

Review

English for Academic Purposes: Perspectives on the Past, Present, and Future

Douglas E. Bell

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English for Academic Purposes (EAP) finds itself at a pivotal juncture in its history as it grapples with many diverse challenges, a contemporary appraisal of which is the main aim of this work. While the volume surveys the past, present, and future of EAP, author Douglas E. Bell has not attempted a comprehensive treatment of the extant issues and debates but has, instead, adopted a discretionary stance in addressing them. His approach can be inferred from the subtitle, which characterises all subsequent in-text observations and arguments as *perspectives*. This designation also reflects the breadth of viewpoints expressed on central EAP themes in the discussion that follows. Bell's own perspectives, for one, reveal an enduring interest in the development of the discipline, explored through considerations of its history and its evolving status in academia, its strengths and limitations, and its practitioners' experiences. Further perspectives directly adduced throughout the text are those of several high-profile EAP professionals, interviewed initially for Bell's doctoral research and some again for this book. Interestingly, a third tranche of perspectives is elicited from the implied reader at the end of every chapter in a section called 'Points for Further Discussion and Critical Reflection'. The reader is invited here to use a given set of questions 'as a starting point for further study or to supplement

in-class discussions as part of a taught module on EAP' (p. xiv). This section also reliably suggests a target readership: while the book is pitched primarily at postgraduate students and General English teachers considering EAP as a prospective career, its critical discussion of the discipline's key issues would also appeal to established practitioners. Overall, delimiting the book's purview to conveying different perspectives is a sound move as it enables Bell to articulate his own longstanding concerns as well as providing a forum for varying assessments of current research and praxis.

These concerns and assessments are themselves subjected to Bell's continuous reflection, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis, which together amount to a healthy strain of criticality clearly discernible throughout the text. This critical spirit is relevant for at least two reasons. One is, it seems to me, self-evident: to begin dealing with the challenges facing EAP, intellectual virtues such as open-mindedness and honesty (Facione 2000) are necessary; these imply a willingness not only to identify problem areas, but also to critique them with a view to improving the situation. There is, I find, something refreshing about candid expression *sans* malice which clears the path towards improvement, and Bell does not shrink from pointing out shortcomings where he might discern potential for a solution. This quality evokes a less obvious, but no less important, aspect of the work's critical orientation: authenticity. For me, its authenticity is evident in an account at once critical and intriguingly self-reflexive. The latter points to a practitioner decidedly invested in his subject, and writing about that subject in a discursive mode which exemplifies fine EAP writing. In a genuine sense, this is a text which 'walks the walk' and so could readily be

used in an EAP classroom as a model of expository discourse.

The book consists of eight chapters of similar length. The substantive content of each chapter is bookended by an Introduction and a Summary, a structure which gives the volume a neat, balanced feel. Chapter 1 is entitled 'EAP's Birth and Early Historical Development' and it duly does what it says on the tin. Not content merely to recount a descriptive history of the discipline, Bell seeks at the outset to justify the value of historical considerations in exploring all fields of enquiry, including EAP. He then delivers an instructive critique regarding the lack of standardised credentials and pathways into EAP, which, were they in place, would constitute 'a shared knowledge base' (p. 2). It is through this initial critical engagement that the book's *raison d'être* is both introduced and realised, and it is here where Bell sets out his stall. This is followed by four more sections charting the development of EAP, which focus respectively on the conceptual evolution and expanding scope of the discipline, significant factors in its emergence, its place in the sphere of English language education, and its development in UK higher education.

