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Teaching academic English in higher education: strategies and challenges

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This narrative review explores the strategies and challenges associated with teaching Academic English (EAP) in higher education, summarizing recent research findings and practical evidence. With the expansion of global academia, proficiency in academic English has become vital for students and institutions. The review examines learner-centered, multimodal, and technology-driven instructional strategies, such as virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), that support effective language acquisition. It also discusses persistent challenges, including varying student proficiency, insufficient teacher training, and difficulties in technology implementation, highlighting their impact on teaching outcomes. The issue of biases toward non-native English teachers is also examined. Empirical studies reveal successful approaches such as blended learning and structured teacher development programs. Recommendations emphasize institutional commitment, targeted professional development, and strategic technology use. Suggestions for future research include deeper investigation into critical thinking, digital literacy, intercultural competence, and sustainable EAP program effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

academic English, English for academic purposes (EAP), higher education, teaching strategies, teaching challenges, technology integration, narrative review

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of the review

With the rapid growth of higher education opportunities around the world, it has become increasingly clear that English proficiency is a cornerstone of success both in the university and in the workplace. In a wide range of fields, the English language has defaulted as the language of dissemination for sharing research results, international cooperation, and inclusion in global academic communities (Gurney, 2016; Klímová, 2014; Naka and Spahija, 2022; Wong and Wong, 2018). Hence, a growing number of students and academics whose first language is not English need specific training to acquire their English for Academic Purposes (EAP) competencies. EAP is designed to help students meet the academic language demands of higher education, including skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking within an academic context (Sarkar, 2019), and it is grounded in the fields of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), applied linguistics, and writing studies, focusing on academic discourse and communication (Charles, 2012; Hamp-Lyons, 2011). EAP classes teach learners the language skills and communicative strategies needed for effective participation in academia. Courses like these maintain the complexity of academic discourse in terms of field-specific vocabulary, domain-specific conventions and rhetorical patterns (Yunita and Pratiwi, 2017).

In that context, these skills help students better understand references, and materials that are often comprehensible to them only in English (Tuomaite and Zajankauskaite, 2017), expanding

students' access to the most up to date research findings, thus improving their standing in an increasingly global labor market. Besides preparing students for the linguistic demands, EAP also promotes intercultural awareness in university (Klímová, 2014; Norris and Xi, 2021). By developing intercultural awareness, learners can acquire a better understanding of the varied and culturally constructed communication styles associated with different academic communities. This awareness often leads to greater self-confidence and engagement in academic debates as well as collaborative projects (Li, 2023). It also encourages multidisciplinary thinking and the ability to draw knowledge from various fields, which is in accordance with the broader goals of preparing undergraduates who can thrive in globalized contexts.

1.2 Significance of the review

As it substantially contributes to both individual and institutional development, EAP represents an increasingly important aspect of higher education (Naka and Spahija, 2022). At the scholar level, the mastery of academic English has been shown to be positively associated with improved course comprehension and high grades in academic performances. Students with stronger academic English skills are more likely to participate in intellectual exchanges that transcend geographical boundaries, developing a global perspective that is essential to 21st century professions. On the institutional level, this also improves the university's international status as the faculty will be trained in English (Wong and Wong, 2018). This supports the notion of EAP as something that is not only for students but also for academic staff, enabling them to obtain research grants, engage in transnational projects and become part of international academic networks (Naka and Spahija, 2022). EAP programs usually focus on reading, writing, listening and speaking skills but are increasingly giving attention to the skills like digital literacy and critical thinking. This comprehensive focus is aligned with the broader trend of producing graduates who are both academically competent and professionally competitive in a global workforce (Klímová, 2014). The greater impact is achieved when such programs are tailored to various academic disciplines, as it provides students with discipline-specific language skills necessary for engaging with specialized communities of practice.

