Situating an Academic English course for Spanish-speaking doctoral students “in the disciplines”

A small-scale feasibility study through ethnographic methods

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Project FFI2015-68638-R MINECO/FEDER, EU

Ecologies of genres and ecologies of languages: the dynamics of local, transnational and international scientific communication

XVII INTERNATIONAL AELFE CONFERENCE
28-29 June 2018, Universidad Camilo José Cela (Madrid, Spain)
INTRODUCTION
This presentation is a research-in-progress report

Main RQs:

• What does it mean to “situate” an Academic English course “in the disciplines”?

  UBC’S VANTAGE ONE PROGRAM

• Is our course (UZGS AE) situated “in the disciplines”?
  • https://escueladocotorado.unizar.es/es/tr-ingles

• Is it possible to establish viable correlations between the students’ disciplines and our findings in terms of needs and competencies? For example, are there disciplines that require more work, or special work, on oral skills?
Vantage College brings innovation to teaching international students

Come spring 2018, the first cohort of students in the Vantage One program will be graduating UBC. Vantage One is a unique first-year program in UBC’s Vantage College, which opened in 2014. The 11-month program is designed for international students with strong academics, but who do not quite meet the university’s English language admission standard. In addition to taking courses in one of four streams—Arts, Engineering, Management, or Science—students also take academic English courses to accelerate their language learning. But rather than general language instruction, Vantage One provides integrated, discipline-specific support. With a team of faculty and staff who embrace collaboration and innovation, Vantage College is reimagining language learning.

“A lot of other programs, nation-wide and around the world, offer general academic English, whereas ours is really situated in the disciplines,” explains Jennifer Walsh Marr, a lecturer in the Arts stream of the AEP. “We’re using authentic texts and authentic discourse to then talk about how language is used.”

Sandra Zappa-Hollman, director of the AEP, says “What we’re trying to do here is draw on the disciplinary content and the kinds of literacy skills and oral skills that the students will need to be able to deploy in the future, to create pedagogical strategies and materials that will prepare the students to be ready to meet those demands.”
• Teaching related to the requirements in terms of internationalization and communicative skills for Young Researchers established by “Real Decreto de Doctorado 99/2011” on the basis that English is the main language for international academic communication.

• As is the case with Vantage One, the Academic English course at the Graduate School of UZ has always been divided into "streams" (discipline-based teaching groups), but budget pressure may limit the number of groups.

• Will genres as well as literacy and oral skills then need to be trans-disciplinary?
INTRODUCTION

• UZGS AEC is a 30-hour “in-sessional course” (Woodrow 2018: 8).
• All the instructors are teachers from the English and German Studies Department of UZ.

• Class groups and students per academic year:
  • 2014-15: 8 / 120
    • Medicine, Biomedical Sciences, Law, Education, Economy, Arts & Humanities, Engineering & Architecture, Sciences (Natural & Formal SS)
  • 2015-16: 7 / 100
    • Medicine, Biomedical Sciences, Law, Social Sciences, Arts & Humanities, Engineering & Architecture, Sciences (Natural & Formal SS)
  • 2016-17: 7 / 85
  • 2017-18: 3 / 40
    • Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, Law & Social Sciences, Arts & Humanities, Engineering & Architecture, Sciences (Natural & Formal SS)

Can students without a group be relocated? – What criteria? – Disciplinary or personalized?
INTRODUCTION

- The organization or structure of the UZGS AEC is a clear illustration of the situation described by (among others):
  - Swales (2004: 142) (section E. Developing Classes for Doctoral Students in the chapter about *The Ph.D. dissertation*)
  - Charles & Pecorari (2016: 14)

  1) the relative merits of disciplinary-specific and division-specific classes AS OPPOSED TO those drawing participants from across the university [OR Pulverness’ ‘problem of specificity’]

  2) affected by “logistic difficulties”

  3) a matter of “convenience, and indeed cost-effectiveness”
Ramani et al. (1988). However, one unresolved question concerns the relative merits of disciplinary-specific and division-specific (e.g., all the social sciences) classes as opposed to those drawing participants from across the university. There are certainly firm advocates of the former, as might be expected, especially where some element of team teaching is involved. On the one hand, Sung, writing from the valuable viewpoint of a doctoral student herself, comments negatively on the latter:

In most institutions, both broad and narrow courses tend to face logistic difficulties, and it is always difficult to recruit participants at the right stage in their dissertation work. As Sunderland notes (personal communication), “Most come too early to really relate to and use what they learn.” Furthermore, Sung and others have pointed out that the pool of suitable and available EAP instructors may be limited, as they ideally need to be active researchers themselves and yet be able to devote adequate time to one-on-one consultancies. In the end, though, the question of disciplinary versus nondisciplinary courses may often be less a matter of pedagogic principle and more a matter of administrative opportunity. Indeed, the well-known EAP program at Birmingham in the
We have also drawn attention to EGAP and ESAP teaching, another issue that has been much debated. While it is certain that there are substantial differences among disciplines, does this necessarily mean that all teaching has to be ESAP teaching? In many teaching circumstances it is a matter of convenience, and indeed cost-effectiveness, to have student groups that are multidisciplinary. Moreover, working alongside students from different disciplines can make learners more aware of the specific characteristics of their own discipline. Again, this issue demands your attention as you make decisions on the type of teaching that is desirable and achievable within your own context.
METHODOLOGY
for data collection and triangulation

