The Leap into TEAP: the role of the BALEAP competency framework in the professional development of new EAP teachers

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Teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) involves developing students' language and study competence to help them perform effectively in an academic context. This field has expanded considerably in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, supported by a professional institution (BALEAP), with centres in most further and higher education institutions, an active research base and the *Journal of EAP*. Nevertheless, it is a relatively young field, emerging as an entity distinct from English Language Teaching (ELT) in the 1960s with the first use of the term EAP occurring around 1974 (Jordan, 2002). Its evolution can be seen as a natural process, which has now reached a key stage. A review of how this process occurred highlights aspects of teaching EAP which experienced practitioners take for granted but which may be problematic for novices.

The development of EAP as a field can be examined using a model of knowledge flows 'as creators of institutional legitimacy' (Blomquist and Söderholm, 2002: 25-26). This model has been applied to another emerging research field: Project Management (PM) which began about a decade before EAP. In this model, knowledge flows occur in waves as ideas spread to different contexts. The *carriers* of knowledge are the practitioners and trainers and the *vehicles* are the publications and courses which promote knowledge diffusion. The processes involved do not necessarily take place in sequence but are often overlapping and in parallel. The process appears to progress steadily towards increasing complexity but like Darwinian evolution there can also be false starts and blind alleys.

Project Management began in response to a felt need for the control and evaluation of large scale weapons development projects in the United States during the Cold War era of the 1950s. Specific techniques and tools were developed – and given acronyms – such as PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) and CPM (Critical Path Method).
These tools, initially developed for specific companies, were quickly spread to other industries by the engineers and contractors involved in the projects and this constituted the first knowledge flow in the discipline. Similarly EAP began in the 1960s as a response to the needs of overseas students on university courses in the UK (Jordan, 2002). The universities of Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle appointed tutors to provide induction courses, and ELT centres were established. Specific tools were developed for diagnostic assessment such as the English Proficiency Test Battery or Davies Test. However, the individual units were largely working in isolation, each developing their own tests, courses and materials. There does not seem to have been the same potential at this stage for tutors to move between institutions and spread ideas as there was for Project Management.

The next phase of knowledge flow for both these fields came with the activities of consultants. Engineers involved in the large military projects set up PM consultancies which expanded into other markets. They also began to apply PM to other areas besides product development and to make the tools and techniques more generic, enabling them to be applied to many different contexts. EAP became important in countries such as the USA and Australia, which were also experiencing an influx of overseas students and EAP consultants went to advise universities setting up English medium programmes. The generic products in EAP are rhetorical functions, outlined in Trimble (1985) and genre analysis associated with Swales (1990 and 2004) and others. These tools enable teachers to analyze texts and understand text processes in specific contexts. They spread into the EAP community initially through coursebooks such as Jordan's *Academic Writing*, Weissberg and Buker's *Writing up Research* and Swales and Feak's *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. Corpus linguistics, though originating elsewhere, could also be thought of as a generic tool for analysing texts in specific contexts.

As both these fields developed, practitioners needed an arena to share research, materials and concerns. This led to the establishment of professional associations holding regular conferences. Conference proceedings were published and both associations established specialist journals. This constituted the third wave of knowledge dissemination. For EAP, the

association was originally SELMOUS (Special English Language Materials for Overseas University Students). It is worth noting that this title prioritized the need to share teaching materials and that even after the change of name to BALEAP there was 'general agreement over the continuing importance of materials-sharing to the organization'.[1]

Blomquist and Söderholm (2002) suggest that the fourth wave of knowledge contributes to the legitimacy of the field through standardization, research and university training and that these are essential for long term survival. Project managers now have a *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge* (PMBOK) together with standardized certification programs and procedures which allow them to demonstrate that they are members of the project management community. Increasingly PM is beginning to influence its parent field with organizations changing to a *management by projects* paradigm. Ten years behind PM, EAP is still working towards this level of standardization. Books describing the current state of the field have appeared regularly (Swales, 1985; Hutchinson and Waters,1987; Robinson, 1990; Johns, 1997; Jordan, 1998; Benesch, 2001; Hyland, 2006; Alexander, Argent and Spencer, 2008). EAP has the potential to inform teaching practices in other areas of ELT with its needs-driven, contextualised approach, as Hyland (2005: 57) suggests:

> I've always seen EAP as being at the cutting edge of a lot of innovations in language teaching: needs analysis, genre approaches, critical pedagogy, have really been sharpened in EAP and are crossing over to ELT

Key aspects of teaching EAP which are now taken for granted by experienced practitioners include the response to felt needs, the use of generic tools to analyze texts in specific contexts and the emphasis on developing materials based on texts from the disciplines that students are aiming to enter. However, the field still has some way to go in establishing its professional status within institutions, standardizing its body of knowledge and skills and formalizing teacher education. The latter is particularly important to enable knowledge flows to continue to build the field. Although a variety of short training programs and accredited modules have emerged, e.g. DELTA module 3, teacher training for EAP remains largely ad hoc and informal.

