

# Putting the E into English for Academic Purposes

What language should we teach at low levels?

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# Outline

- Introduction – my stance
- Motivation for interest in low level learners
- Low level learners – characteristics
- Sources of information
- Choosing language to teach

## Introduction – my stance

1. EAP should be called English for Grownups
2. The customers are adults, often with responsible positions in their own societies
3. Their motivation for learning English is instrumental: for achieving their degree (English as a lingua franca)
4. They are not particularly interested in the culture of EFL (e.g. saving the whale)
5. They are interested in their degree subjects
6. EAP teacher and student are equals in the process of learning how language works in those degree subjects: students can research the subject and EAP teachers can research the language.

## Motivation for ideas about low levels

Fragments of conversation [overheard on a train 27.08.08] between two academic researchers who were discussing data on sedimentation in the Thames river.

They discussed the quality of the data

- where they got it from,
- how they had changed it [i.e. by computer analysis]
- how reliable they thought it was.

They spent a little time discussing current research activities.

They then attempted to interpret the results

- to give an overall picture
- paying special attention to any anomalies.

Finally they discussed what they would need to do next.

# Strangers on a train

The conversation lasted an hour and employed a lot of complex noun phrases but a fairly restricted range of grammatical structures

There is / are...	What is / are...?	It is + quite useful	That's
I / we / he / has got [data]		ownership	
I / we / he / has got [to do something]		obligation / ensuring reliability	
I / we / he / has [to do something]		obligation / ensuring reliability	
He is going to.. / Is he going to...?		That's going to be + difficult	
Let's look at			
You can	We could	He might be	
It / that would take about [period]			
I'm + -ing			
It's being + -ed			
They've been + -ing			

# Strangers on a train

## Hedges

just      sort of / kind of  
actually a fair bit    about      quite      almost  
apparently      basically

## Giving opinions

This looks like...      I got the impression that...  
I find it  
I always thought that  
It just seemed very... to me  
I don't know  
This [data] should be able to tell us  
I'd be tempted to  
I think we should  
That makes me wonder / think  
That would make it easier / more reliable

## Insights from the train

It seemed to me that most of these grammatical structures would be quite accessible to low-level students (Pre-intermediate – around IELTS 3.0-4.5 ) and that the difficulty and complexity for these students lay in the complex noun phrases.

# Low level learners – characteristics

- adult learners (post 15-16)
- grown up and intelligent, just like advanced learners
- huge gulf between where they are and where they have to be
- sometimes want to run before they can walk
- easily overloaded because cognitive processing is not yet automatic
- need thoughtful stepping and scaffolding
- not confident with complexity but have to deal with it: need simple tasks repeated in different contexts with increasing complexity to build confidence
- need to go at their own pace and therefore have control, e.g. over how many times to repeat a task until they are satisfied.
- may need the security of seeing written forms before being expected to hear and respond (or vice-versa, depending on their experience).

## Choosing what to teach

Most general coursebooks take for granted that the most frequent words in the language must be presented in the early stages of language teaching, and this is a sensible decision, because they offer the learner a survival-level repertoire for comprehension and production.

McCarthy Michael (1990) *Vocabulary: A Scheme for Teacher Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

## Sources of information

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. 1999. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Longman.

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Management corpus [1 m words level 1 texts]

Science and engineering corpus [1.6 m words level 1 and some level 3 texts]

## What do we know about academic texts?

- What is the approximate ratio of nouns to verbs?
  - ♦ 4:1 [compared to conversation 1:1]
- What percentage of verb tenses are present or past
  - ♦ 80%
- What percentage of verb phrases contain modals?
  - ♦ 10-15%
- How common is the present simple compared to the present progressive?
  - ♦ 24 times more common

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. 1999.  
*Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow: Longman.

## What do we know about academic texts?

- What are the most common words in an academic corpus – HWUM + HWUSE ?
  - ♦ the (6.5%)
  - ♦ of (3.5%)
  - ♦ to (2.3%)
- First verbs
  - ♦ is (1.7%)
  - ♦ be (0.8%)
  - ♦ are (0.75%)
  - ♦ have (0.3%)

## What do we know about academic texts?

- Most common modal verbs?
  - ♦ will (0.37%)
  - ♦ can (0.35%)
  - ♦ may (0.2%)
- First lexical words occur at
  - ♦ # 58 business
  - ♦ # 61 example
  - ♦ # 62 work
  - ♦ # 65 value

# What do we know about academic texts?

- the ability of a material to undergo plastic deformation before fracture
- the active participation of the workforce in the affairs of the business
- the growth of multinational companies in manufacturing and in banking
- the levels of nitrogen compounds released into the air
- the movement of charged particles in magnetic fields
- the pattern of light and movement at any point in the environment

The advantages of turning a hobby into a business are the degree to which one is already motivated and knowledgeable about the area and the possibility that it might make a very agreeable occupation.

Money is required for the ordinary business of life. The amount of money required depends on the frequency and value of purchases together with the time interval between weekly wages or monthly salary.

## How do we decide what to teach?

- Corpus data can help to prioritise both lexical items and grammar
- The focus should be on nouns and noun phrases not verbs and verb phrases
- It is not necessary to 'march through all the verb tenses' at low levels nor to present all the modal verbs
- If EAP is about addressing high priority needs, this means prioritising language