Designing English for Academic Purposes Courses for ESL Students
by James Phillips

University courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), are content-based ESL classes that prepare ELs to better use English in their academic majors and careers. Common fields served by EAP teaching include business and engineering (Knight, Lomperis, van Naerssen, & Westerfield, 2010). To develop an EAP course, it is helpful to follow several steps from the Best Practices for English for Occupational Purposes (EOP)—the other branch of ESP—including an instructional needs assessment, interviewing all stakeholders, creating a curriculum, choosing teaching materials, and evaluating the results of the teaching (Lomperis, 2014).

My first experience in teaching an EAP course occurred when my superiors asked me to start a Business English class in response to the popularity of that major among students in our program. The starting point in such a venture is always, "What will my students need to do with this text and how can I help them to do it?" (Gillett, 1996). To prepare for the course, I interviewed several business professors and administrators regarding their particular types of assignments, as well as the deficiencies they observed in their internationals; I spoke with graduates from our program who were taking business classes; and, on the first day of class, I asked my students what they hoped to gain from the course. All of these actions proved helpful in designing the course, selecting an EAP textbook, developing Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs—e.g., learning field-specific vocabulary in context, applying reading strategies to academic textbooks, using APA-style research methods, and giving presentations), and creating an avenue for students to meet their future professors by hosting a social event (Phillips, 2014).

Perhaps, though, the most important steps in creating an EAP are to identify the academic tasks that students will need to perform and then determine the language tasks that are necessary for them to succeed (M. van Naerssen, personal correspondence). For example, when I taught a mixed-level English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP—EAP's general English cousin) Reading/Writing class for engineering students, I blended standard SLOs with EAP assignments based on communications with the chair, a professor, and a student assistant in the Engineering Department. The resulting approach included showing my students writing samples of projects required in their future academic classes and having them write weekly summaries of and responses to student-selected online journal articles in their fields (differentiated based on their English levels), which they scaffolded into a culminating Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)-style report. The final presentations demonstrated one great advantage of EAP classes: The students were clearly energized to speak in English about topics in their fields.

My most recently assigned EAP course was created to support a class of music therapy (MT) students taking their first MT academic class. I started my preparations by communicating with some EAP experts and asking them about needs expressed by some previous MT students in our program, including a MT chair in China, as well as from the MT chair and MT professor on campus. The MT professor shared his syllabus, explained his assignments and assessments, and gave me access to his class on Blackboard. I decided to base my syllabus, schedule, and SLOs on the professor's course, and it became the most directly academically applied course I have taught: Our authentic reading sources were the students' MT reading assignments (mostly from their textbook) and our writing assignments consisted mainly of their weekly MT summary assignments and MT projects, which I divided and scaffolded for process writing assignments.

My aim was to help the students develop academic skills rather than just provide answers and "short cuts," and my most frequent role was to clarify the schedule and check for understanding of assignments, areas that ELs commonly understood. I regularly asked in class if our lessons were being helpful and I invariably was greeted by cheerful nods. At the beginning of the semester I also provided support by attending the MT class while sharing my notes with the students, a role I have developed previously (Phillips, 2013) and one that this class described as helping them feel "safe" and "relieved." Based on an anonymous Google Forms survey, students also felt all SLOs and class activities were very helpful; as one student replied, "[. . .] I can not image how awful if we don't have Prof James's help."

The MT professor was also a great support for both my students and me through many emails. He even joined us for a private MT drum circle improvisation session, which I filmed and shared at the NYS TESOL convention in November. Of course, while I supported the students by going to the MT class, I was also observing the professor. At his request, I was glad to provide a formal written evaluation for his file that highlighted his excellent teaching and empathy for our mutual students. Giving back to academic professors like this is a key way to build relationships for our program.

To conclude, I have found the EOP Best Practices of needs assessment, communication with all involved, instructional and materials design, and ongoing evaluation to be key in developing EAP courses. In addition, I have done some reading in the fields of my students—e.g., online magazines, journals, and books—to gain background knowledge and establish credibility with them. University ESL programs that seek to begin EAP classes would do well to follow these steps, based on the campus departments to which their ELs are drawn.

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A former high school social studies teacher, James Phillips, M.A., started teaching part time at the Haggerty English Language Program at SUNY New Paltz in the twentieth century, becoming full time in 2011. He enjoys learning in new fields and thanks his director and dean for supporting his EAP efforts. He welcomes your comments and questions at <phillipj@newpaltz.edu>