Routes into EAP teaching were investigated in 2006 with a small survey of EAP teachers which asked about the kind of training they received to prepare them to teach EAP, how they continued to develop professionally and what they found challenging about this type of teaching at the beginning. This survey was available for completion online between April and August and was advertised to the BALEAP discussion list so most respondents are likely to have been teaching on pre-sessional courses in the UK when they answered it. The results were grouped into three categories, depending on the length of teaching experience: up to 5 years, between 5 and10 years and more than 10 years. A selection of the data compares novice and experienced teachers.

The survey asked about teachers' qualifications and most teachers who responded were very well qualified. Almost all those with less than five years' experience had an undergraduate degree and more than 60% had a postgraduate degree. Over half also had a teaching qualification such as a DELTA or an ELT focus to their degree. In comparison 90% of the most experienced group had a postgraduate degree. They were more likely to have a PGCE as their teaching qualification and a higher proportion had an ELT focus to one of their degrees.

Respondents were asked how they first learned to teach EAP, either through formal courses or informally, for example, through apprenticeship, team teaching with an experienced teacher. For the group with up to five years' experience the three main ways were induction

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[1] Paul Fanning, personal communication, August 2006

sessions for pre-sessional courses (usually lasting only one or two days), by using an EAP coursebook or by working it out for themselves in their own context. The most experienced group had a similar profile and they also chose meetings as important for their early training. The data suggests that the possibility for learning through apprenticeship is less available than it once was. Whereas 29% of the most experienced group had been taught by team teaching with a more experienced colleague, only 17% of the least experienced group had learned this way.

In terms of continuing development, only around 20% of all the respondents reported using formal routes such as in-service or accredited courses for professional development. When asked about their preferred methods for developing professionally more than half said these formal routes were not available to them. Instead they used informal routes to develop by sharing ideas with colleagues, using EAP coursebooks, reading books or journals and attending meetings.

In spite of the informal nature of their initial training over half of the least experienced group reported that it had taken them only one year or less to feel confident teaching EAP. In contrast, the majority in the most experienced group said it had taken them two years or more to feel confident and a third said they had needed at least five years or they were still learning. One interpretation of this might be that the inexperienced group have a narrower range of courses with more prescribed materials, which has allowed them to feel confident much sooner. However, this finding seems at odds with the high proportion of teachers who are working out what to do for themselves as this process might be expected to take longer than one year.

In their comments two respondents expressed pertinent but different views in relation to formal training. One comment suggested that no existing diploma or masters qualification combined theory and practice, leading to a lack of transferability of qualifications across the profession. In contrast, another respondent suggested there was no need for an EAP-specific qualification provided that good support was available. However, the survey seems to reveal that thorough induction and support is not necessarily available in all institutions.

The final question in the survey was an open ended one, asking what the main challenges had been in learning to teach EAP. The most frequent challenges related to the content of EAP courses: understanding what EAP involves and how it is different from general ELT, understanding materials and student needs in the disciplines, making EAP relevant, authentic and interesting and understanding the cultural shifts students have to make in studying in a new environment. Other challenges related to delivery: dealing with mixed discipline or mixed level classes or time constraints. A small number of respondents also mentioned working conditions such as lack of support from colleagues or the institution, resistance to what EAP involves, lack of formal training and heavy workloads.

The survey seems to confirm the anecdotal evidence that there is very little formal training available and little support in the form of team teaching with more experienced colleagues. Continuing professional development is also informal and requires the teacher to be proactive in seeking opportunities for development. Most teachers have to find out for themselves by trial and error what is appropriate in their context. The main challenges they faced when they began teaching EAP involved understanding EAP materials and student needs in the disciplines, rather than how to deliver the materials in the classroom. In spite of these challenges, some teachers new to EAP reported feeling confident with this type of teaching after only one year.

It is possible that novice and experienced teachers do not hold the same perception of what EAP teaching involves. In part this stems from a significant difference in emphasis between general ELT and EAP teaching. The former is more concerned with establishing a classroom

environment suitable for language learning, paying attention to the social needs of the class as a community. Content is not prioritised as any instance of language use could potentially be selected for skills and language practice. In EAP, the teacher is assumed to be competent to promote learning in class and is, therefore, concerned with exploring and understanding texts and text processes within specific disciplines. Student needs in EAP relate to the performance of academic tasks rather than knowledge of the language system.

