



## OPTIMIZING EAP COURSE DESIGN FOR READING AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT

Aneta Naumoska, Biljana Naumoska-Sarakinska

Department of English Language and Literature “Blaže Koneski” Faculty of Philology - Skopje  
Ss Cyril and Methodius University, North Macedonia  
[aneta.naum@flf.ukim.edu.mk](mailto:aneta.naum@flf.ukim.edu.mk)

ORCID iDs: Aneta Naumoska  
Biljana Naumoska-Sarakinska

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8734-2246>  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7657-9598>

**Abstract.** *This paper examines the differences between General English and English for Academic Purposes, exemplified by the specialized approaches and objectives of the latter in preparing learners for academic and professional success. It underscores the criticality of needs analysis in English for Academic Purposes, for tailoring instruction to academic goals and professional demands, contrasting it with the simpler applications in General English. Pedagogical strategies in English for Academic Purposes, such as genre-based instruction and the use of authentic, context-specific materials, address the limitations of standardized resources, fostering reflective practice and discipline-specific communication skills, while teachers navigate dual roles as linguistic and subject-matter facilitators, often working with students possessing greater subject knowledge. A sample curriculum design and writing task are presented, focusing on critical reading and synthesis to enhance cognitive and linguistic proficiency in writing. Course designers for English for Academic Purposes can gain insight from this paper as it highlights its transformative potential to prepare learners for globalized academic and professional challenges.*

**Key words:** *English for Academic Purposes, course design, reading, writing*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT), the distinctions between General English (GE) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have become more pronounced, reflecting their unique methodologies, materials/content, and learner outcomes. GE prioritizes language acquisition for everyday use, while EAP equips learners with specialized linguistic and cognitive skills to thrive in academic environments, focusing on critical thinking (CT), discipline-specific language, and the autonomy required for success in higher education and in professional contexts. This paper firstly examines these differences through the lens of practical applications. Drawing on Alexander et al. (2008) and the BALEAP Framework (2008), it underscores the role of CT as a hallmark of EAP, distinguishing it from the functional orientation of GE. Needs analysis emerges as a

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Corresponding author: Aneta Naumoska, Department of English Language and Literature “Blaže Koneski”  
Faculty of Philology – Skopje, Ss Cyril and Methodius University, North Macedonia  
E-mail: [aneta.naum@flf.ukim.edu.mk](mailto:aneta.naum@flf.ukim.edu.mk)

critical process in both contexts, albeit with varied depth and complexity. GE uses this process to tailor content to learners' proficiency levels, while EAP employs it to align with academic objectives, considering future professional demands.

Additionally, this paper delves into the pedagogical nuances of EAP, highlighting its reliance on genre-based instruction. EAP pedagogy fosters reflective practice, guiding learners to navigate academic texts, synthesize information, and develop discipline-specific communication skills. The integration of authentic materials and customized in-house content further enhances its relevance, addressing the limitations of standardized textbooks. Teachers in EAP settings play multifaceted roles, balancing linguistic expertise with subject-specific knowledge, often collaborating with learners who may possess greater familiarity with specialized content areas. Assessment in EAP also reflects its distinct academic orientation. Validity, reliability, and contextual relevance are paramount in evaluating students' ability to meet academic benchmarks.

The third and fourth parts of this article provide practical insights into EAP course design and a sample task design, as well as the reasoning behind it. Through reading critically and synthesizing, outlined as interconnected subskills, students develop both the cognitive and linguistic proficiency necessary for academic and professional success. The inclusion of reading as preparation for writing tasks ensures that learners draw on textual inputs strategically, bridging comprehension with production.

By juxtaposing GE and EAP, this article offers course designers a deeper understanding of how these domains serve distinct yet overlapping purposes. Ultimately, it highlights the transformative potential of EAP in preparing learners for academic rigor and beyond, fostering not only linguistic fluency, but also intellectual growth and adaptability in a globalized world.

