

## A PROJECT-BASED ESAP COURSE: KEY FEATURES, BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract.** *This paper is concerned with some issues of English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes. The paper argues that a project-based English for Specific Academic Purposes course needs to integrate some features of Content-Based Instruction, English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes approaches. This paper attempts to highlight the benefits and challenges of such a course introduced at National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Saint-Petersburg, Russia.*

**Key words:** *EAP, ESP, CBI, EFL, project-based learning, reading and writing strategies*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the two concepts, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), have been the major drivers for the changes in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programme at Higher School of Economics. These changes include curriculum restructuring, modularization, new EAP and ESP courses, new Economics courses with English as the language of instruction, new grading systems, reciprocal exchange programmes and many others. The changes cut across various aspects of the university life; however, the bottom line is they are based on the idea of ESP and EAP being two different approaches within the field of EFL.

Although the dominant view of EAP as a branch of ESP with a number of points of similarity still holds, a newer approach differentiating between EAP and ESP is fledging. The main point of convergence is a greater focus of EAP on academic contexts and “demands of specific academic disciplines” (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons 2002, 2), while ESP “addresses the communicative needs and practices of particular professional or occupational groups” (Hayland 2007, 391). The mere existence of two different journals *Journal of English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Purposes* is a good enough reason to acknowledge the marked difference in ESP and EAP both in theory and practice.

In Higher School of Economics, this is translated into practice in a particular teaching framework which involves introductory ESP courses at the CEFR B1 level and more advanced ESP and EAP courses at the CEFR B2 level. The ESP course at the CEFR B1 level is designed to teach students a range of vocabulary items and grammar structures to communicate in a number of professionally relevant situations. The ESP course at the CEFR B2 level is designed to teach students to communicate in a broad variety of professionally relevant situations. Professional vocabulary knowledge is the main focus

of the course. The main skills developed within the course are reading professionally relevant texts and expressing a point of view on a professionally relevant topic.

The EAP at the CEFR B2 level focuses on the development of all key language skills and is tailored to the needs of students planning to continue their education in an English-medium environment. The main feature of this course is teaching very general academic English skills irrespective of the needs of students of Economics with the primary focus on writing and speaking skills. Students are also trained in giving an oral presentation and a persuasive talk to support or oppose a particular point of view previously expressed in a written text.

However, several problems occur with this framework. First, there is a quite common misconception among our students that they learn different “Englishes”. As a result, they do not transfer skills acquired in General English classes at the CEFR B1 level to their ESP or EAP classes. One of the students captures the misconception in the following way, “Once I’ve passed my IELTS exam, I don’t need to care about grammar any more. English for Economics is only about knowing specific words for what we study in Russian. Academic English teaches you to read Economics articles and write essays”. However debatable the point of view is, it is quite dominant among the students and makes them wonder if there is any point of connection for their different “Englishes”.

Second, both students and instructors of the Department of Economics express their dissatisfaction with a too general character of the EAP course. The English language instructors note that the material within each of the courses inevitably overlaps with the material in the other course. For instance, the instructors have to use subject related texts on Economics in the EAP course.

Third, separate ESP and EAP classes do not fully embrace the general goal of the English Teaching Strategic Framework adopted at HSE in 2010. The ultimate goal is to promote the ability of students to use the language to accomplish various communicative goals in their academic and professional life. The academic and professional life refers to one sphere rather than two different spheres and entails an integrated approach to teaching English in the academic and professional context. To recapitulate, there has been a need to introduce a course integrating both ESP and EAP at the advanced level. Two most likely options in this case are content-based instruction and English for Specific Academic Purposes. In the next few paragraphs these two approaches are discussed to show their relevance to the purposes of the Department of Economics, Higher School of Economics.

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is “an umbrella term referring to instructional approaches that make a dual, though not necessarily equal, commitment to language and content-learning objectives” (Stoller 2008, 59). CBI has been widely implemented in various ESP contexts as it a) combines traditional teaching methods with recent approaches (Grandall 2002) and b) puts emphasis on learning something meaningful for students rather than learning language as the latter can sometimes be a problem to students with low motivation (Heo 2006, Davies 2003).

English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) is a branch of EAP with the focus “on a particular academic culture, e.g. economics, together with its disciplinary culture” (Jordan 1988, 5). Within an ESAP course students can employ academic literacies mastered within an EGAP course to address particular academic tasks such as writing essays or listening to lectures, as it may be required by their department (Lis 2010).

There are some features of the approaches that limit their application across the Department of Economics. First, Swain indicates that students taught by CBI develop low

L2 proficiency and high content material proficiency (Swain 1996). Thus, CBI cannot be successfully employed for the development of communicative competence in English. Second, there is an argument in ESAP that it may be too difficult for students with limited L2 proficiency (Lis 2010). Apparently, the rationale for the argument comes from Jordan's definition of ESAP as a study of language used in particular academic setting, i.e. the language of academic texts (Jordan 1988, 231). Dealing with academic texts such as dissertations and research articles is likely to require a high level of L2 proficiency. Thus, a generic ESAP course might be too "academic" for students with a more practical aim in mind.

