation, methodological triangulation in the form of questionnaires providing both quantitative and qualitative data, group interviews providing qualitative data and source triangulation (students, teaching staff, and outside experts) of data were used to collect data. An inquiry audit was done by outside experts with extended experience of teaching English language to rural South African students to verify the appropriateness of the evaluation criteria. A shortened list of the evaluation criteria appear in the Appendix (excluding those regarding format and cost or otherwise unrelated to the focus of this article).

Defining academic literacy (AL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

EAP or AL, particularly in South African tertiary institutions, is at the forefront of tertiary language education today. It is defined as teaching academic language skills to assist students in their studies or research (Hyland 2006: 1; Flowerdew & Peacock 2001: 8; Jordan 2004: 1) or with their discipline specific writing requirements. (EAP teaches these skills in English, as mentioned above.) A more comprehensive and concrete definition of academic literacy is given by Weideman (2006: 84), who lists the following ten components that make up academic literacy and that a student should master to be described as being academically literate:

- understand a range of academic vocabulary in context

- interpret and use metaphor and idiom, and perceive connotation, word play and ambiguity
- understand relations between different parts of a text, be aware of the logical development of (an academic) text, via introductions to conclusions, and know how to use language that serves to make the different parts of a text hang together
- interpret different kinds of text type (genre), and show sensitivity for the meaning that they convey and the audience that they are aimed at
- interpret, use and produce information presented in graphic or visual format
- make distinctions between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments; distinguish between cause and effect, classify, categorise and handle data that make comparisons
- see sequence and order, do simple numerical estimations and computations that are relevant to academic information, that allow comparisons to be made, and can be applied for the purposes of an argument
- know what counts as evidence for an argument, extrapolate from information by making inferences, and apply the information or its implications to other cases than the one at hand
- understand the communicative function of various ways of expression in academic language (such as defining, providing examples, arguing)
- make meaning (e.g. of an academic text) beyond the level of the sentence.

The advantage of defining in exact terms what academic literacy is, is that course designers can break up each component into smaller language items to include in the content of an AL / EAP course with accompanying activities for practice or for particular emphasis. In a rural context such as Limpopo, students often still need to be taught the construction of a complete English sentence, the function of the different word classes and even basic punctuation rules. In this case, a grammar-focused or 'restrictive' view of language (formal grammar instruction) needs to be applied before students can be expected to make meaning 'beyond the level of the sentence'. The vocabulary, the complexity of language used and the examples provided in materials still may need to be adapted in order to be reader-friendly to students with a low English proficiency so that they can acquire or sharpen cognitive skills, while continuing to improve their English 'performance'. 'Catching up' to tertiary language requirements may call for at least an extra year of AL/ EAP to address the academic discourse skills students need to attain; although it may be argued that 'catching up' with skills not taught at school is not within the ambit of the tertiary teaching of a second language.

Another perspective which contributes to the decision about course content is the discussion which has emerged in recent research (Barton 1994; Gee 2000, 1996; Street 2003) about the nature of literacy. The 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) argue against the view that literacy is the 'general and self-contained ability to read and write English or any other language' (Gee 2000: 412). Street (2003: 77) asserts that the standard definition "disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal and that literacy as such will have benign effects" such as "enhancing the cognitive skills of poor, "illiterate" people, villages, urban youth etc., improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens, regardless of the social and economic conditions that accounted for their "illiteracy" in the first place. He points out that research in NLS challenges this view and suggests that in practice literacy varies from one context to another and from

one culture to another and so, therefore, do the effects of the different literacies in different conditions. The autonomous (or standard) approach is simply “imposing western conceptions of literacy on to other cultures or within a country those of one class or cultural group onto others” (Street 2003: 77).

While this article does not seek to prescribe or define a specific type of literacy, since even academic literacy is interpreted differently by different groups (Parkinson et al. 2008: 12), nor argue about whether a course imposes a western conception of literacy (the reality is students need to achieve English proficiency to cope with their tertiary studies), it does argue that context should not be ignored when designing courses or materials. It attempts instead to argue for the avoidance of a ‘one size fits all’ approach to courses that seek to address the academic discourse needs of first-entering university students. Course designers may still have to include the ‘basics’ in certain English and study skills impoverished contexts while also introducing the skills referred to by Weideman above. Choices are further influenced by the political demand for ‘redress’ (South Africa 2001: 35-43) and open higher education for all, particularly for previously disadvantaged groups (Reddy 2004; CHE 2004; Smith 1996), and the unmanageably large classes that such demands lead to. The teaching and learning of general basic language skills (sentence structure, punctuation, verb forms, tense and aspect, cohesion and coherence, dictionary work, note-taking and reading strategies) essential to the tertiary classroom, serve as a springboard from which students can then progress to applying these basic skills proficiently and flexibly, and become ‘shape-shifting portfolio people’ (Gee 2000: 415)¹ who can adapt to the demands of changing contexts and circumstances.