1.3 Purpose of the review

The purpose of this review is to synthesize studies concerning the strategies and challenges involved in teaching academic English in higher education and to highlight empirical evidence of effective teaching practices. Thus, this article directly addresses the following two review questions:

1. What are the strategies and challenges for teaching Academic English?
2. What empirical evidence exists concerning teaching practices in Academic English?

The results of the review aim to provide educators, policymakers, and researchers with information about what the current effective practices in EAP instruction are, and what has yet to be addressed.

This narrative review specifically targets university students in general, synthesizes research on instructional strategies and common challenges within EAP, providing practical implications for educators and policymakers. Following this introduction, the review outlines the methodological approach, discusses effective strategies and prevalent challenges, presents empirical findings, and concludes by highlighting limitations and suggesting avenues for future research.

2 Methodology

A narrative review approach was chosen to provide a qualitative synthesis of existing literature. Major databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC were searched using key terms, including "Academic English," "EAP teaching strategies," "technology integration," and "higher education." Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed articles, theoretical or empirical research studies, and works specifically relevant to EAP within higher education. Thematic analysis was utilized to categorize findings into instructional strategies, challenges, and empirical outcomes.

3 Strategies for teaching academic English

3.1 Multimodal approaches and learner-centered teaching

The field of EAP is dynamic and continues to evolve to serve the increasingly specialized and career-focused needs of non-native English speakers in higher education contexts (Çelik et al., 2018). In numerous institutions, the focus on proficiency in academic English has increased, especially due to more high-stakes language proficiency examinations necessary for college admission (Liu et al., 2023). EAP is provided to a diverse demographic, from undergraduates to post-graduate researchers, so strategies should consider differences in language ability, academic readiness, and disciplinary needs. An important trend in EAP teaching is aligned with the shift towards multimodal communication and integrated skills assessment (Khabbazzbashi et al., 2023). Learners consume information in various formats, such as videos, podcasts, infographics, and webinars, and are expected to contribute to conversations on different platforms. Many EAP instructors are incorporating activities that combine reading, writing, listening, and speaking, all within a single learning project, reflecting the authentic academic work students face in the real world. For example, a project could contain reading research papers, discussing them in an asynchronous discussion board, giving a verbal presentation, and writing up a summary of the main discussion points and a critique for submission. Referring to this holistic approach, which promotes language transfer across academic tasks, allows for students in this field to automatically transfer it into practice.

Learner-centeredness has become a cornerstone in the move towards successful EAP instruction (Tianfu and Hongyuan, 2021). Grammar drills and rote memorization are increasingly staged within pedagogical approaches that push students to engage actively as an alternative to teacher-centric models. Students take responsibility for their own learning in learner-centered classrooms, participating in peer review, group discussions and project-based learning. This

promotes independence, nurtures analytical thinking, and prepares them for flexible communication in the real world. Experiential learning methods (e.g., games and nontraditional approaches such as role-playing simulations) is an example of the involvement of learners with the language in an active as well as engaging manner. Alongside learner-centered instructional approaches, explicit teaching of academic language has also been found effective (Bowers et al., 2010). Academic English is more complicated, more focused, and typically has its own specialized words than English spoken in regular life. Academic language and discourse conventions, including rigorously linking verbal and conceptual ideas through key vocabulary and argumentation phrases, explaining structure in the text, mentioning, orientating and referring are valuable. Teachers might guide students to read for rhetorical moves in academic articles and then write for those moves in their own texts. This kind of approach is also what builds higher literacy skills required for graduate education.

3.2 Leveraging technology

Technology in EAP instruction has become a tool to scaffold language skills, provide feedback, and foster collaborative learning environments (Leong et al., 2024). Technologies vary from simple tools including web-based editing platforms to more complex systems, such as virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) applications (Guanuche et al., 2024; Hatmanto and Sari, 2023; Marjanovikj-Apostolovski, 2024). For example, students who have access to Microsoft Office 365, can work together in real-time, providing peer review comments and suggestions for grammar, vocabulary and content improvement. These technology tools can encourage learner autonomy by giving students an opportunity to record their revisions and reflections on their writing processes. Additionally, smartphones and tablets allow learning to go beyond the classroom. For example, students can use reading apps to practice reading comprehension skills, communication apps for speaking and pronunciation practice, and social media platforms to engage in extensive reading and authentic interactions (JoDee, 2015). Technology tools, such as smart boards, projectors, and digital books, can accommodate different learning styles and promote access and engagement (Nasim et al., 2022).

