

EGAP: What is missing?

By Farnaz Karimian, Amy Parker, & Xiaoming Li, Canada

The number of international students seeking enrollment in higher education in Canada has increased four times in just twenty years from 122,665 in 2000 to 621,565 in 2021 (Crossman et al., 2022). Thus, it is evident that there will continue to be a need for more EAP programs to prepare EAL (English as an Additional Language) students for their post-secondary studies. But before delving deep into this issue, it is important to first discuss the nuanced, yet meaningful distinction between *EGAP* (English for General Academic Purposes) and *ESAP* (English for Specific Academic Purposes). EGAP instructors typically focus on *general* English language proficiency required for post-secondary level education, whereas ESAP instructors center their curriculum on teaching *English for specific academic purposes*, in which they collaborate closely with other discipline-specific course instructors to recognize and define student needs and produce class materials based on discipline-specific texts (Charles & Pecorari, 2016). While EGAP programs have proven to be beneficial in certain contexts (Archibald, 2001; Issitt, 2016; Mazgutova, 2015; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011, as cited in Pearson, 2020), the question remains as to how effective EGAP programs are in preparing learners for their disciplinary courses once they have completed EGAP. Based on our own prior experiences with EAP and through a comprehensive literature review, it is apparent that the main challenges faced by learners after the completion of EGAP courses are:

1. not being able to transfer academic skills from EGAP to disciplinary courses,
2. lacking knowledge about discipline-specific, genre-specific writing, and
3. lacking discipline-specific vocabulary

Through exploring these challenges, we will also examine possible solutions to meet these unique academic needs.

Unsuccessful transfer from EGAP to discipline-based courses

Hüttner (2008) posited that the primary aim of an EGAP course should be that students acquire transferable skills, which include “developing a general understanding of the relations between communicative purpose and text, and a genre awareness that enables students to understand the workings of genres unfamiliar



to them in order to ultimately be able to produce them” (p. 150). James (2009) concurred that transfer of learning outcomes is an important goal in university writing education but acknowledges that the writing tasks students do in an EGAP course may be different from the writing tasks they are expected to do in other courses. This difference may be problematic for the transfer of learning outcomes from the EGAP course, but it is possible that certain techniques, such as providing cues for students in a task prompt, can be used to promote learning transfer. In fact, the study concluded that even if certain learning outcomes are suitable for application in different kinds of tasks in different contexts, the students themselves may not actually apply those learning outcomes. This is to say that while learning outcomes may be transferable, they are not necessarily transferred.

To illustrate this notion of lack of transfer and to understand the perspectives of EGAP students on the program’s effectiveness, Dooley (2010) conducted a two-phase study that examined the perceptions of thirteen students from various cultural backgrounds who had been enrolled in an English Language Bridging Course (ELBC), which falls under the umbrella of EGAP, at a university in Western Australia. The first phase of the study focused on finding out the students’ perceptions upon completion of this program, and the second phase was done after these students had completed at least one full term in their tertiary course. The findings illustrated that although the students found the ELBC program to be generally a helpful starting point, they still found themselves struggling with elements such as understanding their lecturers’ and other students’ accents, giving formal presentations, general listening skills, and being able to participate in in-class discussions and out-of-class activities.

Lack of discipline-specific and genre-specific knowledge in writing

Keefe and Shi (2017) found similar results in their study of students who were enrolled in an EGAP program before entering their disciplinary courses at a Canadian university. The objective of the study was to gain insight into students’ experiences in their first year of university. Participants reported facing a number of challenges in their disciplinary courses in the first year, including struggling to understand lectures, completing new and more complex tasks specific to their disciplinary courses, and adjusting to new expectations of having to do more work autonomously outside of class. In addition, participants reported a disconnect between the writing they had completed in the EGAP program and the writing expected of them in their disciplinary program, despite the fact that essay writing was the most common form of assignment in the EGAP program. These findings were echoed by Counsell (2011) who reported that participants did not feel that their EGAP course influenced their ability to recognize effective writing strategies in all cases or to transfer these strategies into their discipline-specific writing tasks. The study concluded that students



