EMERGING ENVIRONMENTS OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING MATERIALS

Abstract

Commercial materials can offer many practical benefits to the EAP teacher. But how useful are EAP materials produced predominantly for western contexts to learners in Southeast Asia? This paper examines some limitations in commercial EAP materials. In particular, I will focus on socio-cultural bias present in these materials. I will do this in the context of three EAP environments, which I have distinguished. Each of these environments will be described and compared. I will end by proposing some possible solutions to help meet the needs of our EAP environments. Although examples will be drawn mainly from Southeast Asia, the discussion will be of interest to anyone involved in EAP in other Asian countries.

Introduction

This paper describes the limitations of commercial materials for the teaching and learning of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Southeast Asia and proposes ways by which we can better meet the needs of EAP students in our unique teaching and learning environments. The term ‘EAP’ is used here to refer to the learning of language and communication skills in order to meet the demands of academic tasks in tertiary level education. These include taking lecture notes, making oral presentations and participating in seminars, writing academic essays and reading long academic texts.

Publishers offer a wide selection of course books for the teaching of those skills I have just mentioned. Many of these course books have been used for a number of years and some are into their fourth or fifth reprints. This shows the demands there are for commercial EAP materials. Many EAP course administrators and teachers prefer to use these commercial
materials to producing their own materials. This should not come as a surprise since there are many advantages in using commercial course books. One common reason given is that there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Besides many of these commercial texts are high-quality work produced by professionals who have spent hundreds of hours writing and subsequently field testing these materials. Many of the course books available are also based on sound principles of language teaching and learning. In addition, commercially published materials are also undoubtedly more visually appealing to the students. Most importantly, using published materials saves time and energy, which could then be invested in activities like conferencing with students, and grading assignments and writing feedback.

While the use of commercial materials can bring many benefits, these materials have a number of limitations, particularly when used in the context of Southeast Asia. I will discuss these limitations in terms of two emerging EAP environments, of which Southeast Asia is an important part.

**Traditional and Emerging EAP Environments**

I have identified three main environments in which EAP teaching and learning take place. I shall refer to these as classic EAP, domestic EAP and new EAP.

**Classic EAP**

This is typically one in which students from non-anglophone countries go to anglophone countries to study at tertiary institutions. Countries in which the classic EAP situation exists are Britain, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. A large number of overseas students arrive in these countries each year to take up courses, such as engineering, law, business, accountancy, medicine, and computer science. They range from undergraduates to postgraduates at the MA and PhD level. Their subject lecturers are predominantly first language speakers of English. Most of these overseas students are taught EAP either in pre-sessional or in-sessional courses, or in both. Classic EAP has its beginnings in countries like Britain many decades ago. By now, it is a well-established discipline with a growing body of research, journals and a plethora of published learning materials.
Domestic EAP

This situation is one in which students in non-Anglophone countries receive a tertiary education in their own countries where courses are taught fully or partially in the English language. For most of these students English is a second or third language. In some cases, it is a foreign language. The subject lecturers consist of mainly speakers of English as a second language. In some situations there is also a sizeable proportion of western expatriate teachers.

We can further distinguish three learning contexts in domestic EAP:

English is used as a medium of instruction for all disciplines in universities and polytechnics. Some examples are Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

English is used as a medium of instruction for students in some courses. For example, courses that prepare undergraduates to become teachers of English in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei Darulsalam, and the People’s Republic of China. In some universities in Malaysia, science courses, such as engineering and medicine, are also taught in English, while all postgraduates can write their theses in English. (Asmah Haji Omar 1996)

English is used as a means of acquiring information and knowledge. Students receiving tertiary education in their national language often have to understand written, and to some extent, spoken materials produced in English. Some examples are Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. This need will perhaps extend increasingly to countries like Laos and Vietnam. An innovative step has recently been taken by Malaysia in allowing institutions to determine the amount and extent of English used in the various academic disciplines (Asmah Haji Omar 1996, Wong 1997). Thus EAP students will learn English not just for the purpose of understanding, but also as a means of production.

New EAP

This EAP environment is one in which students from non-anglophone countries go to other non-anglophone countries where English is a medium of instruction. Singapore is an example of this. It has for decades been receiving students from other Asian countries into different levels of university
education. Malaysia, with the setting up of more universities which use English as a medium of instruction will also be well-poised to become “a centre of learning not just for Malaysians but for the people of the Asian region as well” (Asmah Haji Omar 1996). It is also foreseeable that Hong Kong, with its socio-political changes, may become a popular choice for prospective tertiary level students from Mainland China. Students arriving in these countries will have varying proficiencies in English, but most will have studied English as a second or foreign language. Like students in domestic EAP, new EAP students will be taught mainly by academics who are second language speakers of English.

