



Study Abroad & EAP: An Interview with Olwyn Alexander

by Elaine C. Gilmour

Olwyn Alexander is a Teaching Fellow (what we would call a Professor in Japan) of English for Academic Purposes at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, supporting engineering, applied sciences, management, and translation students. She was born and brought up in New Zealand, but moved to the UK in 1978 and now regards Edinburgh as her home. She studied chemistry and physics as an undergraduate, and worked as an analytical chemist for 15 years before changing to her current career. Together with Sue Argent and Jenifer Spencer she wrote *EAP Essentials: A teacher's guide to principles and practice* (2008). With Sue Argent she has also authored two coursebooks, *Access EAP: Foundations* and *Frameworks* (2010, forthcoming). She is currently chair of the British Association for Lecturers of English for Academic Purposes, which since 2010 has become known simply as BALEAP. This interview was conducted in person and by email during the winter of 2012.

Many university language teachers in Europe are familiar with BALEAP, but not so many teachers in Asia seem to know about that organization. Could you explain something about the background of BALEAP, and what the main provisions of the organisation are?

BALEAP was established to support the professional development of EAP teachers, mainly in the UK, but increasingly in Europe and elsewhere, by running professional issues meetings (PIMs) and a biennial conference, and hosting a discussion Listserv for members. In addition, it oversees the quality of EAP pre-session courses in the UK through a voluntary accreditation scheme and is about to introduce accreditation for individuals using e-portfolios. Individual members who wish to become accredited fellows of BALEAP will have a dedicated space on the BALEAP website (www.baleap.org.uk) where they can store their e-portfolios and make them available to prospective employers. Institutions regularly advertise EAP jobs on the website. BALEAP also establishes working parties to carry out projects, for example drawing up the BALEAP TEAP Competency Framework and the BALEAP Guidelines on English Language Tests. We also have a research and publications sub-committee to promote and encourage research and publishing amongst members.

What prompted you to write your groundbreaking book [EAP Essentials: A teacher's guide to principles and practice](#) and then to go on to write [Access EAP: Foundations](#)?

Sue Argent, Jenifer Spencer, and I were commissioned to write a set of distance learning materials that became *Academic English for Business Studies* in 2001. These were based on a corpus of first year undergraduate business texts which formed part of a distance learning programme at Heriot-Watt University. Researching the corpus and talking to the lecturers who wrote the texts gave us a good understanding of what the university expected from students. We decided to share these insights through short professional development courses for ELT teachers who were interested in teaching EAP.

EAP Essentials grew out of conversations with some of the 200 teachers who attended these courses over a period of eight years. We wanted to show how and why teaching EAP was different from general ELT. We also included a CD ROM of classroom materials that have been found to be effective in our EAP classes. However, Sue and I felt that if we wanted teachers to adopt our approach, we needed to write a coursebook to demonstrate how to put the ideas into practice. We also wanted to counter the prevailing belief that EAP could not be taught to low-level learners, by showing teachers just how it could be done. And so we started with the CEFR A2/B1 level book *Access EAP: Foundations*, and we have just completed the CEFR B2/C1 level *Access EAP: Frameworks*, which takes students towards university courses. Frameworks is intended for students



going into research degrees, where they have to show ability to use the language in their field; it is set to be published in 2013.

What are the key principles on which your approach is based?

Our approach follows principles outlined by John Swales and Christine Feak, Ann Johns, Ken Hyland and others. Studying at university is like learning to drive or play the piano – it is a performance which involves mastering discipline-specific genres. Students are encouraged to become ‘text detectives’, learning how to access academic genres by identifying the purpose and audience of a range of academic texts, both written and spoken, and analyzing their structure and language. This meta-cognitive awareness of genre equips students to find and select information easily from academic sources and to complete academic tasks using similar genres. It is generally assumed that students can easily transfer this knowledge about text purpose and structure to the specific texts and tasks they will find in their disciplines but these can often be very different from the texts and tasks that are practiced in language classrooms. In *Access EAP: Foundations*, we attempt to facilitate this transfer by creating a specific academic context, Gateway University in the city of Summerford somewhere in the UK. The student readers follow several student characters studying at Gateway University as they face problems, make choices about how to study and complete tasks within specific disciplines (Management, Information Technology and Environmental Studies). In *Access EAP: Frameworks* we developed this further by using the concept of graduate attributes: "skills, knowledge and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts and are acquired as a result of completing any undergraduate" Barrie (2006, p. 217). These frame typical academic activities and tasks and are presented as ‘what the university expects’.