must have access to discipline-specific content and the opportunity to “gain a voice within the discourse community of their chosen discipline” (p. 11). Although EGAP instructors teach many types of writing tasks (such as a five-paragraph essay or an academic summary), these types of writing tasks do not actually provide opportunities for learners to acquire, and later display, stream-specific writing skills such as an increase in vocabulary richness and complexity and understanding of writing improvement in certain genre norms and conventions (Knoch et al., 2015). This lack of genre knowledge is an alarming issue because although instructors may try to develop students’ metacognitive genre awareness in an EGAP class, this is difficult to do when students do not have a shared academic trajectory or developed disciplinary knowledge. In addition, instructors are often limited in their knowledge of writing practices across *all* disciplines (Tardy et. al, 2022).

As Alexander (2019) noted, one of the main goals of EGAP programs is to help students analyze texts from given contexts so as to understand the relevant content and engage with it to show understanding or generate new ideas, but due to the nature of EGAP courses, students are not usually able to learn genre-specific writing that is specific to their own discipline which is why they struggle with writing tasks once they are enrolled in their disciplinary programs. It is evident that generally students feel unprepared and lack knowledge of discipline-specific writing genres as they feel their EGAP instructors did not, and could not, prepare them for every writing genre they would encounter in their academic career. This lack of genre knowledge may encourage students to fall back on genres and forms they have used previously but that does not apply to the specific expectations of the assignment (Johns, 2008; Miller et al., 2016 as cited in Caplan, 2019) and may result in receiving a low grade, feeling discouraged, and losing motivation. One glaring example is the medical field. León Pérez and Martín-Martín (2016) stated that in the medical field, publishing scientific papers in English is an essential step for promotion and professional advancement. However, it is evident that many EAL learners struggle to master the appropriate rhetorical conventions needed to write such papers. Despite the efforts of EAP researchers, there remains a lack of “specific practical writing courses with an explicit pedagogical approach to the teaching of academic genres” (p. 96). As such, many post-secondary institutions have increasingly been adopting a more discipline-specific and Genre-Based Pedagogy approach to their EGAP programs.

Bridging the gap: Moving toward a GBP approach within ESAP courses

Melles et al. (2005) illustrated one such approach through a case study at the University of Melbourne. A course within the Architecture Faculty was created with the intent to blend a language and communication focus with an analysis of the genres and tasks specific to architecture. It was established that the curricula



must be responsive to changes in the broader disciplinary context, and close collaboration between faculty and EAP staff is necessary. This was exemplified through ongoing discussions with faculty staff about their pedagogical practices, which included examining the roles of language and content and the importance of making disciplinary genre and discourse conventions explicit for students. Melles et al. concluded that “the EAP field needs to take up the critical challenge of engaging with the disciplines through interdisciplinary collaboration” (p. 15), and that discipline-specific credit-based EAP programs offer a way to do exactly that.

Van Viegen and Russell (2019) also recognized the importance of discipline specificity in L2 pedagogy. They found that an English for Academic Purposes Bridging Program (EBP) at an English-medium university successfully prepared students for the requirements of their undergraduate degrees. The program included both EGAP and discipline-specific courses, and students were required to complete a full-year undergraduate credit-bearing course related to their discipline. Students also completed a non-credit, discipline-specific half-course that corresponded to their admission stream and focused on the lexis, grammar, and discourse of different text genres, with the learning tasks consisting of assignments typical of what students would be expected to do in their discipline undergraduate course work. A significant number of students received final grades of adequate or higher in their discipline-specific course, which corresponded to their later CGPA (cumulative grade point average) in their undergraduate program. As such, Van Viegen and Russell concluded that students need opportunities to develop not only content knowledge within their discipline but also language knowledge and practice understanding and producing written and oral communication that adheres to the rhetorical conventions of their discipline.