Tertiary English language needs

At UL there is a constant request for courses to assist students achieve a reasonable to high English academic proficiency across all faculties. Discussions with staff from other institutions, particularly those with many students coming from rural schools, confirm this.

That students need courses to achieve proficiency in Academic Literacy (whether English or another language) is further confirmed by comments on the school and university failure rate in the media and by research (Kasanga 1998; Balfour 2002; Webb 2002; Pityana 2005). Despite English having been the LoLT for decades at our schools from Grade 5 onwards, studies (Webb 2002: 187; Balfour 2002: 159) show that ESL school-going learners do not progress sufficiently in their mastery of English. Their English proficiency acquired at school is inadequate for tertiary learning and academic writing purposes (Pityana 2005; Kasanga 1998:107; Chimbanga 2001: 147). This is particularly true of students at universities with a large contingent of rural students. These rural students frequently possess good “basic interpersonal communicative skills” (BICS) (Cummins 1979, 1981, 1984) and often appear to communicate reasonably well when speaking English, but write incoherently and ungrammatically. Thus, despite having

¹ According to Handy (1992) and Peters (1994), as cited by Gee (2000: 414), “individuals are not defined by fixed essential qualities, such as intelligence, culture or skill; rather they are (and must come to see themselves as) an ever-changing ‘portfolio’ of rearrangeable skills acquired in their trajectory through ‘project space’ – all the projects they have been involved with. Hence, Gee (2000: 414) asserts ‘shape-shifting portfolio people’ are created who “live to fill up their portfolios with attributes, achievements and skills that they can flexibly rearrange as things change and new contexts demand that they redefine themselves”.

had English as a subject and as LoLT for at least their five years at secondary school, they lack the language proficiency termed “cognitive academic language proficiency” (CALP) (Cummins 1979; Kasanga 1998:106; Van Dyk 2005) which is cognitively demanding language which involves understanding and using abstract concepts – a requirement for tertiary studies. To succeed in their tertiary studies, students need to develop academic language proficiency or CALP as well as content-area knowledge and skills (Garcia 2000; Freeman & Freeman 2003). AL/EAP courses seek to address these shortcomings.

However, institutions may find that the academic literacy course of another institution may not be suitable for their own institution’s target population’s language problems in terms of course content and complexity and institutional constraints or even time (two years instead of only one) – hence the need for considering the choices listed below. Instead of a common content for academic literacy courses across all institutions in the country, each institution needs to consider the needs of its own target population.

The AL/EAP course content will be determined by the context: in terms of appropriate pedagogy, for instance, moving from the known or familiar content to the unknown and unfamiliar (culturally and academically: examples expressed by the students’ paragraphs above) may be particularly necessary for students who find the conventions of a university foreign and confusing. Thus one institution may at first include more local content in language activities before moving to a broader use of English which may include more American, British or international content. An institution with first-entering students who have been already been exposed to different cultures and conventions at school or in the urban environment may not need that initial ‘local’ and familiar material.

How the content is presented and how much, will depend on what is possible and practicable in ‘tutorials’ or workshops for a group of 50 to 60 students or in lectures for 500 students as is the case at UL. This differs from how the content can be presented and dealt with in small groups where one-to-one support is possible. Students who have entered university possessing the necessary academic language skills will likely be able to cope in a group of 50 or 500 whereas those without the required skills may not.

One institution may include study skills such as time management, dictionary and note-taking, in the course content while another may not, because their students have already acquired those skills at secondary school. The wide range of abilities and language skills with which students enter university is the rationale for dissimilar choices by different institutions at the initial stage of designing an academic literacy course.

Issues and choices in EAP or AL

As mentioned, the need for academic discourse, often in English, for the purpose of study, research and teaching, is escalating. This is because of the growth of English in academic contexts, and because academic discourse needs to be mastered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels by ESL students and researchers. So, not only are the choices course and material designers have to make, influenced by the different levels of proficiency and language skills with which students enter university, but also by the level of study already achieved and its academic discourse requirements – whether undergraduate, postgraduate or staff.