The next two chapters follow a temporal trajectory, examining the core issues and debates which have arisen in EAP from its inception to the present day. Chapter 2 covers the first forty years from 1960 and divides this period into halves. The 1960s-1970s section discusses the seminal concepts of register analysis, rhetorical/discourse analysis, needs analysis, and authenticity, making the point that every successive approach benefited from its precursors in significant ways, for example in the steady improvement of study materials. The next section (1980s-1990s) is more extensive, reflecting the remarkable growth of EAP and its gradual emergence as a sub-branch of English Language Teaching (ELT) distinct from English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Bell identifies a number of core questions persistently posed during this period, several of which remain unresolved and topical, with one of the most prominent being whether EAP practitioners should have specialised content knowledge. While still a point of theoretical contention, this question generally finds concrete resolution on the ground, with practitioners who have specific content knowledge often choosing to work in ESP rather than EAP. The other topics featured in this section are materials writing, teacher training, textbooks and programme descriptions, skills-based learning and study skills, learning-centred approaches, wide-angle versus narrow-angle approaches, content-based instruction and team-teaching, genre analysis, and accommodationist EAP

versus critical EAP. All these topics and themes are evaluated both within their respective contexts and with the benefit of hindsight. While a few have become less relevant or fallen out of favour completely, Bell notes that many 'are in fact recursive and continue to re-surface' (p. 43).

This tendency is understandable in a still expanding discipline and can be seen in Chapter 3, 'Core Issues and Debates 2000-2024', where a few previous themes reappear. Consistent with the book's orientation towards criticality, the first subsection deals with the cognitive construct of critical thinking, focussing on its application in EAP learning rather than teaching. Considering EAP as a locus of development in both academic expression and higher-order skills, Bell outlines how students can effectively conceptualise and operationalise critical thinking across these dimensions. He also highlights prevalent epistemic assumptions around the construct—such as 'formal logic is equivalent to practical reasoning'; 'training is transferable from one context to another'; and 'critical thinking is a pan-cultural intellectual value'—and cautions against uncritical acceptance of such propositions. The next subsection considers plagiarism and academic misconduct and, unexpectedly, reveals that this perennial hot topic 'has not received any explicit attention in several of the book-length surveys from the post-millennium EAP literature' (p. 49). While recognising the complexities of plagiarism and the legitimacy of exculpatory explanations in many instances, Bell takes quite a firm stance on the issue, calling for such practices where they occur 'to be identified for what they are and dealt with accordingly' (p. 49). Interestingly, this perspective is at variance with several of the writers cited, who have either addressed plagiarism gingerly or skirted the problem entirely. Other contentious topics introduced in this chapter include academic literacies, practitioner education and development, privatisation and commodification, the ongoing relevance of genre, and the increasing influence of technology. Due to their importance, they are engaged with more extensively later in the book.

Drawing together this wide-ranging account of EAP's historical development spanning three chapters, Bell concedes the subjectivity of his topic selection; by way of mitigation, however, he acknowledges the value of the many sources informing his perspectives. One noteworthy conclusion derived from this wealth of research is a discernible trend in the way language education evolves. In tracing the development of EAP, Bell observes a 'what→how→who' trajectory similar to those seen in TESOL and ESP. This pattern broadly represents the progression of priorities in language

education: linguistic description (the what) is usually the first point of interest, followed by a focus on pedagogy (the how) and then on teachers (the who).

Inverting this sequence, Chapter 4 explores the EAP practitioner. It begins by examining the self-designated term *practitioner* conceptually—from its variations in nomenclature (e.g. teacher, instructor, tutor) and how these feed into notions of professional status, to the inevitable tensions this tangle of identities evokes. These are but a few of the considerations bound up not just with the various routes into EAP but the range of roles within it, so it is no surprise that where many see a rich tapestry whose diversity is its strength, others see an area ill-defined and fragmented. Bell does not inhabit either of these extreme positions, though he does argue for EAP shifting towards the established conventions of Higher Education. Clarifying professional identity and standardising qualifications exemplify moves which, he contends, would contribute significantly to enhancing practitioners' status, institutional recognition, and job security. Chapter 5 foregrounds pedagogy, with the opening section delineating the knowledge base and competencies expected of the ideal EAP teacher. What emerges is a string of notable distinctions between EAP teaching and general ELT, each of which Bell is careful to substantiate. A case in point is his nuanced line of reasoning countervailing 'the default tendency in many contemporary ELT contexts ... to see learner-centredness as an absolute virtue and teacher-centredness as an absolute vice' (p. 95). This is not to discount learners as a central element of the pedagogical relationship but rather to re-evaluate seemingly entrenched orthodoxies in relation to teaching. Indeed, the nature of EAP learners is considered at length, with Bell advocating that pedagogies be judiciously modified to accommodate the differing needs of pre-sessional and in-sessional learners.