Thus, to help students become more familiar with genre-specific writing in their disciplines, instructors must help develop learners’ genre awareness *in combination with* genre knowledge through the examination of genre samples and increasing students’ awareness of discipline-specific features in genres (Cheng, 2018, as cited in Tardy et. al, 2022). In other words, learners first need a deep understanding of the concept of genre and how it affects textual choices, language use, organization of content, etc. before they can develop the skills needed to produce text in a specific genre. The main objectives of teaching genre awareness are to help students “understand the intricate connections between contexts and forms, to perceive potential ideological effects of genres, and to discern both constraints and choices that genres make possible” (Devitt, 2004, p. 198, as cited in Tardy et. al, 2020).

As ESAP courses implement a more genre-based pedagogy (GBP) approach in writing, students are further able to overcome such genre-related writing barriers. GBP was first described by Swales (1990), who “identified task, discourse community, and genre as the foundational concepts of a new approach to teaching academic writing” (Tardy et. al, 2022, p. 2). One reason this approach has been proven successful



is that it aims to “raise students’ awareness of how language is used to carry out rhetorical goals of a community through various categories of texts (genres)” (Tardy et. al, 2022, p. 2). To examine the extent of the effectiveness of genre-based approach and material in teaching writing in the ESAP context, Ellis et al. (1998) conducted a study on 34 participants who were required to take two semesters of English as part of their degree program. The courses consisted of 6 hours per week over a 3-week period (the writing component was only 2 hours per week). In this study, students were divided into two groups of genre and non-genre groups. In the genre group, participants were taught writing using genre-based teaching material, whereas, in the non-genre group, participants used more traditional, non-genre materials. The results of this study clearly showed that a teaching approach focusing on the rhetorical organization would be successful in an ESAP teaching class with fairly advanced learners.

In another study which examined the awareness of language features and generic structures of discussion genre texts, Nagao (2019) implemented a genre-based approach to text-based writing lessons during a fifteen-week EAP course. The participants of the study were 27 Japanese EFL learners at the university level with mixed low and high English proficiency. The study focused on four main stages: Stage (1): modeling and deconstruction of a text; Stage (2): writing of target texts; Stage (3): genre analysis of peers’ essays; and Stage (4): writing of an analysis reflection. The results of the study indicated that following these four stages showed major improvements in the learners’ genre-based writing, particularly among the low-proficiency English learners.

Lack of discipline-specific vocabulary in EGAP learners

In the same way, it is generally recognized that students’ knowledge of academic vocabulary affects their writing and learning in EAP courses. However, little research has looked into how to teach and how to learn discipline-specific vocabulary. In discussing the role of specialized language in learning disciplinary knowledge, Woodward-Kron (2008) stated that a lack of discipline-specific vocabulary will cause problems when students express ideas in complex grammar and make oral presentations in content-specific courses. In his longitudinal study of how learners from one academic discipline incorporate content-specific language in their writing, Woodward-Kron (2008) concluded that students’ ability to use the discipline-specific language determines their success in understanding the content knowledge and in writing accurately within that specific context.

Echoing Woodward-Kron (2008), other studies have also suggested that the acquisition of subject-specific vocabulary is one of the main language difficulties of EGAP learners. One such study is Evans’ & Green’s (2007) extensive study of 5000 undergraduate students from one Hong Kong university. Through analyzing data collected from questionnaires, interviews, structured focus-group discussions, and tests, the researchers



found that one of the major issues facing these 5000 students is their lack of both receptive and productive vocabulary. The researchers contended that such a lack of basic language competence could hinder students' achievement in more complex macro-linguistic tasks. It would also lead to a lack of confidence when students study in disciplinary courses within English-medium universities. Thus, the researchers called for more focus on the teaching and learning of subject-specific vocabulary.