Another source of misunderstanding about what EAP teaching involves results from the widespread use of gatekeeping exams such as IELTS in decisions to admit students onto university courses. Such general English proficiency exams only test knowledge of the language system and skills within very general contexts. Where they alone determine the syllabus of pre-sessional courses, this leads to impoverished EAP provision. There are many more coursebooks training students to sit IELTS and similar exams than there are EAP coursebooks developing study competence. Respondents in the survey who report learning to teach EAP from coursebooks may in fact be referring to IELTS preparation coursebooks.

A pre-sessional course provides little scope to develop EAP expertise. Courses are short and very intensive but induction is brief and often related to management issues rather than teaching or course content. Teachers may have little opportunity to contribute to materials development or to receive feedback on materials they do produce. Often they are observed using ELT criteria. Advertisements for such courses asking for EAP experience do not define what that includes but it may simply mean experience of teaching on a pre-sessional, creating a self-referential loop that leads nowhere. Assessors on the BALEAP Accreditation Scheme have observed pre-sessional teachers who were unable to explain the link between their lesson and the syllabus and unable to relate lesson activities to an academic context.

If EAP has reached the fourth wave of knowledge, which contributes to the legitimacy of the field and which is essential for long term survival, then there is a need for an agreed standard to inform teacher development and reflective practice. In 2008, BALEAP published a *Competency Framework for Teachers of EAP*, on which to base recruitment, induction, classroom observation and professional development of teachers. The framework derived from a three-stage survey of experienced practitioners, which attempted to define and describe best practice. It specifies competency at masters level and consists of an overall competency statement with 11 components relating to academic practice, EAP students, curriculum development and programme implementation.

It is appropriate to sound a note of caution about competency frameworks. Although they can contribute to transparency and greater effectiveness in monitoring and developing teachers, their use can imply that the ingredients of good teaching are universal and can be itemized and learned, leading to a discourse of the competent craftsperson (Moore, 2004). This can tend to marginalize the personal and responsive aspect of teaching, suppressing creativity. Competencies list what can be observed and measured but leave out intangible qualities such as enthusiasm or imagination. Handed down by education authorities, they might be used to shift blame for failures in an education system away from policy makers and on to teachers.

However, the BALEAP TEAP Competency Framework was not the product of a powerful authority but the result of conversations with a wide range of expert practitioners, which aimed to reach consensus about what competent EAP teaching involved. It was motivated by trends in pre-sessional EAP teaching, such as gatekeeping exams, which could lead to impoverished provision. It aimed to enhance professionalism and standards in the field by providing a basis for productive reflection and development for individual teachers, teacher educators and EAP centres.

An example of its use as a reflective tool is an unpublished dissertation (Post, 2010) which examined the challenges encountered by new EAP teachers working on pre-sessional courses for the first time. Five teachers contributed to a blog where they discussed their experiences of pre-sessional teaching under categories drawn from the Competency Framework. Their challenges were similar to those expressed in the 2006 online survey. They included, personal insecurity about what is involved in EAP teaching and a lack of discipline specific knowledge. Teachers were unsure how to manage their role in the classroom to encourage independent learning or how to promote critical thinking.

In reflecting on the role of the Competency Framework in her own development as a teacher, the researcher noted that it was useful for highlighting important areas of EAP before teaching began but she had required practical classroom experience to achieve a deeper understanding. She commented that 'novice Academic English practitioners cannot be expected to make the links which are possibly taken for granted by more experienced practitioners' (ibid: 78) so the framework needs to be made accessible for new teachers by talking with more experienced colleagues

In the next phase of development, each competency statement in the framework will be expanded by adding range statements which indicate how a novice or experienced teacher might demonstrate each competency, together with examples of practice. It has been suggested that some competencies, e.g. syllabus and programme development or text processing and production are only applicable to experienced teachers who design courses and create materials. However, if novice EAP teachers are not able to recognize the type of syllabus they are working with or complete EAP tasks which require knowledge of discourse analysis and text processes, they will be unable to justify classroom activities to their students by linking them to performance in the academic context.

The BALEAP TEAP Competency framework is a description of good practice in EAP, which represents an important development towards standardization in the field. It enables a shared understanding of what is involved in teaching EAP and a more rigorous approach to teacher recruitment, induction and professional development, especially for novice teachers and teacher educators.

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