The latest developments in AI such as ChatGPT, can produce natural human language (Hatmanto and Sari, 2023). For EAP, these technologies can assist conversation partners for speaking practice, grammar checkers with written tasks, or feedback generators for content development. Incorporating AI tools within communicative and task-based frameworks promotes a sense of student independence, personal communication, in-depth engagement, and illustrated authentic use of the language (Marjanovikj-Apostolovski, 2024). Nevertheless, educators should be mindful of possible drawbacks like excessive dependence on AI-composed text or diminishing engagement among students and their colleagues. These concerns can and should be addressed through thoughtful instructional design and ongoing teacher mediation.

Virtual reality is an immersive environment for practicing language, where students can step into three-dimensional simulations of academic or professional contexts (Guanuche et al., 2024). Such simulated environments allow learners to actively participate in simulated, scenario-based tasks including conference presentations, lab demonstrations or group discussions. VR activities can help relieve

classroom anxiety by giving students a controlled, yet realistic environment in which they can practice their communication skills. Therefore, strategies for teaching academic English in higher education increasingly rely on learner-centered models, the direct instruction of specialized language forms, and the integration of advanced technological tools. This shift toward diversified and interactive teaching methodologies addresses the ever-evolving communicative demands of globalized academia. Educators play a crucial role in balancing these methods to ensure that students develop robust and transferable academic English competencies.

4 Challenges in teaching academic English

4.1 Diverse student proficiency levels and needs analysis of curriculum design

Despite the various pedagogical innovations developed to teach academic English, instructors and institutions encounter manifold obstacles that hinder the efficiency of the EAP programs. These struggles include diversity in student language proficiency, as well as the lack of teacher training and insufficient institutional support. A fundamental challenge posed by students entering higher education is their wide measured range of backgrounds in the English language. Wang (2022) states that variations in instructional practices at the secondary school level contribute to marked differences in English skills. For example, some students may already have learned English extensively and gained high levels of literacy, while others may only have had exposure to more basic grammar and vocabulary.

To meet such a broad range of ability levels usually means differentiated teaching and resources. This level of customization is difficult to implement consistently due to time constraints, large class sizes, or institutional policies. In seeing EAP teaching as an integrated field, plenty of literature has proposed ways to educate students' language learning objectives, their disciplinary requirements (including language needs) and specific institutional contexts. Yet, conducting comprehensive needs analyses necessitates skills, resources, and time, which are not always readily accessible. Similarly, designing a syllabus that aligns with these needs poses another challenge: teaching materials must be relevant, engaging, and appropriately challenging, yet institutions often adopt standardized curricula that lack contextual specificity. Balancing general English proficiency requirements with discipline-specific content can also prove difficult, particularly in programs where students come from multiple academic majors.

4.2 Lack of qualified instructors and insufficient teacher training and support

Shortages of linguistically qualified teachers continue to pose a significant problem in many higher education contexts, particularly in regions that have recently expanded their English-Medium Instruction offerings (Galloway and Ruegg, 2022). The shortage of EAP instructors may result in heavier workloads for existing colleagues, which may ultimately affect the quality of teaching or reduce the time allocated to curriculum development and individualized student support. Even in

largely non-English-speaking locations, hiring native or nearly native speakers of English as teaching staff is often costly and complex. In institutions adopting English-Medium Instruction (EMI), content specialists are often required to teach their subjects in English with limited preparation (Sánchez-Pérez, 2020). These faculty may have deep disciplinary expertise but little formal training in language pedagogy, causing their language instruction to be less than ideal. The same gap holds for those EAP teachers who may be well-versed in language teaching methods but with little or no discipline-specific knowledge. These issues can be also considered as a demand for pre-service and in-service training programs, on both linguistic and disciplinary dimension (Kir and Akyüz, 2019). Mentoring and support structures, such as professional learning communities, are also essential for guaranteeing ongoing teacher growth.

