

## Exploring Teacher Views in Teaching EAP at Low Skill Levels

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**Abstract:** Teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) needs teachers skilled in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to obtain further skills, abilities and methodologies. Views about CLT teaching may not be correct for teaching EAP, especially to low level learners. Making teachers aware of their opinions is the major step in helping them to change. Informed by the literature and the BALEAP Competency framework for Teachers of EAP, these statements were categorised as barriers to or success factors for successful EAP teaching. The results highlighted two key features where CLT and EAP approaches differ: the description of the language system within which teachers frame their talk and the approach to scaffolding student performance.

**Keywords:** teacher views, EAP, low level learners, obstacles to effective teaching, success influences

The methodology is the actual way to achieve the purpose of the study, develop the theoretical framework and explains independent and dependent variables used and operationalization of concepts and variables. Furthermore it discusses the technique implemented for sample selection and data extraction.

Teacher beliefs about teaching and learning are personal constructs which guide decisions and appointments. These beliefs have an huge impression on learners at many levels, affecting interaction, curriculum design and learning content and contributing to the ‘culture of learning’ of classrooms. CLT teacher beliefs are formed first from understandings of learning in childhood, which can be particularly unaffected to change and later from experiences of learning languages. These beliefs can be challenged over training programmes which introduce new knowledge, approaches and techniques but it is the recognition by teachers of tensions between their beliefs and their classroom practice which constitutes a powerful force for change in their professional development.

Guskey concluded that change in beliefs is more likely if teachers can be convinced to try out new ways of teaching which turn out to be fruitful with their students. However, new beliefs will challenge existing beliefs and can lead to teachers’ personal constructs of teaching becoming ‘entangled domains’ in which discordant beliefs can dislocate normal decision-making processes. In attempting to adapt new beliefs, teachers’ can perform ‘very agile mental flips... to turn conflicting evidence into support for already held beliefs’

### Influences on CLT teachers’ views

A paradigm shift in language pedagogy occurred in the 1970s, when the focus moved from theory to function. This shift was a reaction against a supposed overemphasis on teaching the formal, structural properties of language but it was also driven by real needs: in CLT, for communication between people in the new European Economic Community and in EAP, for continuing access, through a lingua franca, to the technical skill and academic knowledge of former foreign powers. At the same time, developments in second language acquisition research, remarkably the concept

that learners had their own developing ‘interlanguage’, shifted the responsibility for learning away from the teacher towards the learner. Prior to these changes, the content of language courses was consequent from the linguistic description of grammatical structures and rules. This was operationalized in classrooms by creating situations in which the meaning of particular constructions could be displayed and learned through drills until learners could produce them correctly. Although the approach went out of fashion, the structural syllabus, with its stress on verb forms, has continued to inform CLT grammar instruction, particularly at beginner and elementary levels.

Functional methods take equal account of both the semantic possibilities - the meaning potential - and the pragmatic realisation that are proper in any given context. This means that the target context for language use has to be acknowledged and specified indeed. Although this is possible for EAP courses, it is much more difficult for general language courses in which learners do not have clear purposes for learning. One way to address this problem was *The Threshold Level*, which specifies a so-called common core of functions for general socialising, e.g. greeting, inviting, which all learners, whatever their concluding commitments, are presumed to need.

Insights from SLA research led to changes in teaching methodology by placing the learners and their developing interlanguage at the centre of the learning process. Effective language learning occurred when learners were given situations where they needed to use language expressively to communicate. Good language learners implemented strategies which suited their own learning style and the role of the teacher changed to that of an organizer, assisting students to use strategies effectively. Initially interference from the first language (L1) was seen as an obstacle to learning a second (L2) and the use of L1 was expelled from the language classroom. However, more recent SLA research has come to view second language learners as developing bilinguals with the ability to code-switch between L1 and L2. The two languages interact animatedly and influence one another in the learner’s mind. This interaction should be stimulated inside as well as outside the classroom. Another important influence on CLT was the priority given to the spoken language with written language seen as a secondary and derived form. This view seems to have invented with the reaction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Reform Movement against GTM. However, it is based not on research but on analogy with children acquiring their first language, in which speech happens naturally but reading and writing have to be taught some time later. It had a particular influence on methods for beginner and elementary levels. In order to pretend natural attainment processes, only the target language should be spoken in the classroom and explicit grammar instruction should be avoided. Students just need to let language wash over them to acquire it. However, the analogy with L1 acquisition may have led to the unfortunate leaning to *infantilise* learners at lower levels, falling them to the dependent state of little children so they could acquire language obviously.

As a result of these influences, the main focus of teacher training programmes for CLT came to be methodology for oral proficiency, i.e. how to create conditions in the classroom which stimulate social interaction and the authentic use of spoken language to achieve social purposes so that learners are actively involved in exchanging meaning in pairs or groups in order to solve problems, discuss issues or express their personal outlooks. Spoken articulacy is promoted over accuracy and the use of the target language in spoken activities is significant. This usually leads to a relaxed classroom atmosphere with a priority on creating good social relations but can also mean that ‘the measure of a good lesson for many teachers... is one where activities work and students are happy, with little noticeable evidence that students have learnt anything’. Some of the assumptions which underlie recent practices in CLT no longer fit with current thinking in SLA research and may even create obstacles to successful L2 learning, especially for EAP learners. For example, it is now predictable that there are significant differences between gaining an L1 and learning an L2: L2

learners are typically older and hence more cognitively, socially and emotionally mature; they have already acquired communicative competence in their L1 so do not need to re-learn general ideas about the way languages function; they are likely to be literate or developing literacy and their experience of studying at school or university may have given them analytical competences which are well suitable understanding explicit grammar instruction, especially if this is done in the L1. Moreover, they do not need to be treated as preschoolers, learning to listen and speak before reading and writing, or learning social functions and discussing personal topics when their purpose is to learn and use academic English.