## 2. GE vs. EAP

Exploring Alexander et al. (2008), one notable difference between GE and EAP is that the former places little emphasis on study skills (or, these focus on language learning only) and cognitive skills are not explicitly included, while the latter makes such skills explicit, particularly learner independence and cognitive skills, with a focus on CT. Lynch (in Flowerdew & Peacock 2001) has stressed the importance of the role of EAP learners as converting to autonomous learners. The BALEAP Framework (2008) notes student CT as a competency principally relating to EAP students. It is a sweeping generalization to state that CT is a fundamental feature of EAP, and not of GE, as more often than not there is overlapping of such skills; however, teaching GE necessitates significant inclusion of activities that develop students' skills to enhance their learning of the language, whereas teaching EAP greatly includes sequences of learning activities (contexts and interactions) that require students to demonstrate CT skills, such as judging the credibility of sources skillfully (Fisher 2001). For example, teachers might give a GE class a text on green cities in which students need to put the sentences in the correct order (skill: reading), while teachers of EAP might give students of architecture a text on sustainability in green cities in which they need to draw conclusions and take a critical stance towards it (skills: reading/writing), presupposing they have topic knowledge.

The systematic and exploratory investigation of students' needs for the design of a GE course, known as needs analysis, as well as the optimisation, adaptation and refinement

of language teaching to those needs, is an aspect of teaching GE that transfers well to an EAP context. In both contexts this inevitably leads to curriculum and syllabus development – GE being level-driven, while EAP is goal-driven – however, their starting point is collection and analysis of students' needs prior to any teaching. EAP is geared towards the learners' immediate needs and fulfilment of particular goals, i.e. it is learner-led, goal-driven and context-specific (Campion 2016; Hamp-Lyons 2001). Bocanegra-Valle (2016) argues that EAP needs analysis should ideally be conducted in three stages (each with a number of steps): preparing for needs analysis, doing needs analysis research, and using the needs analysis results. In addition, it is a lengthier and more complex cyclical process including quantitative or qualitative and inductive or deductive research methods, and with the use of specific data collection instruments or techniques. For example, the needs of students of a GE course can be analyzed via an open-ended questionnaire, while EAP needs analysis is more extensive and might include not only present students as stakeholders, but also educational authorities or policy-makers (concerned with societal demands), who participate in questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Needs analysis is an integral component of EAP teaching, and it should constitute University course accreditation processes.

The implication is that EAP course designers need to consider restricting and limiting the language items, topics and discourse to cover only those relevant to EAP learners' immediate purposes, all the while strengthening their CT skills.

### **2.1. EAP key issue: teachers**

Regarding pedagogical approaches, in EAP teaching the inductive approach outweighs and favors the deductive approach. Teachers would rather assist learners and guide them in their discovery of the content-based curriculum than give them explicit rules. Bell (2022) mentions the role played by process syllabuses, suggesting that learners and teachers should negotiate the entire syllabus together. In this respect, to further exemplify, process-based approaches to writing are quite common in EAP, with outlining, drafting and re-drafting as necessary stepping stones to the final product. Furthermore, EAP teachers will have a high level of not only language knowledge but also discourse analysis knowledge and specialized subject knowledge (BALEAP 2008). Nonetheless, reality demonstrates a switched situation: EAP teachers often are less knowledgeable in specialized content than their learners (Morgan 2009), hence the former can also take on the role of a reflective practitioner. Hamp-Lyons (2001) discusses engaging of EAP with issues of power thus helping learners to develop a critical lens through which power relations in the EAP classroom are studied.

The implication is that EAP course designers need to implement a negotiated syllabus for EAP learners as a reaction against a fixed syllabus imposed on them.

### **2.2. EAP key issue: content & materials**

Genre analysis holds steady in EAP, forming an integral part of learners' future professional expertise; therefore, teachers should pay close attention to comprehensive textual particularities of function and situation, or subdomains in EAP. According to Shaw (in Hyland & Shaw 2016), great importance is placed on genres in EAP, as conventional structures and communication patterns used to construct a whole academic text of a certain length within a register/variety. For example, writing an argumentative essay or a research article would require the skill of summarizing, i.e. the subskills of critical reading and synthesizing would be prioritized. Furthermore, published EAP materials and textbooks are fairly general, hence

making the EAP textbook syllabus inadequate (Harwood 2005; Swales 1995) and in-house developed materials significantly more beneficial for the particular study context and needs of the learners (Hamp-Lyons 2001). It would have to be acknowledged, though, that this is to the disadvantage of major publishing houses for reasons of profit. Moreover, as Pecorari (in Hyland & Shaw 2016) has noted, EAP learners either aware or unaware of it, could lean towards plagiarism, which, as a specific form of intertextuality, is a topic of concern amongst teachers as it is a serious academic breach and should not go unnoticed.

