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## GENRE-BASED APPROACHES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES (EAP)

### Abstract

In recent years English for academic purposes (EAP) has become one of the mainstream fields of practice, study and research within language education, mainly due to the position of English as the international language of higher education and scientific research. The paper briefly examines the main assumptions of the approach in the context of its links to ESP (English for specific purposes), systemic functional linguistics and new literacy studies. However, the main focus of the present discussion is on genre-based pedagogy as the leading framework and an important point of reference for EAP education. To illustrate this perspective within the field, the notion of genre and its interpretations in foreign language teaching are discussed. Finally, two closely related academic genres – discussion and debate – are explored with the aim of indicating their potential benefits, areas of difficulty and challenges for students and teachers in the EAP classroom.

**Keywords:** English for academic purposes (EAP), genre, critical thinking, academic skills, discussion, debate

**Słowa kluczowe:** język angielski akademicki, gatunek, myślenie krytyczne, umiejętność uczenia się, dyskusja, debata

## 1. English for Academic Purposes – introduction

The field of English for academic purposes (EAP) which “emerged out of the broader field of English for specific purposes (ESP)” (Hamp-Lyons, 2011: 89) is often considered an eclectic sub-discipline within ESP. However, EAP can be clearly differentiated from ESP by its focus on academic contexts, and its scope of interest can be most accurately defined as “the linguistic, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic description of English as it occurs in the contexts of academic study and scholarly exchange itself” (Hamp-Lyons, 2011: 89). Thus, EAP education is concerned with the teaching of specialized knowledge and literacy skills and intends to prepare university students and young researchers for efficient communication in English in different institutional and research settings. The specific aim of EAP education is to help students study and conduct research in different English-medium contexts and participate in academic life. Consequently, it is the teaching of English which does not focus on developing students’ general proficiency in English but rather on the language which is used in the academic world.

The initial focus of attention in EAP was probably the expansion of higher education, multilingualism and to provide support for international students, but at present EAP is concerned also with local students (either monolingual or multilingual) and their increasing need for training in academic literary skills (see Lillis & Tuck, 2016). Nevertheless, it seems that the increasing popularity of EAP education and its rapid growth as a field of study and research results mostly from the position of English as the international lingua franca of higher education and research (Pérez-Llantada & Swales, 2017) or, in other words, “the gradual growth of English as the leading language for the dissemination of academic knowledge” (Hamp-Lyons, 2011: 92). Thus, it comes as no surprise that nowadays “the need to learn how to communicate in English in global academia is unprecedented” (Pérez-Llantada & Swales, 2017: 42). Bearing this in mind, it is worth considering whether EAP education should be (or is) looked upon as a specific support service, or as a research-informed academic subject on its own. In fact, EAP pedagogy takes on various forms or guises and, although it has become increasingly influential in recent years, its status is frequently questioned.

One way of looking at EAP is to distinguish two differing perspectives within the field. A wide-angle approach, often referred to as English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), is based on the conviction that there are a number of language forms, skills and study activities that are common to many disciplines which, as a result, are transferable across contexts (Hyland, 2016). In fact, activities such as skimming and scanning texts, paraphrasing and summarizing,

taking notes and giving presentations are important to all students regardless of the individual's subject of study. The other approach – English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) – points to the necessity of tailoring the course to the needs of students. This narrow angle view concentrates on very specific uses of language typical of a particular discipline and its theoretical and research orientation. It focuses on skills, language features, subject-specific knowledge and genres which seem to be directly linked and applicable to the students' specialization. According to Hyland (2016), who opts for the strong case for specificity, ESAP is more challenging and demanding for teachers, as it requires both expertise in a field and the ability to use the specialist discourse. However, it gives students the opportunity to work on a more relevant selection of academic texts or skills and allows them to better prepare for further studies (masters or doctoral). In a similar vein, Murray (2016: 436) underlines the fact that a decentralized approach to EAP takes into account the variation that exists between typical language practices within different academic disciplines. By contrast, traditional centralized models of English language provision do not recognize the importance of context and, as a consequence, they interpret EAP education in terms of developing a static set of skills that are generalizable across disciplines (Murray, 2016).