Domestic EAP and new EAP are not situations that have developed only recently in our region. These environments have, nevertheless, become more prominent because of changes in language policies and the increasing importance of some Southeast Asian countries as centres for learning in the region.

A Comparison of Three EAP Environments

The three EAP environments share some common ground. This is mainly in the area of academic systems, since many universities in Southeast Asia have modelled after western ones. In other words, we can expect to find similarities in the way courses are structured and in the mode of teaching. For example, many universities here have a system of lecture and tutorial/seminar. Another similarity is the presence of overseas students who have learnt English as a second or foreign language. In the case of classic EAP and new EAP, both groups of overseas students are also operating in socio-cultural contexts that may be very different from the ones they have come from.

One major difference between classic EAP and the other two EAP environments is in the composition of academic staff. Whereas university teachers for the various disciplines in classic EAP environments are mainly first language speakers of English, academic staff in domestic and new EAP universities consist predominantly of local lecturers who speak English as a second language. In addition, students in these countries may not always have to communicate with local students in English because they share a common language with the community at large, as is the case of students from China studying in Singapore.
Domestic EAP and new EAP, on the other hand, have more in common if considered within the larger socio-political scene. In spite of the great diversity in Asia in terms of race, religion and culture, Bray and Lee (1996) have identified three areas of commonalities: educational and colonial transitions, interrelationships with economic changes, international forces and the evolving role of the State. They stressed that these features will have significant effects on education as a whole. With Bray and Lee’s framework of commonalities, I would like to discuss particular implications for the teaching of EAP in this region, in particular the choice and use of learning materials.

1) Educational and colonial transitions

Countries that have gained their independence from colonial powers often take a long time to make a full transition into complete autonomy in every aspect of the word. Although many relics of the colonial past are slowly demolished during this transition, some things like education systems remain (Altbach and Kelly 1984). In the context of our discussion here, one such example is the way university courses are structured and taught, and the procedures by which students are assessed. The most common model for teaching is perceivably the lecture-followed-by-tutorial one. Another common feature is student seminars, particularly for postgraduate students, where readings or research done are presented. A popular form of university assessment is through written work, whether as a piece of assignment, timed-answers produced in cavernous exam halls, or theses of a several thousand words. The main goal of EAP teaching is therefore to help students develop skills to meet these academic demands. As Bray and Lee (1996) have noted, structures of education that originated from the West are not exclusive to countries with a colonial history, but this influence can also be found in other Asian countries not formally colonised.

As a result of the similarities in the structure of tertiary education between western and Asian universities, we find that a great deal of EAP materials based on British or American universities contexts find their way into Asian EAP classrooms. While the materials are generally of very high quality, there is inevitably a socio-cultural bias in them. We will return to this point in a later part of this paper.
2) \textit{Interrelationships of education with economic changes}

Bray and Lee (1996) noted that socio-political changes may cause economic changes which may in turn cause educational changes. One such change has been a further increase in the number of Asian students going overseas to study. UNESCO (1993, cited in Bray and Lee 1996) reported that between 1980+1990, there was a rise of about 10\% of Asian students studying in non-Asian institutions. The organisation also noted that for some East Asian countries, such as Japan and China, there was a significant increase in the number of students studying in both Asian and non-Asian institutions (UNESCO 1993, cited in Bray and Lee 1996). If this trend continues, and we may expect it to do so in the near future, we will see a rise in the number of foreign learners at tertiary institutions in those Southeast Asian countries that are developing an increasingly important role as regional centres for learning.

Another outcome of economic changes is the increase in the demand for English to be learnt as a language for academic and professional communication. As we are already seeing in a number of ESL countries, this demand is a direct result of economic forces as well as students’ perception of English as shaped by these forces (for the case of Malaysia, see for example, Rajah 1991, Zulkifli & Sharifah Zainab 1992). With this increase, we can also expect a dramatic increase in domestic EAP teaching activity. English departments that already have their hands full with teaching will find that they will be stretched even further.

From my observations, one of the most common problems that English departments in tertiary institutions face is the production of relevant and appropriate materials. The problem is usually not in a shortage of expertise, but rather a constraint of time. Departments often have to cope with the administration and teaching load that come with increased student intake. Sometimes there are also the added demands of changing policies that directly affect the curriculum and learning materials. Thus, if Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Singapore continue to attract foreign students to our institutions of higher learning, these constraints in terms of teaching and learning resources will become even more pronounced.

3) \textit{International forces and the changing role of the State}

The flow of ideas and expertise from one country to another is often viewed as desirable as it can promote better understanding across countries. In
addition, it introduces new perspectives and insights that may be refreshing or enriching to all parties involved. Some of the impetuses for this flow have been international aid (in cash and kind), overseas job opportunities, and students studying at foreign universities. This movement of ideas across national and regional boundaries has had a significant effect on the teaching of English.

