

Conference Review

Norwegian Forum for English for Academic Purposes, 8th Summer Seminar

June 12-13, 2014, Hogskolen Akershus, Oslo

Stella Harvey and Paul Stocks

Goldsmiths, University of London

This conference focused on English for Specific Academic Purposes. Its small-scale (43 participants) facilitated discussion and made it possible to see themes emerging. One such strand was the ongoing internationalisation of universities, and the encouraging idea that the status of EAP may be rising as departments recognise our expertise in managing this process.

Diane Schmitt's opening plenary highlighted the need for more collaboration between applied linguistics research and EAP. Focusing on reading, she argued that international students lack the necessary level of automaticity in their reading (i.e. not immediately recognising enough of the words in a text, sometimes as low as 75%). This means they read more slowly and thus lack time to read widely or deeply enough, which has a detrimental impact on actual learning. She advocated closer work between applied linguists and EAP lecturers, especially on how best to help students improve their reading skills. The question of the disjuncture between research and EAP practice proved to be a recurrent point of discussion during the conference, the pitfalls of allowing ourselves and our students to be mined as data being an issue that particularly engaged delegates.

Another plenary speaker, Professor Caroline Coffin, discussed the relevance of systemic functional linguistics to ESAP, drawing on her book (with Jim Donohue) *A Language as Social Semiotic-Based Approach to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (2014). Her approach aims to make language *visible* in HE, rather than the invisible 'water through which we swim'. She predicted the role of EAP will become more central as HE institutions continue to internationalise, and become more aware of the important role it can play in this process.

Plenary speaker Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams is an American academic who opened the UK's first university writing centre in Coventry in 2004. Her talk outlined the development of writing centres, firstly in the US, and now as they are spreading across Europe and the UK. She cited a seminal article by S. North (1984) which helped to define the principles of writing centres: they are not a 'fix it' shop; they are student-centred, and aim to produce better *writers*, not better *papers*. Crucially, academic writing should be seen as a key competency for both university students and staff, and hence universities need to build whole-institution writing programmes.

Kevin Haines' plenary addressed the internationalisation of the academy from the perspective of an English Medium Instruction (EMI) environment in the Netherlands. Particularly interesting was the development of accreditation schemes whereby universities can demonstrate added value and good conditions in the international classroom. Kevin stressed that responding to internationalisation in a meaningful way must happen systemically in an HE institution: it is not merely the concern of EAP practitioners, and should be reflected in all teaching and learning pedagogies and practices.

Two presentations focusing on the increased collaboration between EAP centres and departments were given by Jackie Donnat and Claire Brett from Bristol, and Anne Vicary and Sarah Brewer from Reading. Jackie and Claire described a very positive process that included moving from communication to co-operation and finally to collaboration, in just a few years on one science in-session module. Anne and Sarah outlined their experience of implementing Sloan and Porter's CEM (contextualisation, embedding and mapping) model for integrating in-session language and academic skills into degree programmes and eventually specific modules. Interestingly, several presenters mentioned contacts with departments improving after a crisis of some kind had occurred which prompted the need for better co-operation with EAP centres.

Our own presentation considered the challenges facing students on transdisciplinary degree programmes at Goldsmiths that combine different academic traditions and require a range of written assessment types. These included, on MA Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship, an innovative hybrid 'academic business plan' for which students were encouraged to 'do it your own way' rather than follow an existing model. We argued that the degree programme in a sense performed the *precariousness* which characterises working conditions in the creative and cultural sector, and that such degree programmes indicate the need for tolerating ambiguity both by students and ESAP practitioners. It appeared in later discussions that the notion of precariousness had struck a chord with some delegates, who related it to the casualisation of employment in HE and to the 'Cinderella' status of EAP within the academy.

This conference benefited from excellent plenaries and some thought-provoking discussion. The need for a more productive relationship between ESAP and applied linguistics research emerged as a particularly salient point. The contributions from speakers from non EAP backgrounds highlight the importance of dialogue between EAP and germane disciplines. It was also notable that familiar debates, such as the uniformity or diversity of academic writing and the degree of subject-specific content knowledge required are still current. Overall, we found this conference focused, informative and highly relevant to our work as EAP practitioners.



CONTACT THE AUTHORS

s.harvey@gold.ac.uk

p.stocks@gold.ac.uk