Following coherently from this focus on learners, Chapter 6 offers critical perspectives on questions around two major areas related to learning: materials and assessment. Addressing materials first, Bell discusses their function and then evaluates custom-made materials against those produced commercially. His main take here is that materials should be pedagogically appropriate, that is, they should meet the specific needs of a given teaching environment and learner cohort, and that essential to this equation is the target context. He then addresses contemporary approaches to materials design, evaluating resources such as TED talks, podcasts, documentaries, and TV shows. Following this is the section on EAP assessment, which opens

by discussing the main purposes for assessment as categorised by Fulcher (1999): proficiency, placement, and achievement. Among the many issues broached is that of test validity where, particularly as a predictor of proficiency in academic writing, the ubiquitous IELTS predictably takes a fair amount of flak. EAP practitioners also come in for some scrutiny when Bell turns a critical gaze on what he identifies as a knowledge gap in many teachers' assessment literacy. The spotlight on teachers does not let up in the next section, 'Assessment of EAP teachers', which closes the chapter. Although candid discussions of these issues may well be disconcerting for some practitioners [do any teachers like being critiqued?], Bell's observations, offered as they are for the purpose of improving the discipline, are typically constructive and courteous.

Moving on to matters both delicate and contested, Chapter 7 is entitled 'The Role and Status of EAP in the Academy'. The opening discussion reconsiders whether EAP can be characterised as an authentic academic discipline. This is of course a term I have used throughout this review, though admittedly with reservations similar to Bell's. Operating on the assumption that it can be called a discipline, an even bigger question looms: is EAP a respected member of the academic community? This is not so easily answered—and even if it is eventually, the reality for many practitioners is less easy still to come to terms with. Bell's conclusion, supported by perspectives from several prominent figures in the field, is that 'when compared with other disciplines, EAP does seem to find itself positioned as a poor relation' (p. 126). For a number of reasons, not least the aforementioned issues around non-standardised qualifications and non-regulation of entry routes, this is not a position likely to change soon. Indeed, given its primary and most visible profile as (merely) a teaching enterprise—which of course excludes the odd university which accommodates Teaching English for Academic Purposes (TEAP) as part of its Education faculty provision—gaining true parity with established disciplines on all levels is unrealistic. The argument then takes a fascinating tack: drawing on the work of three different educational theorists (Tony Becher, Basil Bernstein, and Pierre Bourdieu), Bell examines EAP's place in academia from a sociological perspective. This is a welcome turn as it imbues an already compelling analysis with an additional layer of erudition. In closing, Bell suggests some ways of mitigating what may have read as a bleak narrative up to that point. One suggestion appeals directly to practitioners' agency, specifically to upgrade their credentials; another approach is to widen the scope of

EAP provision to all (not just L2) students as a matter of course; and a third is to engage actively in scholarly activity and research. These recommendations are neither straightforward nor painless, a point Bell readily concedes, but he is convinced that they are necessary to enhance the academic status of EAP practitioners and the discipline itself.

With an eye on the future of EAP, the final chapter consolidates key themes raised in previous chapters to provide a broader critical assessment of the discipline, with particular reference to its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). From Bell's perspective, EAP's main strengths are that it has all the accoutrements of a mature educational practice; it is a truly global enterprise; and, through the efforts of the UK-based organisation BALEAP, formal professional recognition is available to its practitioners. However, BALEAP finds itself the launchpad for a series of weaknesses elaborated in the next section, two of which are familiar: EAP's peripheral status as a service vendor and its lack of regulated entry routes. Also identified are limited upward career mobility and the widening gap between research and practice. A key dimension of this last point is the tendency for issues concerning practitioners, particularly pedagogy, to be marginalised in published work, relative to pieces on language analysis. This situation prevails despite the editorial efforts of professional publications such as the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* to encourage more scholarly interest in disseminating what actually happens in the EAP classroom. The next section on opportunities for EAP also covers previously charted ground, including calls for the discipline to widen its scope of practice, for practitioners to leverage their knowledge and skills towards other related areas in the university, and for more opportunities for practitioners' professional development. The final element of Bell's SWOT analysis outlines threats to EAP, the first of which is the increasing influence of neoliberalism in HE. This leads directly to a strident (if restrained) critique of the recent ill-controlled expansion of private EAP providers in the UK, whose corporate motivations Bell takes care not to impute to individuals. The chapter continues with critical evaluations of further perceived threats to EAP: global economic and sociocultural changes, including changes to the status of English; a possible decline in the calibre of practitioners; and the development of generative AI. The discussion closes with a general perspective regarding the future of EAP—tempered by the vicissitudes of the past several years, its cautious optimism is conditional on all stakeholders remaining vigilant.