Could you tell us about the study abroad programmes Heriot Watt offers and your role in those programmes?

I am not directly involved in study abroad programmes, but Heriot-Watt prides itself on being Scotland’s most international university. As well as a campus in Riccarton to the west of Edinburgh, it has a campus in Dubai and another opening in Malaysia in 2014. It has several distance learning programmes run through Approved Learning Partners (ALPs). Students may transfer from Dubai to Riccarton and vice versa for part of their studies or from distance learning to on-campus study mode. In addition the university has articulation agreements with institutions in China and elsewhere so that students can come to Heriot-Watt for a single semester or a full year of study as part of their degree. The university participates in the Erasmus programme for language exchange students and has established a number of Erasmus Mundus masters degrees, which are delivered at three partner institutions within Europe. Students from outside the EU can apply for funding to obtain those degrees. Those coming to study on the Edinburgh campus may choose to prepare for their studies by attending a summer pre-session course in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). There are also EAP classes offered to students while they are studying to further develop their study competence. A lot of what we need to do on these courses is to correct students' mistaken assumptions about academic writing. Many students show evidence of their ability in English through a university admissions English test such as IELTS or TOEFL. However, the kind of writing that gains high marks in these tests is very different from what is expected at university. Students are usually surprised and upset to discover this.

British universities have enthusiastically implemented study abroad programmes in their undergraduate modern language degrees. However, engineering and science majors tend to study abroad less than other majors. Why do you think this is so?



Sadly I think this may reflect the declining interest in studying foreign languages although Heriot-Watt does offer language electives in a range of modern foreign languages together with Chinese, Arabic and British Sign Language, which are well attended. However, it may also reflect the fact that for the kinds of degrees Heriot-Watt offers, e.g. applied science, engineering and management, there is a lot of content to cover with little room for additional subjects such as languages. This is particularly the case for degrees in subjects such as accountancy, surveying, engineering, which are tied to professional bodies with specific requirements. That said, I know that there is increasing interest in the concept of internships, where students can spend part of their degree working for a company, and some of these could be located in other countries.

Somewhat related to this, to what extent do you feel study abroad should be interpreted as a gendered experience?

I'm not sure that study abroad really ought to be interpreted as a gendered experience. It is well known that more women than men tend to study languages, and given that you need a language to study abroad, it is reasonable to assume that more women are likely to study abroad than men. Heriot Watt has a relatively small number of students participating on SA programmes. For example, around 25 Chinese students are coming to study undergraduate Accounting or Economics or Business Management in 2013 and the split between male and female is about equal. Based on the student profile of our summer pre-session course, a sizeable minority of international students choosing to study Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects at masters level are female. The School of Management and Languages at Heriot-Watt offers mainly vocational masters degrees such as Logistics, International Business Management, Strategic Project Management and Translation and Interpreting, which lead more directly to employment than theoretical degree courses. In terms of financial outlay, international students taking these degrees have chosen to invest in their own 'professional' futures. At the moment, Heriot Watt has no articulation agreement with Japanese universities that I am aware of. We do however see one or two Japanese students on the pre-session EAP courses before they enter postgraduate degrees in brewing and distilling. These students tend to be male, on one-year secondments from their companies. So, not only gender, but nationality and professional enthusiasm influences the choice of subject specialisms. This is an interesting area for investigation, though without having access to real data on the profiles of the international student population in each school, I hesitate to comment further.

Heriot Watt University has the largest proportion of undergraduate and post-graduate international students on campus in the UK (around 45%). Why do you feel so many international students opt to study at its technology, engineering and business faculties?

These faculties consistently offer better job prospects than do the humanities. A recent survey (BBC News, 4.12.12) noted that Heriot-Watt graduates can expect to earn 14% more across their working lives than the average for graduates from other institutions in the UK. Heriot-Watt graduates also have an excellent chance of securing a job after they graduate with 94% in employment or further study six months after graduating (HESA, 2012). It seems international students are becoming much more discerning in their choice of institution, taking account of a variety of features and not simply the institution's reputation for world class research.

What language learning/skill areas should international students focus on to prepare for their study in the UK universities?