Choice 1: Specific or General Academic Purposes

The issue questioned here is that of specificity in terms of the different disciplines' English needs. A distinction is made between English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) and English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). With an EGAP approach an attempt is made to establish the skills and activities that are common to all disciplines – that is generic academic practices. These can be, for instance, the core activities listed by Dudley-Evans (1998: 41):

- Listening to lectures
- Participating in supervision, seminars and tutorials
- Reading textbooks, articles and other material
- Writing essays, examination responses, dissertations and reports.

The question arises whether the skills needed for the above are transferable across different disciplines or whether we should rather focus on the texts, skills and forms learners need in their different disciplines (Hyland 2006:9; McCabe 2008: 305). This emphasises the focus of this paper: different contexts, different choices – one size does not fit all – yet eventually all must achieve academic English proficiency.

Some of the issues that need consideration when selecting a general or specific approach are:

- Language educators may lack the training, expertise and confidence to teach subject-specific conventions. It would help if all teachers were also language teachers. The following issues and questions are intermittently raised at ELT workshops and seminars attended by the researcher. Could education faculties be persuaded to make English language courses compulsory for content-subject teacher trainees? The counter argument is that EAP or academic literacy educators cannot rely on subject specialists to teach disciplinary literacy skills as they usually do not have the expertise or desire to focus on language issues. English language educators at universities and in secondary schools find little support from content-subject educators in terms of the poor English the students use and consequently students do not take language skills seriously because they are never made aware of their language deficiencies outside the language classroom. In the field of ESL teaching it has already been proposed that content–subject teachers should also be teachers of English. Cummins (1994) argues that the teaching of English and subject matter content should be so integrated that “all content teachers are also teachers of language” (Cummins 1994: 42) and “view every content lesson as a language lesson” (Met 1994: 161).
- Underprepared learners, or learners with a low English proficiency, are not ready for discipline-specific language and learning tasks and need preparatory classes to give them a good understanding of general English (or the institution's LoLT if a second or third language for the student) first. Many rural South African first-entering students could be classified as ‘underprepared learners’ (cf. McCabe 2008) as has been found by Kasanga (1998) and others. In this article ‘underprepared’ in terms of English and academic discourse.
- By being specific, and basing course content on the communicative demands of particular courses and disciplines, does not necessarily prepare learners for unpredictable assignments and may encourage, among other writing, unimaginative and formulaic essays. This may support the case for additional EAP/AL courses at the second and third years of study in which different approaches can be introduced and encouraged. The argument for

additional courses in the second or third year is supported by the UL study (McCabe 2008) which found that the course book for the UL EAP modules and after using it for five years could not cover all language problem areas in one year.

- Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research does not support the argument that learners need to master core forms before getting on to specific and presumably more difficult language features. Learners do not acquire language step-by-step (Hyland 2006: 10-12).
- EAP/AL professionals are not merely concerned with teaching isolated words, structures, lexical phrases, and so on, but particularly with investigating the uses of language that carry clear disciplinary values as a result of frequency and importance to the communities that employ them.
- There are serious doubts about whether there is a common core of generic language items. Once meaning and use are introduced there no longer is a finite set of grammatical forms that can be common to all disciplines. Any form has many possible meanings depending on its context of use.
- EAP or academic literacy classes do not focus only on forms but teach subject-specific communicative skills as well. Participation in these communicative activities does not depend on the learner having full control of these common core grammar features. Few educators would want to delay instruction until such time that the learners had perfectly mastered those items.

In the case of students from rural backgrounds who are underprepared in terms of academic reading and writing and study skills, ESAP is not an option when they first enter – because of the generally low English proficiency of rural students as found in Limpopo (McCabe 2008) which makes an immediate introduction to subject-specific discourse and conventions problematic. Their poor proficiency is primarily the result of impoverished English language input at school, exacerbated by institutional constraints such as staff shortages, insufficient contact periods and available venues (McCabe 2008: 10-14; also see Dikgari 2011). Until the barriers to learning English more effectively in rural secondary schools have been overcome and the students enter the university with an English proficiency which enables them to cope with more challenging English language usage, the course materials should cater for common core features (a generic course). An attempt needs to be made to introduce learners to a wide variety of academic genres, while attempting to do ‘catch-up’ work in what should have been done in the schools. The academic skills (analysing, reasoning, arguing, evaluating, and other cognitive and metacognitive skills) required by students in different disciplines can still be inculcated in a generic academic literacy course, since the similarities may be greater than the differences regarding discipline, audience, and context. However, this researcher believes that ESAP at second and third year levels providing language support throughout the degree studies of an ESL student should be an adjunct to a first year academic language support course because language skills need constant reinforcement. The first year involves assisting students to ‘catch up’ with language skills not acquired at school and moving from Cummins’ BICS to what he terms CALP – as mooted by Kasanga (1998) and other researchers mentioned above. A second year of AL/EAP, at least, is required for the language skills needed for the content subjects.