The present paper aims to discuss the position of genre-based approaches within EAP teaching and learning, to examine the notion of genre in the EAP context, in particular with regard to the spoken language, and, lastly, to analyze the possible forms of practical implementation of two closely related spoken academic genres, discussion and debate, during an advanced EAP course.

## **2. Genre-based ELT and EAP pedagogy**

The initial emphasis on solving practical problems, developing educational practices in rhetoric, or composition studies and implementation research which characterized the field of EAP in the early years of its development has been gradually replaced by the focus on genre analytic studies. In fact, it was Swales' (1990) pioneering work in genre analysis that gave the initial impetus for the growing popularity of genre-based approaches and helped to establish their present position as one of the mainstream trends in teaching English (particularly writing) all around the world. Both Swales (1990) and Paltridge (2001) opted to give genre a more central position in language teaching (particularly in ESP and EAP education), indicating that genre-based approaches allow for exploring languages from the perspective of the whole text and take into account the social and cultural contexts of communication.

At present the growing body of research concentrates not only on specific textual genre analysis but also on numerous phenomenological aspects of academic genres and the notion of genre in non-literary discourse, particularly in the context of language teaching and learning (see Paltridge, 2001; Hamp-Lyons, 2011; Hyland, 2016; Pérez-Llantada & Swales, 2017). It seems that exploring the effectiveness of genre-based approaches in teaching different aspects of academic English in generic and subject-specific contexts has become one of the leading research themes within the field, particularly as regards teaching academic writing.

Generally speaking, genre-based approaches to teaching languages comprise at least three main theoretical perspectives:

- English for specific purposes (ESP) – In the 1950s and 1960s English became a leading language for science and business in many countries and growing numbers of international students continued their education in Britain (as part of national educational policy). Since then ESP and EAP courses have served as the answer to the emerging needs of increasingly multilingual and multicultural populations of students who need training in specific academic and research skills in English. This orientation is strongly influenced by the position of English as the dominant language of higher education, academic knowledge and research.
- systemic functional linguistics – The approach derives from Hallidayan functional linguistics (Halliday, 1978) and the sociocultural theory of learning, based on the ideas of Vygotsky (1978). It points to the interactive and sequential character of genres and the ways in which language is related to context by means of its lexical, grammatical and rhetorical features (Hyland, 2003). The structures of genres are not fixed but they vary according to three changeable characteristics:
  - context – where genres are used,
  - purpose – the function of genres,
  - audience – the community to which genres are directed.

Consequently, the approach promotes a more situated view of genres, although it is stressed that “there are no rules that can be applied to all texts across contexts, purposes, and audiences” (Correa & Echeverri, 2017: 48).

- new literacy studies or academic literacy (Hamp-Lyons, 2011: 97) – Originally the terms were narrowly associated with American composition literature and school reading and writing. The change in perception of academic literacies started in the 1990s and since then they have been seen as a complex set of skills necessary to be able to use language to learn and experience knowledge (Johns, 1997). Contrary

to earlier interpretations, nowadays academic literacies are not understood as confined to reading or writing and the main emphasis within the movement is placed on practices rather than on exploring texts. Additionally, it is assumed that “academic rules and conventions are negotiable and that students have the right to participate in the academic community and therefore develop a critical stance towards these rules and conventions” (Pérez-Llantada & Swales, 2017: 45). The “academic literacies” perspective is an example of a decentralized approach to teaching academic language (English for specific academic purposes) and it aims to reflect the practices of individual disciplines, both with regard to language and social meanings (Murray, 2016: 436).

Within all of the above-mentioned orientations genre pedagogy offers a number of unquestionable advantages to learners and teachers, mainly because it manages to incorporate language, content and context into a coherent approach to language teaching. The main benefits of the approach can be summarized in the following way (Hyland, 2007: 150):

Genre pedagogy is:

- explicit – it makes clear what should be learnt,
- systematic – it provides a meaningful framework which combines language and contexts,
- needs-based – course content and objectives are closely related to students’ needs,
- supportive – it helps teachers in promoting and stimulating students’ learning and creativity,
- empowering – it provides learners with patterns of texts and possibilities of their variations,
- critical – it provides access to appropriate resources and creates opportunities for challenging valued discourses,
- consciousness-raising – it contributes to increasing teachers’ awareness of texts and helps them to advise learners on their specific problems.