As a long-time EAP practitioner, I consider this an impressive volume on many levels: there is nothing misunderstood and little misjudged about the discipline, particularly in terms of where it finds itself at present. By framing the book as a collection of perspectives on selected topics and themes, Bell gives himself licence to prioritise his professional concerns over others'. And even where he takes a distinct position in a given debate, I found myself in agreement.

There is, however, a conceptual issue which needs to be brought out: critical thinking as it applies to teaching. Bell ostensibly addresses this question when introducing the section on critical thinking development in learners, noting that approaches to *critical EAP pedagogy* were covered in the preceding chapter. The ambiguity begins here: by Bell's indication are we to assume a conceptual equivalence between critical EAP and critical thinking, and therefore a similarity in their teaching? If so, that presents a problem. Critical EAP follows the principles of *critical pedagogy* (Freire 1973; Giroux 2020), a sociopolitical philosophy which interrogates established norms of western education, and originally spearheaded in EAP by figures such as Benesch (2001) and Canagarajah (1999). This philosophy—even in its construal of critical thinking per se—bears very little conceptual resemblance to the critical thinking skillset Bell endorses for EAP learners (pp. 45–48). This skillset is a rather more established component of conceptualisations in education, philosophy, and psychology (see Cottrell 2017 for a typical skills-based approach to teaching critical thinking). So while critical EAP pedagogy and critical thinking pedagogy for EAP share elements of criticality, they occupy different epistemological domains. On this basis, it is perhaps reductive to conflate them.

This raises a related issue, which is more a suggestion for a future edition to consider: that is the seemingly commonsense supposition that teachers inherently know what critical thinking is. Whether or not an individual has acquired this knowledge, it is a *prior* and *different* competency to being able to *teach* critical thinking. Among university teachers, for example, Moore (2013) has found considerable variation just in understandings of critical thinking. It is also worth noting that critical thinking development is not a natural but counterintuitive process, largely contingent on deliberate, consistent effort (Halpern and Dunn 2022). According to the BALEAP Competency Framework (2008: 6), however, EAP teachers are expected to have sufficient knowledge of critical thinking to be able to teach and assess it 'through tasks, processes and interactions'. This

competency statement seems to be predicated on at least three broad assumptions: that all practitioners (1) work with similar definitions of critical thinking (bearing in mind these are many and varied), (2) have a defined minimum knowledge of the construct, and (3) know how to teach and assess it in an EAP context. While practitioners with Master's and TEAP qualifications would probably have encountered critical thinking in some measure in their studies, for others the above assumptions may be slightly unrealistic. These observations are certainly not to impugn the competency statement or the standards of practice it espouses but, in keeping with this book's awareness-raising dimension, are rather to underscore the type of concern which might fall within the remit of Bell's argument on the role of qualifications in EAP.

Overall then, this volume displays an astute grasp of the state of the art, offering critical perspectives on EAP's expanding scope and multifaceted character, and the complex challenges which flow from these. In sharing deeply informed insights into the EAP project as a whole, the book more than fulfils its brief and will be indispensable reading for all practitioners with 'skin in the EAP game'. What really enriches the account, however, is the abiding sense that Bell's robust engagement with a range of important issues and debates is genuinely geared towards improving current conditions in EAP. For these reasons, this work is a worthy contribution to the increasingly vibrant enterprise of scholarship in the discipline.

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The Reviewer

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