One practical implication emerging from the discussion of the two approaches is a definite need for an ESAP course tailored to the academic proficiency of the students, providing a meaningful insight into their subject-specific material and remaining a language-related rather than a subject-related course. In the rest of the paper we first describe the syllabus of such a course; second, bring out its advantages and finally discuss its challenges and further implications.

## 2. A PROJECT-BASED ESAP COURSE: PRACTICALITIES AND KEY FEATURES

The aim of this section is to describe a project-based course taught to the students of the Department of Economics at the advanced level and to highlight its benefits to our students and instructors. The project-based ESAP course at the Department of Economics is meant to integrate, activate and advance the skills acquired by our students in their ESP and EAP courses at the lower level. The course has been designed as a successor to these separate ESP and EAP courses. The ultimate objective of the course is for students to carry out an applied research project in Economics and describe the production of the project within the time limit of six months.

Throughout this paper, the term "project" is used to refer to a research activity performed by students to tackle a problem from the field of economics. Mostly, it is a real-world problem that is of particular interest to students of economics such as seeking an efficient strategy to value brands or developing a particular econometrical model. The choice of a problem is determined by students' academic interests and background. Projects may be multidisciplinary or single-subject. Instructors play the role of facilitators and supervisors. The Department together with the University provides resources such as library resources, paid access to closed economics databases, laboratory equipment, short-term travel grants and some others.

Students have to report on the outcomes of their project in a written form producing a 10,000 word piece of writing in English. A piece of writing is formatted as a research paper which sets out the central issues or questions that they cover, outlines the general area of study within which the research falls, provides methodology description and results discussion. The paper also demonstrates the originality of the research. Students can only use English academic texts in the production of a research paper.

The project is supervised by two instructors, one is a subject area (Economics) supervisor, and the other is a linguistic supervisor. The subject area supervisor is responsible for the project content and provides recommendations with regards to the subject matter of the project. Some examples of the subject matter are the economics of happiness, hotel room pricing, effects of demographic process, local residential estate market, economy of small towns and many others.

The linguistic supervisor is responsible for the language of the project and provides recommendations with regards to various linguistics aspects in the form of group or individual tutorials. The task of the linguistic supervisor is to assist students in the production of an extended piece of writing strictly consistent with the conventions of academic English. Tight cooperation between the subject area supervisor and the linguistic supervisor is a prerequisite for the successful and effective teaching and learning process.

At the end of a six-month research period students submit a research paper that is assessed alongside several criteria developed by both subject area and linguistic supervisors. The criteria are clarity of the structure, the development of the subject matter, cohesion and coherence, the usage of subject specific vocabulary, the formality of style, and the general format of a paper. A rating scale of 0 to 10 is used to assess each criterion.

The teaching methodology is based on these two basic tenets: a) the instrumental approach to reading and b) the process-product approach to writing. The instrumental approach originates from CBI and its idea of using a language to learn content. Within the context of our project-based ESAP course it is translated *in the reading to learn strategy*. Students have to engage with a number of academic texts and apply a number of various reading strategies to collect information and complete their project.

The process-product approach to writing presumes equal attention to the product and the process of writing to achieve balanced L2 proficiency in writing (Posand 2013, 76). Within the context of our project-based ESAP course it is translated *in the model-and-stages strategy*. The process of writing a project is broken down into several stages corresponding to such sections of a research paper as Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion and Conclusion. Models of the sections are actively used at every stage of the process for students to be aware of the central features of academic English. Nevertheless, we target the process as the main priority. Students go through several stages in writing their project. At each stage students generate ideas, receive feedback, reshape their ideas, evaluate, revise and assess their writing.

As the course is meant to be a successor to the earlier taught ESP and the EAP courses, proficiency in certain academic literacies, language skills and some aspects of the subject matter is assumed. The ESP course at the CEFR B2 level focused on the development of a range of vocabulary to communicate in a number of professionally relevant situations, reading professionally relevant texts and expressing a point of view on a professionally relevant topic such as economics in the modern world, economics and technology, economics of sport, economics of health and many others. The project-based ESAP course, thus, assumes a high level of proficiency in economics-related vocabulary, basic reading strategies and a three-element speaking strategy (claim-evidence-conclusion).

The EAP course at the CEFR B2 level focused on the development of all key language skills involved in dealing with audio and printed academic texts. The main feature of this course was the focus on writing and speaking skills. Students were trained in writing paragraphs and essays on a range of topics and giving an oral academic presentation. The project-based ESAP course, thus, assumes the knowledge of a paragraph structure, patterns of topic sentences development and argument development.