Choice 2: Academic literacy or study skills

The next question which is raised about EAP/ AL is whether it is fundamentally skills-based, text-based or practice-based (Baynam 2002: 190-192; Hyland 2006: 16). The conceptions of EAP, for example, have gradually changed over the years as the research base has developed. In the beginning EAP was mainly a materials and teacher-led movement focusing on texts (Candlin *et al.* 1975; Jordan 2004), but more recently research has emphasised the rich diversity of texts, contexts and practices in which learners function because, as mentioned before, growing numbers of learners are coming from culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. This is the reason for the difficulty in clearly demarcating the exact nature or format of EAP or AL courses. The needs of the learners in each distinct context have to, by necessity, be addressed differently. In addition, the changes in, for example, the UL configuration of degree programmes has led to learners now taking a more diverse mix of subjects or a medical student at UKZN who has to take Zulu in amongst a range of medical subjects, as well as a law subject. These new course configurations are “more discursively challenging for students who have to move between genres, departments and disciplines” (Hyland 2006: 17).

The study skills approach was the initial thrust of EAP and is still included in academic literacy courses. This entails the more mechanical aspects of study such as referencing, using libraries, dissertation formatting, etc. (Robinson 1991). The definition given by Richards *et al.* (1992: 359) sums up the early EAP study skills approach as:

abilities, techniques and strategies which are used when reading, writing, or listening for study purposes. For example, study skills needed by university students studying from English language textbooks include: adjusting reading speeds according to the type of material being read, using the dictionary, guessing word meanings from context, interpreting graphs, diagrams, and symbols, note-taking and summarising.

This approach is based on the learners’ need for more than just linguistic knowledge to be successful in their studies. The focus shifted from linguistic form to common reasoning and interpreting processes underlying communication which help learners to understand the discourse of their disciplines. The study skills approach gradually gave way to “a more discipline-sensitive and discourse-based approach which saw learning as an induction or *acculturation* into a new culture rather than an extension of existing skills” (Hyland 2006: 19). These, in addition to English language skills, are the skills many rural students need to master for successful tertiary studies (Pityana 2005; Kasanga 1998:107; Chimbanga 2001: 147). Research into knowledge construction, teaching and learning began to connect literacy with a more general understanding of the disciplines (Swales 1998; Jordan 2004; Hyland 2006). The focus shifted to the different types of writing required from learners and their approach to the tasks, interactions and discourses of their fields of study.

The third shift of EAP content raises issues of relevance and legitimacy in relation to writing practices in the disciplines. An academic literacies approach, according to Hyland (2006: 22), emphasises that the way language is used (‘literacy practices’), is modelled by social institutions and power relationships. There is a hierarchy – some literacies, such as those “concerned with legal, scientific and political domains, become more dominant and important than others”

(Hyland 2006: 22). Academic success involves learners learning to represent themselves in a way demanded and valued by their particular discipline, as well as adopting the values, beliefs and identities embodied by academic discourses. EAP, at this level, is no longer for non-native speakers only, but offers academic skills needed by native speakers of English as well.

Choice 3: A homogenous or heterogeneous approach to English (or any other LoLT)

Students, and particularly rural students, may find it difficult to bridge the domains of English in the classroom and their vernacular at home. This includes language conventions and this appears to make it difficult for students to understand and master the conventions of academic discourse (cf. Kaplan 1966). It may be necessary for course and materials designers to bear this mind although the purpose is to teach academic literacy, often in English. Acknowledging the vernaculars with their own conventions may enhance the learning environment. On the one hand, English is viewed as a common language which enables individuals “to enter networks beyond their locality” (Graddol 2001) and makes possible the worldwide exchange of ideas and expansion of knowledge (Glaze 2000). On the other hand, there are those who see the spread of English as “an insidious and destructive force” (Hyland 2006: 28). These views are a reflection of different ideological orientations. The ideal would be to see English becoming a universal culture-free language which does not advantage a particular group – but how this can be achieved without diminishing the vernaculars is not yet clear (Hyland 2006: 29). (Encouraging interculturality in the English classroom may be one tool.) English is still seen by many (particularly parents) as the key to economic empowerment, as well as academic empowerment (Govender 2008: 5; De Wet 2002: 119) – which it still is. Until such time that this changes, EAP with its focus on English will still be in demand. Yet, this should not mean the reality of the ‘other’ languages and the needs of the speakers should not be acknowledged.