### **3. The notion of genre**

It cannot be denied that Bakhtin’s (1986) ideas on the understanding of genres were in fact the major, if not the most influential, contribution in promoting the notion of genre (McCarthy, 1998). In his interpretation Bakhtin (1986) focuses on ‘utterances’, which he sees as abstract units of speech. They may vary considerably in length and comprise both extended monologues and short one-speaker turns in conversation. Utterances illustrate different conditions and

goals of human communication, not only by means of specific grammatical and lexical choices that speakers make, but also through their particular “compositional structure [and the fact that] each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances” (Bakhtin, 1986: 60). These types reflect specific conventions and sociohistorical elements or meanings characteristic of a given community and are enriched each time by interpersonal aspects (such as the typical concept of the addressee) and individual strategies employed by interlocutors.

Definitions of genre are usually based on the idea that particular discourse communities develop the ability to identify similarities in the texts (both written and oral) which they use regularly and for clearly defined purposes. The notion of discourse community, which shares a clearly definable discursive space (although by no means static or fixed – as membership of particular communities is always in a state of flux), seems both useful and necessary for better understanding “of the ways individuals acquire and deploy the specialized discourse competencies that allow them to legitimate their professional identities and to effectively participate as group members” (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002: 6). Consequently, the concept of discourse communities is at present seen as one of the main organizing principles in EAP and serves as a point of reference for explorations of genres or communicative conventions within different academic disciplines from linguistic and pedagogical perspectives (Hamp-Lyons, 2011: 94).

Broadly speaking, the repeated experience of participating in the activities of a given community allows its members to read, comprehend and reproduce genres (in writing or speaking) with a considerable degree of ease and gives them a sense of conventionality or even ownership of genres. As John Swales (1990: 58) claims

[a] genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. The rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of contents and style.

In the definitions of genre situated within the context of foreign language teaching, the process of constructing a genre in an ongoing interaction is closely related to its communicative goals and does not necessarily reflect the interlocutors’ commitment to generic norms or conventions. Moreover, such goals may become evident during the interaction and not at its beginning (McCarthy, 1998). According to Thornbury (2007: 121), the term genre refers to any potential kind

of communicative event, such as, for example, chat, conversation, presentation, discussion and interview or any other communicative situation, which is characterized by a clear and largely predictable structure and is situated within a particular sociocultural context. Derewianka (1990) asserts that the social goals and context of a text (written or spoken) in fact decide about its structure and the particular features of language in use which are mostly schematic and conventional. Hughes (2002) underlines the typicality of a given text structure and grammar, and Hyland (2007: 149) sees genres as abstract, socially recognized and accepted ways of using language in various communicative circumstances.

Thus, it can be observed that genres are usually defined with regard to social purposes of particular communicative situations. They integrate higher- and lower-order features (lexis and grammar tend to correspond to goals and context). However, typologies of genres vary according to the theoretical orientations behind them. One of the popular categorizations of genres, rooted in systemic functional linguistics (Derewianka, 1990), is based on the distinction between text prototypes and specific genres which are the combinations of different text types. Importantly, social functions of discourse are used here as the main point of reference and achieving certain social purposes is seen as the main aim of communication.

The classification comprises six prototype texts distinguished on the basis of their primary social purposes and representative genres, interpreted here as more specific classes of texts, written or spoken, which may contain the elements typical of different prototypes (Derewianka, 1990; Lin, 2006):

- narratives – telling a story,
- recounts – telling what happened,
- information reports – providing factual information,
- instructions – telling someone what to do,
- explanations – explaining how something happens,
- expository texts – presenting a viewpoint.

According to the above classification, some genres may be based on one text prototype (for example, recipes are in fact “instructions”), while others may include a number of text prototypes (for example, a sermon usually includes the elements of narrative or recount and explanation) (Lin, 2006).