As it has been already mentioned, the process of producing a project and writing up a research paper is broken down into several stages corresponding to the sections of a research paper: Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Results, Discussion and Conclusion. At the beginning of each stage students set several separate objectives for their project in terms of the subject matter, the language aspect and the academic literacies

aspect. The subject matter is solely their subject area supervisor's responsibility. The language aspect and the academic literacies aspect are solely the linguistic supervisor's responsibility. Students attend group tutorials on a weekly basis and one-to-one supervision sessions on a monthly basis. Academic skills are thus developed in conjunction with content related skills and high order thinking and analytical skills.

In terms of the academic literacies aspect, the objectives for the Introduction stage are a) to provide justification for the research, b) to define a research question, c) to outline the structure of a paper. To achieve this objective the students apply a number of reading and writing micro-skills such as scanning and skimming, reading and evaluating arguments, writing topic sentences. The objectives for the Literature Review section are a) to define a gap, b) to place the research within the framework of other studies, c) to contrast and compare ideas. To achieve these objectives the students have to engage in analytical and study reading, note-taking, and critiquing. The objectives for the Methodology section are a) describing tools for their research and b) describing the process of their research. Some of the micro-skills activated throughout this section are developing process-description paragraphs, developing chronological paragraphs. The objectives for the Discussion and Conclusion section are a) to discuss and compare ideas, b) to make conclusions, c) to draw implications. Some of the essential skills at this stage are developing argumentative paragraphs and writing concise conclusions.

In terms of the language aspect, the linguistic supervisors target hedging and boosting, nominalization, formal vocabulary, specialized and technical vocabulary, cohesive devices, modal verbs and expressions, complex sentences, emphatic structures as the priority for their students.

Reading and writing skills still remain the two skills that are constantly trained, practiced, applied, tested, developed, and boosted as they are the key language skills involved in the production of a written text reporting the outcomes of the project. The remaining part of the section describes how these two skills are addressed in the project-based ESAP course.

Our students' immediate reading need – reading to learn for their project – requires the application of a number of reading strategies to deal with authentic subject-related academic texts of various types. Academic texts include textbook chapters, research articles, companies' reports, dissertations, library reports, lecture notes, dictionaries and many others. The reading skills required to address these texts include extensive and intensive reading, scanning and skimming, analytical and surface reading. While some of the strategies, such as intensive reading or scanning, present no difficulty to students as these strategies are thoroughly trained at the lower level, other strategies, such as skimming or critical analytical reading, present much of a difficulty. It is essential for the successful production of the project for the student to have a high level of proficiency in these types of reading. Skimming is essential for surveying and evaluating many academic texts in limited time. Critical analytical reading is essential for analyzing information and applying it for the benefits of the student's own project.

Our students' immediate writing need – producing a research paper upon the completion of the project – involves the knowledge of the genre of a research paper, such micro-skills as outlining, summarizing, drafting, revising, editing and more complex academic literacies such as peer-reviewing or substantiating claims totally uncommon in L1 culture. Awareness of the conventions of academic English was developed at the lower level in the EAP course. The students were also thoroughly trained in the production of

various types of academic written assignments such as summaries, reports, data and chart descriptions, reaction papers, exam essays, critiques, argumentative and summative essays in terms of the structure, the language and the rhetoric of each of the types of academic writing. The genre of a research paper is completely new to the students and requires much attention in terms of instruction and production. The productive skill of writing differs from the receptive skill of reading in the degree of relation to other skills. We cannot teach writing a research paper without teaching summarizing, critical analytical reading or note-taking.

### 3. BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

In this section, our intention is to highlight the benefits and challenges of the course. The possibility of using the English language purposefully and consciously in a non-native environment is a major piece of evidence directly arguing for the benefit of the course thus overshadowing all other benefits. Our project-based ESAP course provides a unique opportunity to bridge learning and practice in a manner both challenging and attractive for our students. Meaningful L2 communication, both real and virtual, that our students are engaged in eliminates their major concern about practical outcomes of the English language programme at the Department of Economics.

However, some instructors express their concerns about excessive bias towards content and insufficient attention to language. Linguistic, strategic and cultural objectives are sometimes disregarded by our students for the sake of the subject matter objectives as the latter are allegedly regarded more interesting by some of the students.

The project-based ESAP course encourages cooperation both between the students and the instructors within the Department of Economics and instructors from various academic branches, research institutions across the University. However, the need for cooperation might be an issue for some instructors who are deeply affected by idiosyncratic attitudes towards student-teacher relationships.

Assessment of the projects is another problematic area for our instructors and students as well. There are many questions while there are few answers. Some of the questions are:

1. Are subject proficiency, academic literacies and language achievement equally important? Or should one be given primacy over the other?
2. Can we develop an ideal assessment tool that tests both academic literacies and language achievement? Or rather is it worth developing such a test? Is it not more reasonable to develop separate tests?
3. How is it possible to measure critical thinking skills?
4. Should we stick to single assessment carried out at the end of the course or rather introduce continuous portfolio assessment?
5. Who are the main stakeholders, our students, our instructors or our management?
6. Who can write tests, specially trained experts or any member of the faculty?

It is obvious that a deeper look seems to be necessary to explore the efficiency of the course in terms of both confirmation of the established framework and directions for change.

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