Interculturality, the view that promotes the idea that the learning of culture is more than merely the transfer of information between cultures but rather the contemplation of one’s own culture in relation to another (McKay 2002; Byram 1997, 2000), could be one way of practising ‘damage control’ (or make English less of a ‘destroyer’). The process of learning about another culture involves reflection on one’s own culture as well as on the target culture. Greater understanding of both cultures, but especially of one’s own in a positive relation to others, may prevent a disparaging view of the vernaculars or their loss of status in the eyes of the speakers themselves. Contemplation of introducing one’s culture to others may enhance the degree to which students see themselves in the curriculum (as having something positive to contribute), and in turn how welcome they feel in school (by having their contribution acknowledged). Feelings of self-worth are critical. When setting up academic literacy classes universities may also need to consider whether they are taking a homogeneous approach to educating students who have heterogeneous needs (Maxwell-Jolly, Gandara & Méndez Benavídez 2007: 18). A homogeneous approach may perpetuate feelings of inferiority and invite conflict.

Choice 4: Communicative language teaching or an eclectic approach

For those contexts where EAP or AL still requires a certain amount of ‘grammar teaching’, the choice of a certain language teaching approach or methodology (which is part of ELT), is still a concern. Not only does the course or materials designer include the skills required

for academic discourse in the EAP/AL course but is obligated to include activities to help first-entering students to ‘catch-up’ with language skills they should have mastered at school – English language teaching (ELT). Communicative language teaching (CLT) has been the prescribed methodology for the last decade or more and other methodologies have been viewed as outdated. CLT focuses on active involvement and communication with the focus “on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures” (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 64). Communicative proficiency is a requirement for academic discourse too thus the assumption would be that CLT would be the appropriate approach to teach academic discourse.

Four areas of competence are often distinguished as part of communicative competence (Canale & Swain 1980; Brown 1994; Kilfoil & Van der Walt 1997): grammatical competence (correct application of grammar rules but not necessarily explicit knowledge of the rules), sociolinguistic competence (appropriate use of language and register), strategic competence (the ability to use different ways to make meaning clear; able to ‘repair and ‘sustain’ communication by using the previous competencies), and discourse competence (the ability to recognise and produce the links in discourse that show progression and unity; or how sentences are strung together). This implies that using the Communicative Approach to teach English in the classroom means more than teaching formal language. CLT would thus seem to be the ideal way to assist students to master academic discourse.

However, CLT can also be viewed differently. O’Neill (2000: 1) describes it as having enormous “intuitive appeal” and that “the ‘narrow’ or fundamentalist version of CLT can easily become a stifling orthodoxy in which things like rote-learning, memorisation, ‘display questions’, ‘teacher-talk’ automatically mean BAD. None of these things alone is bad. What matters is how, when and why they are done”. This also applies to the selection of language activities for textbooks and coursebooks – an activity which cannot be described as purely communicative is not necessarily ineffective.

O’Neill (2000: 15) continues by stating that no single method or approach can work for all teachers or for all students and that “there is no scientific evidence of any kind that proves or even suggests that typical CLT techniques work well or work at all under all conditions and with all learners”.

Furthermore, CLT is interpreted and applied in different ways depending on the context (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 68). Hence, there may also be limitations in applying it. As a language teaching method it may not always suit the culture of the learners (Pennycook 1989; Richards 1990; Holliday 1994; Sullivan 1996; Alptekin 2002). In some cultures speaking or contradicting the person in authority such as the teacher, is viewed as disrespectful. In other cultures a woman must not be seen to be too forward in giving her opinion.

The students in the UL study display similar problems² to those of tertiary students described by Bosman and Van der Merwe (2000: 221-228), namely in terms of a culture of non-

² Similar problems with the basic four communication skills (listening, reading, speaking, writing) at other universities in South Africa and other African countries have been observed by Prah (1999).

learning³ caused by socio-economic and environmental factors which lead to a deficiency in metacognitive skills (by which one acquires and validates knowledge – a deficiency in this skill does not suggest a deficiency in intelligence), and poor performance – and these factors may all impact on the successful implementation of a communicative approach in the language teaching-learning classroom – and in the EAP/AL classroom. The communicative approach is, for example, not easy to apply in large classes of previously disadvantaged students. There are often problems with participation: students using their mother tongue languages in group work⁴ (hence getting little practice in English); feedback (regularly – every week or two – marking essays or other written assignments for 90 to 150 students to provide regular and meaningful feedback is a difficult task for lecturers); poor written communication as a result of poor English grammar and writing skills; an over-reliance on the educator or tutor to provide the knowledge, and students' beliefs about their role as language learners (often passive) and the role of the educator to be in the classroom. (Cf. also Hoa Hiep 2007: 193-201). CLT may thus have its limitations and there is evidence of this in the literature (Ryan 2001: 1-3; Li 2000: 149; Chick 1996; Anderson 1993; Valdes & Jhones 1991; Barnaby & Sun 1989; Chau and Chung 1987.)