A general typology which focuses on spoken genres was put forward by Carter and McCarthy (1997). However, the authors stress that genres should not be seen as stable or fixed formats but rather as dynamic and overlapping spoken events that realize complex functions and the individual, communicative goals of interlocutors, which frequently differ. The main generic forms in this typology are defined in the following way:

- narrative – reporting on events from the speaker’s everyday life with active participation of listeners,
- identifying – talking about oneself, presenting facts from one’s own biography, talking about work, hobbies, family, place of residence, etc.,
- language-in-action – speech that accompanies everyday activities (such as cooking, cleaning, packing),
- comment-elaboration – speakers express their opinions, comment on latest events, social, phenomena, actions performed by other people, etc.
- debate and argument – interlocutors take a position in a discussion or debate, present their arguments, justify their opinion,
- decision-making and negotiating – speakers intend to take a decision or negotiate to solve a current problem.

Importantly, as McCarthy (1998) claims, any theory or typology of spoken genres should take into account the specificity of spoken language (its context-variation, the issues of participant goals and relationships), which is best reflected in real data coming from different communicative settings. The relative stability of genres can also work as an effective tool in developing coherent and socially appropriate patterns of communicative behavior in foreign language learners. Unfortunately, as Nowicka and Wilczyńska (2011: 36) point out, such an approach to teaching communicative skills is very rare in Polish schools, and similarly in advanced university courses offered by language departments. Consequently, the practice of general reflection concerning the specific conditions and contexts of communicative events and actions is rather ignored (Nowicka & Wilczyńska, 2011: 37) and references to text types or genre typologies (potentially beneficial from the perspective of developing learners’ communicative competence) are unsystematic. This observation becomes even more meaningful in the light of Bhatia’s (2002: 4) view, according to which analyzing genres (relevant to the needs of a given language classroom) offers numerous and unquestionable benefits to the learners. In general, generic descriptions may be used as models and input for students to analyze, explore, exploit and experience language in specific contexts.

The most popular arguments against using genre-based approaches in the language classroom concern the possibility of encouraging simple reproductions of discourse forms, promoting a simplified, static view of the world (or discourse), and discouraging creativity or active transfer of skills among learners (Bhatia, 2002).

To sum up this discussion, it can be claimed that the increasing interest in the concept of genre and the forms of its application to language teaching seems to be focused mainly on (or, in other words, even visibly confined to) the



skill of writing. Little is known about the potential effectiveness of employing genre-based instruction in developing learners' speaking abilities, including the aspects of the skill which seem of particular importance to EAP learners. To fill this gap, the next section of the article concentrates on two spoken academic genres, namely discussion and debate, and examines recommended procedures and potential problems which may appear while incorporating these text formats into a practical EAP course.

#### **4. The application of a genre-based approach to teaching speaking skills within an EAP framework – discussion and debate as academic genres**

Introducing academic texts (both spoken and written) which are typically taught in EAP higher education courses requires detailed and analytic consideration of the variables of context, purpose and audience. In fact, academic genres can be very challenging for students as they contain specific language patterns, which are frequently abstract, technical or metaphorical, and more complex clause structures or less concrete lexis (Correa & Echeverri, 2017) than genres of everyday communication. They are often identified by their use of generalized or specific participants, rigid or rather flexible structure, and more or less topic-specific vocabulary. The configuration of a particular text has to be determined by its author, but it requires a number of genre-specific features which make a given text acceptable within the discourse community for which and/or in which it was created to be taken into account. Therefore, it is assumed that academic genres should be introduced explicitly and practised extensively before students are given a chance to come up with their own examples of particular genres. One of the most popular schemas employed in the teaching of EAP writing is the so called teaching-learning cycle which can be best described as “an interactive process of contextualization, analysis, discussion, and joint negotiation of texts” (Hyland, 2002: 126). The stages of the process, which can be effectively modified and adopted for teaching spoken genres, involve:

- preparation – comprises negotiating the content of teaching and learning and introducing students to general features of the chosen genre (relevant vocabulary and grammatical patterns),
- modelling – sample texts (written or oral) are used to illustrate the schematic structure and purposes of the genre and specific linguistic features are examined in relation to their functions in the text,
- joint construction – students construct similar texts in groups or with the whole class (this may involve conducting earlier research on the relevant topic in order to develop the knowledge of the field),

- independent construction – learners construct their own texts individually, in pairs or small groups (depending on the specific nature of the genre in question) with appropriate support from the teacher (or other students) when needed.