In my experience, foreign students worry most about listening and speaking when they first arrive because they find the English accent – wherever they go – to be different from the one they



learned to recognize in language classes. This often reduces their confidence to speak up for themselves. However, once they settle into their courses and realize that they do have something to contribute, the main concern usually shifts to the huge amount of reading and writing they have to do to complete assignments.

The difficulty here is that most university admissions English exams do not prepare students for the kinds of texts they will need to read or articles they will need to write. Hence, most students are unprepared for the tasks that lie ahead in their disciplines. Usually overseas faculties put out reading lists for students to encourage them to prepare for their subject. The more of this kind of reading they can do, the better. During our pre-session course at Heriot-Watt, we encourage students to engage with the texts in their disciplines by setting assignments that require them to define a concept and/or explain a problem in their field.

You are currently chair of BALEAP, what 'improved or new directions' has BALEAP achieved whilst you have held office?

BALEAP has undergone a number of changes while I have been the Chair, most notably the change to become a company with charitable status. BALEAP was originally an association of institutions and all members had to work for an institution. This may have contributed to a somewhat elitist view of the organization from those outside it. Now, the ways in which EAP teachers are employed has changed and we welcome individual members looking for advice and support for their professional development. Along with the change of status came a change of name from an acronym (formerly the British Association for Lecturers of English for Academic Purposes) to a word and a strapline, BALEAP: the global forum for EAP Professionals. The strapline is aspirational rather than an accurate description of the current status, but the BALEAP conference attracts delegates from North America, Australasia and South-East Asia as well as Europe and the UK, and we have a number of overseas members both institutional and individual. The organization is keen to make links with other groups who have similar aims in order to share good practice. Our website was given a major overhaul and now supports a book reviews section with plans to establish Open Access resources in future. While I have been Chair, we have strengthened our links with the Journal of English for Academic Purposes and raised the profile of research in EAP through a series of research training events (ResTES), an award for the best MA on an EAP subject and a network for PhD researchers. None of these activities are a result of my actions alone, as we have an executive committee of volunteer members together with others who participate in working parties and sub-committees. I hope I've been able to encourage more members to put themselves forward for these activities.

What research projects are on your horizon now?

I'm currently thinking about an article for the journal *Language Teaching*, called 'Thinking Allowed'. The aim is to critically consider what research is or is not getting into classroom practice and why that might be. I'm interested in the concept of information structure, as outlined in Halliday's *Introduction to Functional Grammar*. This involves the development of ideas in texts from what is familiar to what is new to a reader. This is explained in more detail in Alexander, Argent and Spencer (2008, 59–69). It tends to be an important aspect of texts written in English, which have been called 'writer responsible' (Hinds, 1987). That means the writer must take responsibility for making the meaning clear for the reader, and contrasts with texts written in languages such as Japanese and Chinese where the reader often has to do a lot more interpretive work to understand the meaning. These ideas have been in circulation at least since 1991 when Michael McCarthy included them in *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*, but two recent EAP coursebooks still do not include them.



References

- Alexander, O. (forthcoming). Thinking allowed. *Language Teaching*.
- Alexander, O., Argent, S. and Spencer, J.A. (2008). *EAP Essentials: a teacher's guide to principles and practice*. Reading, UK: Garnet Education.
- Argent, S. & Alexander, O. (2010). *Access EAP: Foundations*. Reading, UK: Garnet Education.
- Argent, S. & Alexander, O. (in press). *Access EAP: Frameworks*. Reading, UK: Garnet Education.
- Barrie, S.C. (2006). Understanding what we mean by the generic attributes of graduates. *Higher Education*, 51 (2), 215–241. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-6384-7
- BALEAP. (2012). About us. Retrieved from <http://www.baleap.org.uk/about-us>
- BBC News. (2012, December). Heriot-Watt University 'generates £278m' a year for Scottish economy. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-20591621>
- Biber, D. Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow, UK: Longman.
- Halliday, M.A.K. & Matthiessen, C. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Arnold.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency. (2012, July). Press Release 179. 2010/11 Performance indicators – Employment of leavers. Retrieved from <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/2513/393/>
- Hinds, J. (1987). Reader versus writer responsibility: A new typology. In U. Connor, & R. Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 text*. (pp. 141–152). Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse analysis for language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.