Breen and Candlin (2001: 23) have also admitted that they can only deduce and propose principles on which communicative curricula may be based. They assert that “any curriculum is a personal and social arena”. In fact, a communicative curriculum emphasises a communicative process by which “the interrelating curriculum components are themselves open to negotiation and change”. They allow that there may be situations in which their proposed principles may not be implementable and so a true communicative curriculum may not be feasible. It is therefore a given that variability is inherent in human communication and in the way it is diversely achieved by different learners and educators. And so, despite the general acceptance of CLT as the way language should be taught it is clear that not all language teachers completely accept or implement it. It is an improvement over preceding innovations, but it cannot solve all the problems that are faced by language teachers in a variety of contexts. Stern (1992: 14), more than a decade ago, explains:

As for the communicative approach, the reliance on a single overriding concept, ‘communication’, is a disadvantage which prevents communicative language teaching from being entirely satisfactory as a theoretical framework. In order to account for all varieties and aspects of language teaching we either stretch the concept of communication so much that it loses any distinctive meaning, or we accept its limitations and then find ourselves in the predicament of the ‘method’ solution: an excessive emphasis on a single concept.

Therefore, the approaches decided upon to teach the target language, the academic objectives of the course and the skills taught, will determine *how* the course content is presented and

³ Non-learning in the context of this study is defined as not participating in class, little self-initiative and holding the teacher entirely responsible for what the learner/ student ‘learns’ or not. The learner does not necessarily ‘not want to learn’ but does not know how to learn.

⁴ This was difficult to control, even in a relatively small group of 30 Arab EFL students where the researcher taught at the Sultan Qaboos University in Oman from 2000 to 2002.

which tasks to include in the materials. The methods and materials are the interface between teaching and learning. Therefore the kinds of materials an educator selects will depend on the methodologies or approaches adopted.

Inevitably each individual or team of materials developers will decide on an approach or methodology and select materials, tasks and activities that reflect the needs (as perceived by the materials developer/s) of the learners in a specific context and they should do so without fear of being criticised for not using ‘the method of the moment’; since, whichever choice is made it is bound to be criticised somewhere by someone or other, and the materials and activities labelled as impractical or too theoretical, too traditional or structured, too informal or formal, or too simple or too complex. Ultimately, however, the materials developer(s) must make the decision about which tasks and activities to include, as best he/she/they can, for the situation as they see it, and according to the needs of learners, educators and their institution as expressed by them. This thinking fits into the postmethod pedagogy described by Kamaruvadivelu (2006), and particularly two of what he terms ‘the five myths of method’:

1. There is no best method out there ready and waiting to be discovered;
2. Methods constitute the organising principle for language teaching.

Educators should reflect about what happens in their language classrooms, about views expressed by their learners and other stakeholders and explore all language teaching approaches and methods before deciding which one (or combination) is best suited for their specific context. Brown (2007) calls it an enlightened and eclectic approach or method. Educators are encouraged, therefore, to constantly *explore* what works and what does not work in a particular context, reflect about the problems and to choose that which works at a given time in a given classroom.

Choice 5: Set benchmarks or scaffolding

Although institutions may believe that students should either sink or swim (those with university ‘capacity’ – with the crucial study and discourse skills obtained in secondary school – managing to swim), a social conscience may dictate that students from resource and teaching impoverished schools should perhaps during a transitional period be assisted to acquire the skills required for tertiary studies. Scaffolding is one of these ‘supports’ by which tasks have in-built support to help the learners to raise their proficiency to a level which will enable them acquire the essential skills to cope with their tertiary academic studies. This may be viewed as ‘spoonfeeding’, or lowering of standards. The question is: Does one expect students who did not have the teaching and learning resources at school (but may have the intellectual ability to acquire the necessary skills) to somehow achieve the set benchmark or does one provide support, even beyond the first year of study?