4.3 Prejudice against non-native English-speaking teachers and technology integration barriers

Another challenge is the prejudice some students and administrators have against non-native English teachers (Shin, 2008). For these teachers, there may be a pressure to demonstrate linguistic competence and cultural familiarity with Anglophone norms. It can undermine confidence, which impacts a teacher's ability to make effective instructional choices. It highlights the need for a culture shift that values the merits of diverse instructional approaches and the multilingual experiences that non-native English teachers contribute to the classroom. Although the technological tools can assist EAP instruction, their incorporation is frequently marred by logistical challenges. Many institutions find it challenging to obtain digital hardware, such as smart boards, virtual reality equipment, due to limited financial resources (Lawrence et al., 2020; Önal and Kurt, 2020). Even when technology is available, teachers may not possess the pedagogy or confidence to embed these tools effectively. Hence, quality professional development programs addressing digital competence are diverse, and sustainable accompaniment could not be guaranteed (Liu and Hai, 2019; Nurhidayat et al., 2024). This means the power of technology to boost student engagement and skill levels is often underutilized.

5 Empirical evidence of teaching practices

Recent empirical studies provide some guidance on how instructors and institutions can effectively handle the above challenges. Research suggests that carefully designed teacher training programs, blended learning models and strategic uses of technology can improve both language proficiency and academic skills. Teacher training is often seen to be a key factor leading to success in EAP (Sánchez-Pérez, 2020). Research shows repeatedly that when higher education institutions develop and invest in specialized professional development, discipline-focused instructors are better prepared to include language objectives in their lessons. Language pedagogy and cultural competency training, along with scaffolding complex academic task strategies, equip lecturers to present content with more efficacy. The training initiatives also contribute to the university's international profile, guaranteeing

instruction of the highest standard for a global student cohort. Research by Mede et al. (2020) is based on the idea that technology integration in EAP programs can foster critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. When teachers incorporate technology as an instructional tool, including discussion boards, digital simulations, and content-specific applications, students have increased opportunities to practice language skills in authentic contexts. Research also finds that technology enables collaborative learning, as students interact with their over geographic and linguistic barriers, using technology to increase both their language ability and their intercultural skills.

One of the things emphasized by the empirical literature is that blended learning approaches work very well for teaching English at the higher education level. Tretyakova et al. (2023) reported that a hybrid format, where face-to-face instruction and online modules were combined, resulted in markedly better scores on both written and oral assignments. Blended learning models also enable more flexible pacing, so that advanced learners can move quickly through material without sacrificing additional support for a learner who needs that support. The asynchronous components provide space for reflection and learning, while the synchronous sessions can be targeted for interactive communicative activity. Yet another benefit reported in an empirical research is the development of academic literacy, which encompasses not only language skills but also the ability to think critically, synthesize, and collaboratively solve problems. EAP programs can lead the transformation of learners through an integrated approach to content knowledge, language pedagogies, and the cultivation of learners' higher-order thinking skills. When instructional materials focused on real-world tasks, like writing research proposals, delivering conference presentations, and analyzing case studies, students can develop more sophisticated knowledge, both of disciplinary content and of the conventions of academic discourse.

These empirical studies highlight the value of needs analysis reflected in curriculum design. EAP courses tend to be effective when incorporate students feedback, input from the discipline, and iterative revision based on assessment outcomes. Studies have shown that materials used for teaching should be up-to-date, relevant to learners and interactive. Programs that devote time to explicit skill-building, like reading comprehension, academic writing and public speaking, are much more likely to yield measurable improvements in student performance. Hence, these empirical evidence supports a multifaceted approach to teaching Academic English, integrated technology, blended learning, and academic focused literacy.