The implication is that EAP course designers need to vary the EAP genres and skills so as to encompass a wide range, which should be visible in the course content with topic-appropriate authentic materials from diverse sources and informed by the learners' needs.

### **2.3. EAP key issue: testing & assessment**

For the purpose of achieving objectivity in assessment of EAP tasks, they must be both valid and reliable. Validity refers to assessing what it claims to assess, while reliability refers to it being measured consistently, regardless of occasion or teacher. In fact, the trickiest issue for EAP regards the construct, i.e. how to describe the language being tested. According to Weigle & Malone (in Hyland & Shaw 2016), when designing for EAP tests, the degree to which language and academic skills can be separated is a crucial point for consideration, in other words, the internal tension between assessing aspects of language use and contextual language. Additionally, the existence of a relevant external performance benchmark is important for scaffolding not only for teacher feedback, but also for peer assessment, or feedback, which is a significant alternative in the EAP context since learners interact and respond to each other's work in a non-threatening and supportive manner (Basturkmen & Lewis 2002; Hyland 2006). At this age (18-20 years), though learners are more analytical, concerns still do exist as to their lack of training in assessment, hence the vague and unconstructive comments they might give to their peers. Involving students in discussions regarding essay evaluation criteria and providing more training may contribute to higher correlation with teachers' grades and higher validity of peer assessment (Andelković 2022: 82).

The implication is that course designers need to integrate different modes of EAP assessment – self-assessment (for reflection), teacher assessment, formative assessment, and peer assessment – as they each have their benefits.

## **3. SAMPLE EAP CURRICULUM / COURSE DESIGN**

Teaching at a higher education institution, there has been a long-awaited need for updated course design in AW. Unfortunately, this is due to the lack of prestige and being an undesirable subject to teach, thus carrying a sort of peripheral and "Cinderella" status (Sharpling 2002) at the Faculty Department. It is our belief that developing a whole new AW course will raise its status and change the view that AW is not as 'worthy' as other subjects, hence AW teachers should not be compared unfavourably with other academics.

Recognizing the need for preparing students for an academic setting in English and providing them with an initial taste of such a setting, the following could be taken into consideration as the background for a curriculum (in the broader scheme of EAP course design) for a 6-week pre-session EAP course for Year 1 students in our local context, with 90-minute classes once a week:

### 3.1. Demographic

They are applying to the English Language and Literature Department (Blaže Koneski Faculty of Philology, Ss Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, N. Macedonia); from different parts of the country; 18-20 years old; most students' L1 is Macedonian; CEFR B2/B2+. Approximately 95% of them will graduate as English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, while the rest will become translators. However, a noticeable trend in the last 10 years has been that a considerable number of students, several months after gaining their BA degree, requalify to work in the HR or marketing sectors. These students do note that for the duration of their University studies, they expanded their soft skills, which they then simply transfer to another field. In addition, they continue their education into MA studies in the abovementioned fields so as to become knowledgeable in the theoretical background, in this way becoming researchers.

### 3.2. Motivation & aims

The mandatory course we teach to Year 1 students is AW, so they are obligated to take it, however, bearing all the above in mind (especially their target situation: writing an MA thesis), our aim for the pre-sessional EAP course is to, firstly, expose this particular group of students to a multitude of genres in AW for the purpose of interpretation of academic discourse (macro-skill: reading). It is important that they become aware that a single, monolithic academic English has been seriously undermined and disciplinary variations are nowadays acknowledged (Hyland 2006: 4). Moreover, it is another aim of ours that they become aware of the difference between being heavily influenced by a researcher's published work and taking/copy-pasting a researcher's ideas verbatim into their own work, without crediting the source (macro-skill: writing). The latter (plagiarism) is a serious breach, a ripe topic of concern across the wider academic community, and should not go unnoticed, nor unpunished, by the tertiary education institution.

By the end of this course, our expectation is that students should be able to read critically and synthesize information so as to be able to produce short academic texts.