Scaffolding instruction as a teaching strategy originates from Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). “The zone of proximal development is the distance between what children can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance” (Raymond, 2000: 176). The goal of the educator when using the scaffolding teaching strategy is for the student to become an independent and self-regulating learner and problem solver (Hartman, 2002: 24). The scaffolding teaching strategy provides individualized support based on the learner’s

ZPD (Chang, Sung, & Chen, 2002: 7; Van der Stuyf 2002:2). The scaffolds, in turn, assist a learner to build on prior knowledge and internalize new information. The activities provided in scaffolding instruction are just beyond the level of what the learner can do alone (Olson & Platt, 2000: 173). The educator or “more capable other” provides the scaffolds to assist the learner to accomplish the tasks that he or she could otherwise not complete; hence helping the learner through the ZPD (Branson, Brown, & Cocking, 2000: 43).

In the area of second language teaching and academic language, Ovando *et al.* (2003: 345) define scaffolding as “providing contextual supports for meaning through the use of simplified language, teacher modelling, visuals and graphics, cooperative learning and hands-on learning”. This support has to be facilitated by the ESL educator, and then, as students become more proficient, the scaffold or the support is gradually removed (Diaz-Rico & Weed 2002: 85; Bradley & Bradley 2004: 1). Bradley and Bradley (2004: 1) identify three types of scaffolding as being especially effective for second language learners:

- *Simplifying the language:* The teacher can simplify the language by shortening selections, speaking in the present tense, and avoiding the use of idioms.
- *Asking for completion, not generation:* The teacher can have students choose answers from a list or complete a partially finished outline or paragraph.
- *Using visuals:* The teacher can present information and ask for students to respond through the use of graphic organizers, tables, charts, outlines, and graphs.

The supports or scaffolding are gradually removed (or ‘faded’) (Davis & Miyake 2004: 267; Pea 2004: 438,442) as learners develop autonomous learning strategies and upgrade their own cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning skills and knowledge. According to Vygotsky, the external scaffolds provided by the educator can be removed because the learner has developed “...more sophisticated cognitive systems, related to fields of learning such as mathematics or language, the system of knowledge itself becomes part of the scaffold or social support for the new learning” (Vygotsky 1978, cited in Raymond, 2000: 176). Scaffolding is therefore temporary.

Conclusion

The choices made by course designers at individual institutions will differ for the different reasons mentioned. The choices made by this author (and revealed in the evaluation criteria listed in the appendix) pertains to the UL rural cohort. They may not be relevant to the EAP/AL courses at other institutions. However, while on the one hand, at workshops and seminars in the past, the author has frequently been told by other academics “This is not apply to or happen at our institution”, “We have a set standard; students must reach it” and on the other, usually as an aside, so not to be heard by others: “We also have a problem”, “We have to deal with problems emerging from the schools as well as the institutional constraints” “A year is too short”. Although this is anecdotal evidence, it confirms that ‘one-size-does-not-fit-all’ when it comes to EAP/AL courses.

Students, who enter university with a low English proficiency, as many rural students at UL do, but who possess the intellectual abilities and able to develop the cognitive and metacognitive skills for tertiary study, would be best served if initially offered a generic academic literacy

course which includes basic study skills and the four basic language skills. Tertiary degree programmes demand the mastering of formal academic discourse and there are many skills that the tertiary student with a low English proficiency needs to acquire, sometimes more than can be provided in a year. Bearing in mind BICS and CALP and scaffolding, it would thus be prudent for course designers to plan for advanced AL/EAP or ESAP courses to follow on a first-year academic literacy course. An initial introduction to academic discourse and its conventions should then be built upon by offering ESAP courses onwards from the second year.

The introduction of interculturality into an initial EAP/AL course could further empower first-entering students by contributing to a sense of familiarity and reducing student anxiety in a new and unfamiliar environment with its own culture and specific discourse, which the first year students still need to acquire. Interculturality in the language classroom is likely to add to their empowerment by increasing self-esteem and confidence. This should encourage student participation because it will involve familiar topics, acknowledge their world view while gradually introducing them to a new one. At the preliminary level a pragmatic academic literacy is called for to help familiarise students with the conventions of academic discourse until they are able to use it to critique.

A series of practical, scaffolded activities, especially when introducing unfamiliar concepts, by means which students learn to use and apply the conventions of the academic register will be beneficial to students and improve student throughput, instead of applying a 'sink or swim' approach.

The dynamics in the language classroom are likely to dictate the approach and methods used by educators to present the course content and may be a combination of Communicative Language Teaching and one of the structural teaching approaches. According to recent research, (amongst others: Stern 1992 and Kumaravadivelu 2006) one particular method cannot guarantee successful language acquisition.