• A small-scale feasibility study:
  • QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE (i.e. MULTIFACTORIAL) as part of the
  • ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD (field-based, personalized, multifactorial, with long-term commitment, inductive, dialogic)

• 2 questionnaires (via Google Forms)
  • Doctoral students: 87 in 2016-17 / 50 in 2017-18 → Response rates: 52% / 46%
  • Instructors (the concept of ‘discipline’ and its pedagogical implications): 15 → Response rate: 66%

• Semi-structured interviews
  • Students: only 6 out of 68 respondents → Response rate: 8.8%
  • Instructors [to be carried out in the near future]
RESULTS from questionnaire for instructors

1. Are you familiar with the field of EAP? Are you an "EAP practitioner" (Charles / Pecorari 2016: 15)?
   - 80% Yes, in terms of both teaching and research
   - 20% Yes, but only in terms of teaching
   - 10% Yes, but only in terms of research

2. If you have ever been a teacher in the Academic English course at UZGS (UZGS AEC henceforth), what is the total number of academic years for which you have been a teacher in the course?
   - 1 year: 30%
   - 2 years: 30%
   - 3 years: 20%
   - 4 years: 10%
   - 5 or more years: 10%
   - I don't exactly remember but surely for more than one year: 10%
RESULTS from questionnaire for instructors

3. How would you describe the TYPE of concept 'discipline' is?

10 responses

4. According to Charles / Pecorari (2016: 8), "academic activities [...] such as reading textbooks, listening to lectures and writing [e.g] examination answers" take place "within specific subject areas or DISCIPLINES, such as chemical engineering and nursing". Would you also agree that 'chemical engineering' is a 'discipline'?  

10 responses
RESULTS from questionnaire for instructors

5. Corpora of (written/spoken) academic English tend to distinguish 'discipline' from 'academic division' (MiCASE), 'discipline group (area)' (BAWE) or 'disciplinary group' (BASE). Do you agree?

9 responses

- Yes: 77.8%
- No: 22.2%
RESULTS
from questionnaire for students

54 discipline names out of... 67 responses (students)
RESULTS from questionnaire for instructors

6. Would you agree with the following statement: ‘Disciplines can be used as organizational variables/factors’? (organizational [Longman dictionary] = relating to the way an organization and its activities are planned and arranged, here the AE course at UZGS)

10 responses

7. If you agree that disciplines can be used as organizational factors, what do you think they tend to/should determine PREDOMINANTLY in terms of course design?

10 responses
Discipline (academia)

"Academic discipline" redirects here. It is not to be confused with School discipline.

For a topical guide to this subject, see Outline of academic disciplines.

An academic discipline or academic field is a branch of knowledge. It incorporates expertise, people, projects, communities, challenges, studies, inquiry, and research areas that are strongly associated with a given scholastic subject area or college department. For example, the branches of science are commonly referred to as the scientific disciplines, e.g. physics, mathematics, and biology.

The nature of a discipline

The concept of an academic discipline is not altogether straightforward, in that, as is true of many concepts, it allows room for some uncertainties of application. There may be doubts, for example, whether statistics is now sufficiently separate from its parent discipline, mathematics, to constitute a discipline on its own. The answer will depend on the extent to which leading academic institutions recognize the hiving off in terms of their organizational structures (whether, that is, they number statistics among their fully-fledged departments), and also on the degree to which a freestanding international community has emerged, with its own professional associations and specialist journals. In some of the typical instances of dispute,
RESULTS
from interviews
with students

Triangulation of data shows that the solidity or straightforwardness of data in the questionnaire is just apparent. Interviews revealed that students actually hesitated and needed to ponder over the matter.

¿Porque tú eres de veterinaria? – Sí, Medicina y Sanidad Animal.
Entonces, tu disciplina, ¿cuál es? -- Eh… eh… ¿qué quieres decir con disciplina?
¿Has dudado? -- Veterinaria, la producción animal, lo entiendo como muy amplio. Mi disciplina es veterinaria porque yo soy veterinario.
¿Tienen que tener en cuenta la disciplina [los profesores de AE]? – Tienen que separar por ramas de conocimiento, porque se trata de aplicar los conocimientos lingüísticos a la literatura científica de cada rama. No tiene nada que ver un doctorado de historia con uno de veterinaria. La escritura científica es totalmente distinta.