### 3.3. Subskills

Reading critically (comparing multiple points of view from written texts, e.g. research articles) and synthesizing (producing a written critical synthesis) are two connected subskills prioritized in this EAP course. These students will be introduced to such academic concepts most probably for the first time in their life, so they will be reading/writing texts no longer than three-four pages. We would connect both subskills in what Hirvela (2016: 128) calls 'reading for writing', i.e. a literacy act in which the students use text(s) that they read as a basis for text(s) that they will be asked to write. The goal-directed activity of reading critically is done in order to write, and vice versa – the reading process is guided by the need to produce a text of one's own. Since this relationship is the foundation of this course's writing, it will be made clear to the students that how they read and approach an academic text, especially viewing it through a critical lens, will be crucial to how they write an academic text. The students will be introduced to critical reading by being asked to make a table with several rows – each row containing questions that they would ask themselves while reading a text. They would be expected to go back to that table every single time they read a text. With each activity

during the course, the students will need to fill in the table with more questions, so at the end they will have created a comprehensive table, which will be a useful tool for their future MA, and perhaps PhD, studies.

Table 1 Reading and pertinent critical thinking questions

Purpose & background	Q1: What do you know about the subject of the text?
Author & text	Q1: What is the author's purpose? Q2: What is the intended audience?
Evidence used	Q1: Is there evidence to support arguments?
Assumptions made	Q1: What beliefs/values does the author hold?

Synthesizing, as a subskill, will be introduced by briefly explaining the concept (Grabe & Zhang 2013), which will then be followed by an analysis of several sample texts (research articles) that have synthesized the topic well. During the course, students will have the chance to work on synthesizing as a group task, then individually. The level of complexity will increase with each text, and students will need to be able to synthesize various sources in support of their ideas (Horning 2010; Pecorari 2016). This is where mention of how to avoid (inadvertent) plagiarism will come in. For a good synthesis students must know how to read critically, and for these students both subskills are necessary, as they are taking their first tentative steps on the path to becoming researchers.

#### 4. SAMPLE EAP WRITING TASK

##### 4.1. Task description & reasoning

Hedge (2005: 7) identifies the following eight reasons for writing:

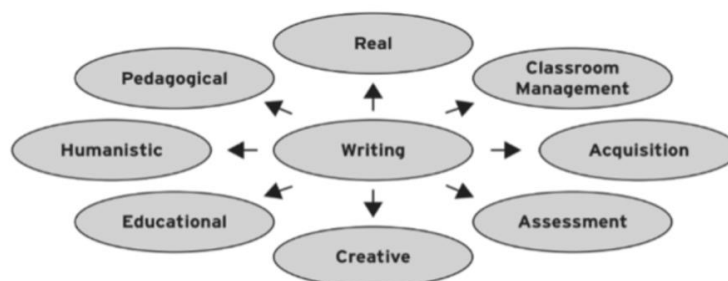


Fig. 1 Reasons for writing

One reason Hedge (2005) identifies is for real purposes, i.e. as a goal of learning to meet students' needs. English is an important tool in present and future business workplaces, regardless of the specific field, and students need to recognize its transactional purpose. Hence, a writing task activity (as part of the genre approach to writing) for the abovementioned target group of University students – a letter of apology – addresses achieving realistic effective communication (*apologizing*) through language means. Starting by discussing and emphasizing the goal of the writer (*to apologize*), the target audience in

reality (*the client/customer*), and establishing that the students have the necessary experience and idea stimulation to approach this genre of writing, the students can then be divided into groups of three-four. Each group is tasked with producing one piece of writing (time limit: 25-30 minutes), so by helping each other out, the students are collaboratively able to produce work that is better and has more flow than any one of them could have produced individually. They are afterwards given a guided task (a guided composition exercise), with a series of pictures with accompanying questions, as the gap is bridged by providing the support of questions, i.e. focused guidance. The relevance of this activity to real purposes is that by having the students compose work collaboratively with a given time limit, they are, in fact, set in a realistic situation: in their future workplace, for example, they might get tasked by their supervisor to write an apology to a high-profile client, with a tight deadline, and they might need the support of their co-workers in composing the apology.