In the same way, Flowerdew (2003) investigated a corpus of undergraduate students' problem-solution writing and analyzed a corpus of problem-solution texts written by experts. He compared the keywords used by the undergraduate students and the professionals and found that the students' restricted lexical knowledge is hindering them from using causative verbs to effectively explain problems and solutions. This lack of lexical knowledge gave rise to the repetitive use of the solution-problem pattern instead of utilizing "the lexicogrammatical pattern of implicit causative verb" (p. 507). The researcher acknowledged that "the student writing [...] investigated displayed a restricted use of the vocabulary and patterns commonly found in professional writing" (p. 508), which again proves the integral role of learning discipline-specific vocabulary. To address such lack of lexical knowledge, Flowerdew suggested that instructors need to sensitize students to different registers of causative verbs. The studies listed above are only part of a growing body of literature on the current issue of students' lack of discipline-specific vocabulary.

Data-driven learning (DDL) approach in ESAP courses

Corpus linguistics (CL) has been popular among researchers and other professionals as tools to describe language phenomena in many areas of language study. According to CL, "language use is mediated by register, which means that language teaching needs to address register awareness successfully in order for learners to use the appropriate form of language across contexts" (Friginal, 2018, p. 27). To help raise such register awareness, researchers have been focusing on using concordance skills within specialized corpora to show learners the probabilistic variation of different language features in terms of frequency and context of use (Anthony, 2019; Boulton, 2015; Chambers, et. al., 2011; Donley & Reppen, 2001; Friginal, 2013b; Gavioli & Aston, 2011, as cited in Friginal, 2018). This idea is further illustrated by Boulton's (2012) meta-synthesis of empirical evaluation of corpus studies. He stated that in the areas of ESL/EFL pedagogy and acquisition, the corpus approach can effectively help learners understand "genre and text type as well as discipline-specific language" (p. 261). Along the same line, Bennett (2010) also confirmed the affordances of the corpus approach. He pointed out that corpus linguistics can provide learners access to highly specific language and terminology in different disciplines to more accurately address learners' specific needs.

To resolve learners' lack of discipline-specific and genre-specific vocabulary, we propose the use of a Data-Driven Learning (DDL) approach: a corpus linguistics method. DDL was first coined by Johns (1991) as an



approach in which “the language learner is also, essentially, a research worker whose learning needs to be driven by access to linguistic data—hence the term data-driven learning to describe the approach” (as cited in Rees, et. al., 2014, p. 2). It is a type of learning method that addresses learners’ needs by providing them with the target language database (the corpus). Learners then would use tools and search strategies, such as Key-Word-In-Context concordances, word frequency lists, word dispersion plots, collocation tables, and so on, to study different language items (Anthony, 2019).

DDL allows learners to interact with various corpora using corpus analysis software to facilitate learning. One of DDL’s applications in language education is corpus-based dictionaries, which differ from traditional dictionaries in that they offer more features such as more samples used in authentic contexts, collocations and semantic prosody, and academic word lists (Friginal, 2018). Another way to effectively use DDL is for students to access a corpus of the target language (such as the British Academic Writing Essay corpus) where they can use search strategies to identify the context and frequency of how different language items are being used. For example, in DDL classrooms, instructors could introduce the *File View* tool, which is available in most corpus software and is very user-friendly. This will help learners understand how certain language items are used. These “inductive, self-directed, language-learning exercises through interaction with a corpus” can help learners hypothesize language use based on their own observation of authentic texts (Anthony, 2019, p. 179). DDL could also be used outside the classroom. For example, students can search certain corpora to confirm information or to look for “a replacement for a specialist informant during homework writing tasks” (Anthony, 2019, p. 180).

DDL has been shown to improve language learning, particularly vocabulary. One such study is Boulton and Cobb’s (2017) meta-analysis of 64 papers. The researchers investigated the effectiveness of employing corpus linguistics for L2 learning. Abundant data demonstrated that DDL techniques, especially hands-on concordance, resulted in considerable overall effects on boosting learners’ abilities and knowledge. In agreement with Boulton and Cobb’s (2017) claim, Ackerley’s study also showed that using DDL approaches enabled learners to develop their analytical noticing skills, which enhanced learners’ autonomy and confidence in and out of their classroom learning. Learning how to use corpora to assist their learning is “a transferable skill that students can take with them into whatever professional field they might enter in the future” (2021, p. 93).