At each stage collaboration between students and the teacher is an essential part of the process – it allows for scaffolding which supports the learners’ progress and helps them move through the consecutive stages of the cycle in accordance with the intended sequence of actions.

One of the most popular spoken genres – discussion (and its more elaborate form – debate) can serve as an interesting example and illustrate the problems, challenges and potential benefits connected with the application of a seemingly common academic genre in the EAP classroom. Discussion is generally defined as “a form verbal interaction between two or more people with the purpose of looking at a certain issue from different points of view or aspects” (Dakowska, 2005: 245). It requires students to have sufficient ability to understand input which may be difficult in terms of language and content or unanticipated, to negotiate output, to express their opinions and to evaluate the opinions of other participants in ongoing, face-to-face interaction. Debates usually have a more formal character than discussions and they involve “two opposing points of view, with points of view ascribed to members of each debating team, but also with points being developed in answer to the opponents as they emerge during the activity” (Dakowska, 2005: 246).

Stewart (2003: 10) makes a distinction between different debate formats. An academic or educational debate style (used for the purpose of educational training in argumentation skills) differs considerably from an applied or real-world debating style (used for decision-making in the real world), particularly with regard to the level of formality, structure of the event and the type of language used. Irrespective of the debating style, the terms used to refer to particular stages and elements of debate are defined in the following way (Stewart, 2003: 10):

Debate term	Definition
Affirmative team	➤ the side that supports the resolution in a debate
Argument	➤ a claim supported by evidence
Cross-examination	➤ the questioning period in a debate
Debate format	➤ a type of debate with particular goals, rules and practices,
Negative team	➤ the team that rejects or opposes the resolution in a debate
Opening statement	➤ the opening speech in a debate
Position	➤ a stand on an issue that a debater supports
Rebuttal	➤ a response to an opponent’s arguments
Resolution	➤ the topic of a debate that the affirmative team supports and the negative one rejects

Table 1: Definitions of debate terms (Stewart, 2003: 10).

Both discussions and debates in the context of foreign language learning are student-centered, fluency-based activities which are believed to stimulate and develop critical thinking skills and require them to be made use of in real time during unrehearsed verbal exchanges. Critical thinking abilities can be presented by referring to a number of dispositions (Ennis, 1996: 171) essential to successful accomplishment of any discussion-oriented activity. They include the ability to:

- seek alternatives, explanations, hypotheses and conclusions,
- endorse a position to an extent that seems justified by the available information,
- be open and well-informed,
- take into consideration viewpoints different from or opposed to your own.

However, students' critical thinking potential may well be taken advantage of only if the activity is planned in accordance with certain rules. Dakowska (2005: 245) enumerates the following guidelines for a successful discussion:

- the topic is controversial enough to ensure that it can be looked at from different angles,
- students have some influence on the choice of topic – as a result, they are more likely to prepare and participate in the activity,
- they must be interested in the topic and knowledgeable enough to discuss it – they need access to relevant sources of knowledge and topic-specific information to construct their arguments,
- students need some idea of the events to come - they may benefit from task sequencing at the stage of preparation and they must be aware of the typical features of the discussion genre.

Similar rules should be taken into account while designing a debate in an EAP classroom. In fact, debates are more often associated with academic settings and are considered to be more formal and demanding in practical implementation, both from the perspective of students and their teachers.

As a formal academic genre, debate can be described in terms of a procedure consisting of a number of stages. Stewart (2003: 15) suggests the following debate format, which is intended to support learners in the activity and motivate them to practise both the language and critical thinking skills.

1. opening statement – two opposing teams (affirmative and negative) present their general introductions,
2. major arguments are stated by each of the parties – after each argument the opposing team asks questions or gives rebuttal,
3. question preview – each team asks two initial questions (comprehension questions from the opposing team can be asked afterwards),

4. cross-examination – teams answer the questions (each team can challenge with follow-up questions),
5. affirmative and negative teams present their closing statements.