Many EAP lecturers in Asian countries, for example, have themselves received their education in the west. This can have two effects on the EAP curriculum and materials. First of all, there may be a tendency for some teachers to introduce curricula developed in western contexts into local situations. Samuel (1996) has warned of the danger of this "relocation of curriculum ideas", which he termed "curriculum transfer". Secondly, there may also be a preference for learning materials produced by ELT professionals in a particular country. This could be due to a sense of loyalty to or identification with the speakers of English of the country in which the teacher is trained. The appointment of western expatriate EAP lecturers can have similar kinds of effect on the curriculum and materials.

To summarise, we can see that with the positive socio-economic developments in Southeast Asia, we can expect a further increase in the number of EAP students in certain countries in the region. This in turn will lead to further demands on the production of materials, particularly at the institutional level. One possible solution is to adopt materials that have been commercially produced by writers in the classic EAP environments. The problem with this, however, is the socio-cultural bias that we find in a lot of these materials. This is discussed in the next section.

Socio-cultural Bias in Classic EAP Course Books

There are at least three aspects of socio-cultural bias present in classic EAP materials: socio-cultural information, hidden assumptions about good communication skills and models of spoken English.

1) Socio-cultural information

Most if not all of the published EAP materials available are produced for students in classic EAP learning environments. These materials not only teach language and communication skills, but they also incorporate into the contents
(language input) information on the society in which the EAP student studies in. So for example, EAP materials produced in Britain for students studying in Britain would include topics that are part and parcel of British life. The same can be said of USA and other countries receiving foreign students. This feature of socio-cultural information is present in all language courses (Holly 1990, Valdes 1990). In EAP courses, this information can take the form of overt descriptions in reading and listening texts.

Cultural information in language input and learning tasks can be one useful way to initiate a foreign student into the new community he or she is in. The same benefit, however, cannot be claimed for domestic and new EAP students using these materials. While students may find information on trade unions in Britain, or the political parties of America informative, it is unrelated to their immediate world. It is useful to add that these course books also include topics of common interests, such as technology, race and leisure. Nevertheless, learners may still find some texts problematic. Firstly, the points of view and contexts of many of these articles are essentially Anglo-American. In addition, they may also assume a great deal of prior knowledge on the part of the listener or as pre-reading input given by the teacher. This kind of knowledge may not always be forthcoming in a domestic or new EAP context. Students can therefore end up handling learning tasks that are extremely demanding. Widdowson (1983) has noted, when a reader’s (and we may add listener) schematic knowledge is insufficient for interpreting and retaining new information, he or she will need to reappraise that knowledge. Following Widdowson, Valdes (1990) adds that such a mismatch often leads to confusion. An understanding of a message, Valdes stresses, can only come about if the reader (and we may add the listener) also understands the culture of the author.

2) **Hidden assumptions about good communication skills**

Another aspect of socio-cultural bias is the hidden assumptions about what constitute appropriate ways of communicating, as Lynch and Anderson (1991) have pointed out. They gave the example of what some writers believe constitute appropriate seminar skills, such as ‘good manners’ in interrupting and disagreeing. They noted that many of the underlying assumptions of material writers are suspect. We may also add the case of listening and note-taking. A random survey of listening courses shows that the writers assume that lectures and talks are delivered in a linear fashion, with an introduction, central points listed one after another and a conclusion. Further, it is generally
assumed that lecturers use discourse markers or phrases (Chaudron and Richard, 1986) to indicate the structure of their talk and alert their listeners when making transitions. We know for a fact that not all lecturers do this. Lynch (1994) has called for university teachers to receive training in delivering lectures. His proposal was made in the context of a western country. Can we expect even greater diversity in lecturing style among lecturers in domestic and new EAP situations, such as those in the universities in Southeast Asia? Experience seems to suggest that this is true. We may also extrapolate this from Wolvin and Coakely’s (1992:59-60) observations that there are differences in the way people from different cultures or philosophical orientations structure their message. In this case, the question we need to ask is how relevant are classic EAP listening and note-taking materials for preparing our EAP students to understand lectures by speakers from diverse cultures and discourse practices?

3) Models of spoken English

Another aspect of socio-cultural bias is one concerning the types of spoken English found in listening materials. As most published listening courses aim to prepare learners to understand common regional accents in an anglophone country, many have made a conscious effort to include speakers with these accents. Once again, this can be extremely useful for students in classic EAP environments, but it may turn out to be of little value and sometimes even a source of frustration for students who may never have to listen to a particular accent in their university. The demands of having to cope with these unfamiliar accents, coupled with an attempt at understanding the content of a talk, may detract some learners from the real objectives of a lesson.