BUT THEN a student from ‘Semántica y Lexicografía’ as discipline (Programa de doctorado en Lingüística española): “en las presentaciones en inglés [as practice in the AE course] lo importante no es el contenido sino el género y sus características (si una arquitecta habla bien inglés)”
RESULTS

from questionnaire for students

Escribe el nombre de la disciplina en que trabajas -- Y dentro de la disciplina indicada arriba, ¿qué es lo que estás investigando?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historia Antigua</th>
<th>Identidad y religión en la Antigua Grecia</th>
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<tr>
<td>Historia Antigua</td>
<td>Ritos de acceso al trono en el tardoimperio</td>
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<td>Historia Antigua</td>
<td>El motín en el ejército romano</td>
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<td>Historia Antigua</td>
<td>Magia y brujería</td>
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Cuando hablas en inglés en tu vida académica y/o profesional, ¿qué Finalmente, cuando en tu vida académica y/o profesional oyes a personas hablar en inglés?

a) No me preocupa que se parezca a la de los hablantes nativos, me) nunca he tenido ninguna sensación sobre esta cuestión o me he parado a pensar en ella.

b) No me basta con ser inteligible, con que el contenido o finalidad d e) se parecen a los hablantes nativos o que se esfuerzan por pronunciar como ellos.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>[Adoptar una postura o posición respecto a algo]</th>
<th>[Describir la metodología de forma clara]</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sí, a menudo</td>
<td>Sí, a veces</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sí, pero en muy pocas ocasiones</td>
<td>Sí, pero en muy pocas ocasiones</td>
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<tr>
<td>[Evaluar o valorar el trabajo de otros]</td>
<td>[Interactuar con hablantes nativos]</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Sí, pero en muy pocas ocasiones</td>
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RESULTS
from questionnaire for instructors

10. Could you please read the passage below (Pulverness 2002: 6) and evaluate its pertinence to the AE course at UZGS in terms of your own teaching experience in the course? [Do so by means of items 10.1 and 10.2 below]

4 responses

- Quite pertinent. ESAP is the adequate approach.
- For short courses the problem of specificity does not seem to be relevant for course design.
- The courses at UZGS are something in between EGAP and ESAP. Students are grouped according to discipline groups rather than disciplines.
- Very relevant. Sometimes there are more points of connection across disciplines even divisions (i.e. applied linguistics and geography) than within ‘closer’ disciplines (linguistics and literature).

EAP has been subdivided, by Blue (1993) and others, into two categories, producing two further acronyms: EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes) and ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes). But even if an EAP class consists of students from the same discipline, it is comparatively rare for all the students to be following exactly the same elective sub-disciplines. So the problem of specificity is one that to some extent confronts most EAP course designers and teachers. Research findings in this area are inconclusive – perhaps reassuringly so. In a survey paper
Results from questionnaire for instructors

11. Could you please read the passage below (Clapham 2001: 99-100) and evaluate its pertinence to the AE course at UZGS in terms of your own teaching experience in the course?

10 responses

Since it is rare for all students in a language class to be in the same sub-discipline, and since even when they are they will have different backgrounds and aims, it seems sensible for EAP teachers to teach what Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) call ‘common core’ EAP. Since it also seems to be the case that genre and rhetorical function have as important an effect as topic on comprehensibility, students should read and listen to a range of EAP academic texts, with teachers ensuring that these texts include the different rhetorical functions such as introductions, reports of research methods and discussions of results which are common across most disciplines. However, there may be certain rhetorical functions, such as descriptions of processes, which require knowledge of underlying concepts. If, during their language courses, students are to read texts containing such functions, they will have to tackle some EAP texts.
CONCLUSIONS

1) “Situated in the disciplines” is an idea, a slogan, almost a catchphrase

• Easier to apply to FOUNDATION COURSES such as Vantage One (= EAP + subject tuition)

• Less easy to apply to IN-SESSIONAL COURSES such as UZGS Academic English (only EAP)
CONCLUSIONS

• 2) There is no clear, straightforward, generalizable solution to the EGAP/ESAP dilemma – the concept of ‘discipline’ is hardly useful

  • relocation of students only through needs analysis and/or characteristics of doctoral programme (the case of Architecture at UZ) – personalized

  • ‘Academic divisions’ → students’ groupings
CONCLUSIONS

3) It is not possible to establish viable correlations between the students' 'disciplines' and our findings in terms of needs and competencies

- Insufficient number of responses
- Students’ responses to ‘what is your discipline?’ tend to refer to sub-disciplines – too many answers, an unmanageable criterion
- Study confirms situation described by Clapham (2001: 99-100)
Some references


Acknowledgements

We thank the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and the European Social Fund for their financial support to the project Ecologies of genres and ecologies of languages: the dynamics of local, transnational and international scientific communication (project code FFI2015-68638-R MINECO/FEDER, EU)

genresandlanguages.org