The amount of time needed for each part of the debate depends on the number of team members and their verbal activity during the task. Undoubtedly, balanced contributions from different team members are recommended but in reality they are not easy to elicit.

Importantly, an academic debate is a genre that requires the ability to extensively use so-called academic language. Chamot and O'Malley (1994) define it as the kind of language used for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge or skills and illustrate by indicating several functions that language is used for in academic settings (explaining, justifying, debating, classifying, proving, persuading, evaluating, etc.). All kinds of debate-related activities involve some of these skills, as the format centers on some sort of controversy or the opposition of viewpoints. Debates provide language teachers "with a solid vehicle for integrated instruction" (Stewart, 2003: 10), promote meaningful engagement of learners in a task and authentic communication in the classroom. It is not a random discussion of a particular topic but a communicative situation which provokes students to think critically and speak in an organized, argumentative manner.

Preparing and conducting a debate is believed to foster the development of academic skills in language students. The stages of a typical language classroom debate may be connected with practising the following academic skills (Stewart, 2003: 12):

Tasks	Academic skills
Researching a topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reading (scanning, skimming, close reading)</li> <li>• writing (note taking)</li> </ul>
Organizing information (selecting major arguments in teams, planning opening and closing statements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reading (close reading)</li> <li>• speaking (summarizing information, discussing)</li> <li>• listening (comprehending short oral reports)</li> <li>• writing (note taking, summarizing)</li> <li>• critical thinking (categorizing information, evaluating information, synthesizing information)</li> <li>• group work (sharing information, planning)</li> </ul>
Writing a short comparative essay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• writing (essay writing, note taking, paraphrasing, summarizing)</li> <li>• critical thinking (contrasting main ideas)</li> </ul>
Making an oral presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• speaking (presenting, stating arguments, clarifying, posing and responding to questions)</li> <li>• listening (comprehending oral presentations, discussions, questions and responses)</li> <li>• writing (note taking, editing)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• critical thinking (evaluating presentations, questions and responses)</li> <li>• group work (evaluating, planning)</li> </ul>
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Table 2: Debate format in language pedagogy (Stewart, 2003: 12).

## 5. Concluding remarks – problems and solutions

Discussions and debates, like most speaking activities, are likely to cause learner anxiety which, on one hand, results from the unpredictable nature of ongoing, real-time communication, and on the other is connected with the character and specific structure of the expected output. Other problems typically encountered during classroom discussions or debates are related to:

- unequal participation of learners (which can have different sources),
- difficulties connected with the topic, which might be too intellectually demanding or may require specialist knowledge,
- specialized (or very specific) discourse needed for discussing a particular topic,
- insufficient background knowledge and/or lack of practice in the discussion genre and its specific elements (grammar, lexis, phraseology, turn-taking, opening and closing remarks, formulaic language, ways of addressing the audience, etc.),
- chaotic or not sufficiently developed task model, without clearly defined objectives, criteria of success or forms of assessment.

To sum up, it has to be stressed that good task design and clear structure of the activity, together with careful topic- and genre-specific preparation on the part of students and teachers can facilitate the implementation of the format, both in a general EFL class and during an EAP course (either in the EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes) or ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) format). However, language provision – in order to be effective – should take into account the disciplinary variation in language use since “all academic English is necessarily contextualized – as indeed is all language – even if there may be certain features that are widely generalizable across disciplines” (Murray, 2016: 440).

In the context of EAP teaching, a discussion or debate task is probably seen as a more formal or structured and knowledge-based activity than in less specific educational settings which aim mainly at developing students’ general proficiency in the target language. Explicit scaffolding of skills and task components is likely to increase learners’ confidence and their chances for a successful and effective task compliance. However, the extent of this explicitness should always be tailored to the possibilities and needs of a particular group of learners. Similarly, the same attitude seems to be the best option while deciding

on the proper balance between the amount of structured, genre-specific output and genuine language production expected and elicited from students.

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