These issues require further research by each individual institution, and alternative views need to be explored, challenges admitted and openly discussed before course designers can make decisions about content and how to present the content to help rural students achieve adequate proficiency in academic discourse. First-entering students from impoverished schools, often rural schools, cannot manage the demands of a tertiary institution and the intricacies of academic discourse without additional support (and in some instances for more than the first year) and adaptations to the EAP/AL course offerings.

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Appendix:

A shortened version of the final criteria developed for EAP in-house materials at UL for first-entering students which pertain to this paper. The materials were bound in two coursebooks – one for each semester module. As pointed out at the beginning of the article, the criteria were extracted from the responses to two questionnaires administered to the students – one at the beginning and other at the end of the year and a questionnaire was administered to the teaching staff of the two modules. Eventually after having extracted the patterns in the responses to the various questionnaires (the patterns are given in brackets after each criterium too), the final criteria were submitted for external assessment. A selection of activities for the UL EAP course materials could be made on the basis of these criteria to fit the current language and academic skills needs of the first-entering students.

1. The coursebook should include many activities which provide the opportunity for interaction, communication, negotiation of meaning and understanding; that is, activities whose primary goal is fluency and appropriate, comprehensible language (a CLT principle).
2. The coursebook activities should include writing activities which involve and provide practice in academic process writing: analysing topics or instructions, creating, conceptualising, drafting, and revising (an EGAP principle).
3. Language activities in the coursebooks should require students to interact with texts (academic reading) and write on topics which require cognitive skills, that is critical thinking and a questioning approach to texts (as for academic writing) for which students need to select, reason, analyse, classify, sequence and other such skills (an EGAP approach).
4. The writing tasks should raise an awareness of cohesive devices (e.g. transitional words and expressions, pronouns, repetition, parallel structures, old/new information) to assist students with the presentation of logical arguments in their own writing (an EAP approach).
5. The coursebook should contain a variety of activities by means of which English grammar (language form and conventions) can be practised and applied; specifically within context, not as discrete items. (The weak version of CLT.) Focus on form may be explicit (see criterion 17).
6. The coursebook should provide activities involving dictionary work and collocations which will help students expand their vocabulary and use of idiomatic English. (Component of EGAP.)
7. Summary writing activities should be included in the materials as a skill to use for note-taking, note-making, and essay writing. (Component of EGAP.)
8. The coursebooks should provide opportunities to write in different academic genres. (Component of EGAP.)
9. The coursebooks should contain several activities that encourage autonomy in language learning, that is, independent learning.

10. In terms of large classes, the coursebook activities should provide opportunities for 'personalisation', that is, personal input to prevent an atmosphere of impersonality and bureaucracy. (an interculturality concept)
11. The coursebook activities should be sequenced according to complexity to promote a feeling of achievement as the simpler tasks are successfully completed (Krashen's input hypothesis). (An alternative, though very similar, is scaffolding, that is building 'support structures' into activities until the learner is able to manage more complex ones.)
12. The coursebooks should apply the pedagogical principle of working 'from the known to the unknown' by including activities relevant to and from the local cultures. This should generate discussion and participation and so help to increase the students' linguistic knowledge. (an interculturality concept)
13. The coursebooks should include some activities which teach interculturality – learning to value one's own and others' culture. (an interculturality concept)
14. The coursebook should for the present focus on only two of the academic language skills, namely, academic reading and writing. (EAP.)
15. In terms of large classes, the coursebooks should attempt to include activities that accommodate different learning styles – for example, auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic – as well as prevent monotony.
16. A number of activities should contain open-ended questions to encourage lively participation in large classes. (For example, 'why', 'explain how to...')
17. Most of the grammar exercises should teach by awareness-raising, that is, implicitly. (There is, however, a role for explicit focus on form and accuracy – see criterion 5.) (focus on grammar)
18. Language structures (grammar) should be 'recycled' or repeated at intervals because language structures are not completely mastered the first time they are done. (focus on grammar)
19. The coursebooks should contain tasks which involve problem-solving. (TBLT.)
20. Activities and tasks should be mainly learner-centred. (CLT, TBLT, EAP.)
21. Some tasks and activities should be done in pairs or small groups of 3 for students to learn to collaborate, interact and take risks. (CLT.)
22. The activities should encourage reflection, that is, encourage students to reflect about how and why and for what purpose they do a task.
23. To encourage participation by keeping students engaged, the coursebooks should include topics that are of interest to young adults between the ages of 17 and 24 years.
24. The coursebooks should contain sufficient reading passages to practise the reading techniques of skimming, scanning, speed reading and close reading. (EAP.)
25. Authentic tasks (simplified if too difficult) should be included in coursebook activities (CLT principle).