Some of the influences which shaped CLT have also learned EAP, in particular the shift of focus from language form to language function and the consequence of the learner, responsible for his or her developing inter language. The concept of addressing learner needs to enhance enthusiasm and promote learning is also important for both. Where these two types of teaching deviate markedly is in their teaching content. CLT content at low proficiency levels is still drawn largely from the common basic functions for conversation and basic survival detailed in *The Threshold Level*. In addition, the CLT approach assumes that low level learners need a basic foundation of main grammatical structures before more complex notions and functions can be introduced. Specific varieties such as EAP or English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) are assumed to be too difficult without this basic grounding.

In contrast, from its early beginnings, EAP course design has followed a ‘deep end strategy’ in which even at lower levels, students can interact with authentic texts from their disciplines and can be supported to function beyond their current level of competence by designing carefully stepped tasks. In accounting for the success of such courses, Bloor and Bloor claimed that it is unnecessary to teach a common core of grammatical structures before beginning to teach a special variation such as EAP because a common core, by definition, is common to all varieties and can, therefore, be taught at the same time as a special variety. EAP contains helping students to perform effectively in an academic context. Therefore, the focus is on understanding and producing academic texts, with curriculums based on the rhetorical functions and genres common to that context. This type of syllabus avoids atomistic approaches by showing how language components are functioning features of whole texts. It encourages students to acquire procedural knowledge about discourse and reapply this in different situations. However, key challenges for CLT teachers involve learning how academic discourse is patterned at whole text level and using this practical knowledge rather than explanations of language structures to anchor their teaching. Pre-intermediate coursebooks are usually organised in self-reliant, topic-based units. These books follow a structural syllabus which delivers verb grammar, vocabulary and functions for general socialising together with surface-level approaches to discourse –reading for gist, skimming and scanning. The syllabus is functional with the choice of appropriate grammar and lexis driven by functions, situations, tasks and genres. The aim is to enable students to achieve academic performance with a regulated repertoire of grammatical structures which can be long-drawn-out as they become more capable. There is a greater emphasis on noun phrase grammar, to reflect the nominalised style of much academic text. Another key difference lies in the expectations about the level of language to teach. Pre-intermediate coursebooks provide practice in grammar structures that students are already expected to know but use inaccurately. Texts are graded to be at or just above the current level of the students. In contrast, Teachers who are used to using pre-intermediate coursebooks are likely to find some of their beliefs challenged by the different approach.

Teacher beliefs are the ‘implicit, personally-held practical system of mental constructs’, which include emotional and evaluative constituents and moral judgments. They are not fixed but form part of a complex, interconnected and dynamic system, in which existing and emergent beliefs can

be inconsistent. For example, there can be discrepancies between beliefs which express ideal practices and those which refer to practical classroom realities. Beliefs are usually expressed in the form of propositions, which may be descriptive (having different clauses in a sentence and complex sentences is part of the way IELTS is evaluated), evaluative and prescriptive. In order to uncover beliefs it is necessary to make implications on the basis of what teachers say, what they intend or how they behave. Commonly used techniques for eliciting beliefs are self-reports, semi-structured or stimulated recall interviews and observations as well as teacher narratives. Evidence of beliefs can be found in obvious statements or uncovered by identifying metaphors used to describe teaching, e.g. Rein them in, feed those ideas, as well as interpreting evaluative comments or presuppositions in narratives. This practice-based study draws insights from a conceptual framework derived from sociocultural theory for studying teacher cognition, proposed by Cross (2010), in which teachers are recognised as social agents whose beliefs are shaped by their background and previous experiences but also by contextual factors, which mediate their ability to teach in ways that match their current beliefs, while at the same time creating tensions which might act to change and develop those beliefs. A key outcome of this study is a reflective questionnaire, containing pairs of inconsistent beliefs, which is intended to raise teachers' consciousness of their beliefs so that they can reflect on the source of these and question their appropriateness.

This study set out to uncover beliefs about language teaching which might form potential barriers to successful delivery of EAP materials for low level learners and to identify associated beliefs which might constitute critical success factors in enabling such students to achieve their target competence. Borg suggested that 'whole areas of language education... remained unexplored from a teacher cognition perspective' and indeed much teacher cognition research has been based on a CLT paradigm, which is, in two fundamental respects, inappropriate for effective EAP teaching. The traditional CLT focus identified in the literature review above, especially at low proficiency levels, is on teaching language as a system of grammatical structures contextualised within a common core of functions for general socialising, thus prioritising spoken language. CLT teachers tend to frame their talk and their practice through language structures and CLT coursebooks continue to adopt this approach uncritically although it is not always supported by recent SLA research. In contrast, an EAP approach follows a deep end strategy, teaching towards the target academic performance and scaffolding tasks so that students can read, write, listen and speak beyond their current level of competence. Teachers frame their talk using genres and language functions, thus supporting students to acquire practical knowledge about discourse processes which they can reapply in the context of their own academic disciplines.

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