We echo Ackerley (2021) in that it is integral for learners to develop skills to use the vocabulary and lexicogrammatical patterns of specialized texts so that they can follow the norms of their specific discourse community. By doing so, the likelihood of the learners’ writing resembling that of expert or professional writers of a specific genre will be higher. Based on the above studies, we highly believe the DDL approach



could raise learners' awareness about registers, namely how language is used differently in different contexts. By exposing learners to enormous authentic samples of language use, learners would be more capable of acquiring and applying discipline-specific vocabulary. We concur with Friginal's assertion in his book *Corpus Linguistics for English Teachers*, that learning English for various purposes "can be (best) accomplished in the classroom when students use corpora, corpus tools, and corpus-based materials to examine specific characteristics of spoken and written registers" (2018, p. 28).

Final remarks

We first want to acknowledge that there remains considerable potential in this area for future research. It would be beneficial to explore in more depth student results after finishing an ESAP course. This could look like measuring transfer by conducting a pretest immediately after students finish an ESAP class, then a posttest when they have completed their degree program, and a thorough analysis of the results to determine how successful the ESAP class was in enabling students to transfer skills and learning outcomes. This could also take the form of conducting studies that focus on students' perceptions of their learning after completing an ESAP class, and determining how the class was useful to them through questionnaires or interviews.

Furthermore, we want to affirm that while EGAP can indeed provide many benefits for some students, it is simply not enough to meet the diverse needs of many EAL learners studying at English-medium universities. Based on our extensive research in this area, we can clearly see that students struggle with various aspects of academia, most notably with transferring skills and learning outcomes from EGAP courses to discipline-specific courses and in being equipped with comprehensive genre-knowledge and discipline-specific vocabulary.

Finally, we are confident that our proposed solutions of encouraging English-medium universities to not only implement ESAP classes but to ensure that the curriculum and pedagogical practices of these classes utilize a GBP and DDL approach will provide teachers with all of the necessary tools to create fulfilling and effective classes. Most importantly, it will allow EAL students to receive the quality of education they deserve, and the opportunity to realize their full potential.



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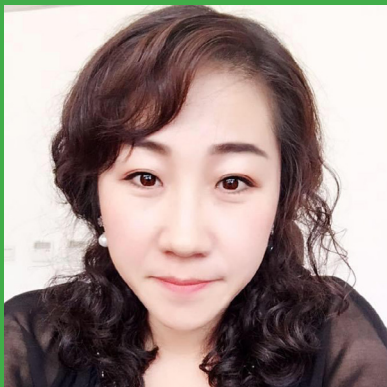
Author Bios



Farnaz Karimian holds an MA in Applied Linguistics, BA in Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, and certifications in Teaching English as a Second Language, TESL Methodology Instruction, and Universal Design for Learning. Her love of teaching has granted her the opportunity to wear many hats in this field in the past 12 years: curriculum developer; teacher; in-service teacher trainer; and Assistant Director of Studies. Her current intersections of interest are UDL, multimodality, and decolonizing curricula in the L2 context.



Amy Parker is a CELTA certified English Language Instructor and holds an MA in Applied Linguistics and a BA in English Literature and Psychology. She has taught in Canada and Colombia and has served in multiple roles including ESL/EFL/ELA teacher, curriculum developer, mentor, and editor. Her interests include language and social justice, plurilingual pedagogy, and language policy. She plans to pursue a Bachelor of Education in order to reach newcomers to Canada in the public education system.



Xiaoming Li has two MAs in Applied Linguistics and a BA in English Literature. She is a TESL accredited and CELTA certified teacher. She has extensive teaching experience in multiple settings in the EAL/ESL field. Her research interests are mainly on teacher education, teaching beliefs, pedagogy, and tech-enhanced teaching methodology. In addition to teaching and researching, she is also an active member of CALL (College Associations for Language and Literacy) serving the TESL community.