6 Conclusion and discussion

6.1 Significance and limitations

This narrative review has well captured the major instructional strategies and challenges in the realm of EAP in higher education, along with substantial empirical evidence that advocates multimodal, learner-centered and technology-integrated practices. Strategic responses are necessary to address significant barriers such as diverse students' proficiency levels, insufficient teacher training, and systemic technological issues. The growth in globalization has spurred a greater focus on EAP programs that better prepare non-native speakers to thrive in an academic international community. The literature addresses

learning strategies to reduce this diversity gap, namely through learner-centered instruction, instruction on academic language and through technological means such as AI and VR. Yet, there are still significant challenges to overcome, varying levels of student proficiency, lack of teacher training, and systemic obstacles to technology integration. The problems will be exacerbated by a widespread lack of qualified instructors and prejudice against teachers whose first language was not English. There is empirical evidence pointing to effective practices, most notably in the case of blended learning models, and well-organized professional development schemes. Future studies would examine ongoing effects of blended learning, successful teacher training strategies, and cultural elements affecting EAP instruction. Investigations on the comparative use of new technological tools, including AI and VR, could add to the depth of instructional practices.

6.2 Implications

Institutions should prioritize teacher training, infrastructure, and resources to effectively implement EAP programs. Institutional policies should be consistent with effective practices in EAP instruction, and this will require the cooperation of language centers, departments and IT services. Even so, curriculum designers need to perform rigorous needs analyses and use authentic, discipline-specific materials in order to keep up with the rapid changes in global academia. Educators require a systematic approach to developing their technology proficiencies and should be incentivized to use learner-focused, multimodal, and interactive teaching methodologies. Active engagement and self-directed learning are crucial. Competencies that are essential for academic success and career development can be developed through exposure to different types of multimedia content and experiential learning activities. Thus, scholarly work regarding EAP should go beyond the study of linguistic outcomes to consider the psychosocial and cross-cultural dimensions of learning language. Research on how identity, motivation, and cultural expectations shape language learning can lead to more integrated program designs.

6.3 Recommendations

Teacher training should go beyond imparting linguistic or pedagogical knowledge in isolation. These programs sensitize teachers to the complexities of EAP teaching and prepare them to be more effective in their roles through integration of language teaching strategies, area expertise, and digital competencies. Ongoing mentorship, peer observation and collaborative lesson planning will add to the quality of teaching. Institutions should also commit to performing a needs analysis that explores the levels of experience of the student body, the requirements of the discourse of their discipline, and the requirements of the institution. This insight should drive the design of a curriculum where instructional materials and learning outcomes are localized, relevant, and map with immediacy and for the future needs of the learner. Technology integration is promising, but it requires intelligent implementation and ongoing support. Educational leaders need to secure reliable digital infrastructure in schools and provide professional development in the implementation of instructional

technology, while educators can align the choice of digital tools with learning objectives to optimize student engagement and skill acquisition.

Universities can adopt a proactive approach to promoting an inclusive attitude toward clear and competent English in their teaching staff as a way to counter biases against non-native English teachers through policy guidelines, awareness-raising workshops and open dialogues. Acknowledging the variety of linguistic resources that multilingual teachers bring to the classroom creates a collective, equitable learning space. Longitudinal studies that follow students' progress throughout their course of study and into professional careers would expand the field of EAP research. Investigations may center around effective-practice integration of critical thinking, digital literacies and intercultural communication within EAP curricula. These philosophical and ethical considerations can be further expanded into comparative studies of emerging technologies, for instance, examining the effectiveness of VR simulations versus even writing assistants powered by AI and so on, leading to real-time actionable intelligence and optimizing the use of technology. Qualitative investigations into teacher perceptions and student experiences of non-native English teachers could also enhance the understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of EAP teaching and learning.

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