Providing Students in Domestic and New EAP Environments with Learning Materials

Since most commercial materials are intended for use in the classic EAP environments, the materials typically address the needs of learners in these countries. Needless to say, the socio-cultural and political contexts of countries like Britain and the United States are very different from our region. In spite of this, commercial materials are extremely popular in our region for some of the reasons I mentioned at the beginning of my paper. For further discussions about this, see Richards (1993).
From my observation, teachers use these commercial course books in at least two ways. One is to adopt a course book, and with it the underlying theories of teaching and the way the content and learning tasks have been graded. A second way, and by far a more common one, is to adapt the materials to local conditions. An example of this is ‘home-based’ writing tasks based on readings in commercial textbooks (Wong 1997). Another way, which is less overt, is to devise learning tasks based on ideas gleaned from commercial materials. Yet another way is to provide class sets of various titles, so that teachers can select those units or topics that they feel will be useful to their students.

This use of commercial materials from classic EAP environments has no doubt benefited many EAP programmes in our region. Nevertheless, I believe we need to explore other long-term solutions in order to meet the needs of our own teaching and learning contexts. One possible solution is to assemble our own materials. In considering this, we will look at two potential ways.

1) Customise course books

This idea was piloted by Harvard University’s Programs of English as a Second Language in 1992 (Harvard University, 1992). The aim was to provide relevant and appropriate ‘authentic’ reading texts without infringing copyright laws. Articles came from a selected publisher’s catalogue as well as from Business Week and The New York Times. Customised texts also consisted of extracts from ESL course books like Mosaic (Price, 1995). Through customising course books teachers can select the materials they want, students get a collection of materials that is tailored to their specific need, and publishers and writers get paid. This is made possible by technology “for reproducing and storing text files digitally, binding finished products inexpensively, and keeping track of material and number of copies used for fair use purpose” (Harvard University, 1992).

The benefits of customising courses are clear. Course materials can be updated and revised regularly. It also saves precious time spent on looking for the right articles which is often further constrained by the legal implications of using some of them. With the rapid advancement in computer technology in our region, customised course books is definitely one prospect that we need to explore. Because of the scale of such a project, it is best explored at the institutional level where negotiations with publishers can be carried out.
2) Produce EAP courses commercially

To date, there have been very few EAP course books produced by Southeast Asian writers for the region. I will not attempt to explore the possible reasons here. Nevertheless, I believe that this is one avenue that we should definitely explore for reasons discussed earlier. There is certainly a need for high-quality, ready-to-use materials that are appropriate for the EAP environments in our region. Materials used at an institutional level are potential commercial materials. Many EAP course books produced in classic EAP situations began this way.

There are at least two other advantages for producing materials locally. One is face validity of the materials. This is particularly important for listening materials. Recordings of lectures that include varieties of English spoken in our region can make the whole listening experience more ‘real-world-like’.

The second advantage is that materials selected from local contexts will be useful in increasing students’ awareness of socio-cultural and political matters in the country they are studying in and the countries around it. Texts on general topics will also offer points of view of writers and thinkers in our region. This will provide learners with opportunities to develop broader perspectives about important issues rather than be restricted to Anglo-American points of view found in most texts produced in the classic EAP environment.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described what I perceived to be limitations of commercial EAP materials produced by and for traditional anglophone countries. By proposing that we assemble our own materials for the region, I am not saying that we should aim to completely abandon those materials produced in countries like Britain or the United States. On the contrary, I think some of these materials should continue to be used because many of them contain excellent learning tasks. What I am suggesting is that EAP learners in our region should be given equal opportunities to work with texts and models of spoken English that take cognizance of local socio-cultural and political situations. It is important to add that challenging learning tasks that can help learners develop language and communication skills for academic purposes must accompany these texts.
The opportunities for students to learn EAP skills through culturally relevant texts should be readily available. This can be achieved if materials can be assembled effectively. Two possible ways of doing this - customising texts and producing commercial courses - have been suggested. More importantly, we need to produce course books that are of a high quality and that can meet the unique needs of learners in our region where classic EAP course books fail to do. To this end, our region needs a great deal more research on EAP teaching and learning. One possible strand of research is ethnographic studies of academic cultures in our institutions of higher learning and comparisons of these cultures within the region and with those in western countries. This research can be broad-based, encompassing general areas of learning, or more focused in scope, such as dealing with individual types of academic tasks. We also need more information about the actual types of language and communication skills that our EAP students need to develop. This is to avoid mismatch of learning tasks and real world needs such as that reported by Williams (1988) in a classic EAP situation. Furthermore, we need to know about learners’ perceptions and concerns in learning English for academic purposes. In particular, we need to know about those issues that affect foreign students in our universities. In sum, we need to build up a knowledge base for different aspects of the teaching and learning of EAP in Southeast Asia. This type of information can offer important insights that can guide the assembling of relevant and appropriate learning materials for the emerging EAP environments in our region.

References


Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Second Regional Conference on English in Southeast Asia, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 22-23 May 1997.