Another reason for writing that Hedge (2005) identifies is for acquisitional purposes, i.e. as a careful mode of working with language, which enables students to explore and reflect on language in a conscious way. Students need to sharpen their understanding of genre analysis and the manner in which social interactions are negotiated in writing, as well as gain insights into evasive language (Nation 2009). Among other things, obfuscation through language could be a feature of a letter of apology, so for students to be able to turn the piece of writing to their advantage and make their apology successful, they need to carefully craft each sentence and use the linguistic means at their disposal. As part of the same guided task from previously, each group is additionally given a checklist (or a scale) containing language points and lexis items to look for in their writing. Research on writing indicates that such scales have a significant effect on improving the quality of the written work (Hillocks 1984 in Nation 2009). In the same time limit of 25-30 minutes, after the students have written their collaborative piece, they edit it, i.e. make any necessary changes as regards grammatical and lexical accuracy, appropriacy and organization, as a whole. This order of first composing, then editing, might go against the non-linear nature of writing, however, the students' focus here is initially on putting their ideas down on paper, then on putting more thought into how the apology is transmitted through various linguistic aspects. 'Polishing' their letter of apology might be considered peer feedback. Similar to how the questions accompanying the pictures in the previous paragraph guide the students, the value of having a scheme on which to base the language makes sure that the students are not narrowly focusing on grammar, but rather on covering a range of language means.

#### **4.2. Reading for task preparation**

There is a close relationship between reading and writing for L2 development. Reading provides input necessary for both the content and its means of expression through language. In fact, one principle from Nation's four strands (2007) states that students should be provided with and have organized comprehensible input through reading.

Both reading and writing involve the individual in constructing meaning through the application of complex cognitive and linguistic abilities that draw on problem-solving skills and the activation of existing knowledge of both structure and content (Hyland 2003). The teacher needs to help students activate the appropriate cognitive schemata, or background knowledge of the topic/lexis, so that they can compose a convincing letter of apology. Schemata development exercises can include reading real-life samples of such writing for

gaining and generating novel ideas. Students can be provided with a variety of reading samples found online, and even press releases after a PR crisis, like the Dove public letter of apology after the company posted a racially insensitive ad. Before the students do the writing task activity they should be provided with several such reading samples and asked to read them in detail. However, there is a downside that needs to be considered, as well: the students might strive to make their writing too similar to the samples, viewing them as the best examples of such writing and having their sights set on the end-product of writing rather than on the process itself. Teachers need to explain to students that this contextualized language of a genre model should not be rigidly accepted as a fixed template.

As preparation for the writing task activity, students read a sample piece of writing for main-idea comprehension and structure awareness of a text closely tied to a social purpose. This can be developed through an explicit analysis of the text for the purpose of identifying where specifically the main ideas are stated and what grammatical/lexical signals (identification of these parts) are used to achieve this. A reading course is certainly not the place to incorporate a grammatical syllabus, however it is important not to ignore grammatical knowledge as a resource for more advanced reading comprehension abilities. Acknowledging and recognizing certain linguistic structures and topical vocabulary in a sample letter of apology can lead to students' using them in their writing with conscious thought. If teachers aim for students to become good readers, and ultimately good writers, they should teach for strategic reading, which involves several steps: introducing a strategy, consistently practising it and modelling it (Grabe 2014; Grabe & Stoller 2013). Main-idea comprehension can, indeed, be taught and, thus, become part of the students' reading repertoire. Engaging in regular reading exposes students, as writers, to diverse writing styles, vocabulary and academic structures, providing models for effective language use through immersion (Devaki 2024: 374). Writing is most likely to be meaningful for the students if they are well prepared for what they are to write. As teachers, providing meaning-focused input prepares the students for meaning-focused output (Nation 2007).

## 5. CONCLUSION

EAP's transformative power lies in its ability to go beyond linguistic fluency, fostering intellectual rigor, learner autonomy, and the adaptability required in globalized academic and professional environments. EAP reading prepares learners to critically engage with academic texts and synthesize information, while EAP writing focuses learners' attention on producing coherent and contextually appropriate texts – both in close correlation. The integration of authentic, in-house materials, as opposed to generic textbooks, further ensures relevance and contextual alignment, showing that a one-size-fits-all approach should not be employed. By connecting EAP reading and writing as interdependent skills, EAP fosters learners' ability to navigate academic discourse responsibly and effectively.

This paper serves to demonstrate to course designers that EAP is more than a preparatory tool; it is a pathway to intellectual empowerment. By prioritizing critical engagement and real-world applicability, EAP enables learners to transition seamlessly from academic to professional realms, bridging linguistic proficiency with broader educational goals, and ensuring that learners are equipped for lifelong learning and success.



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