

# **Is EAP fit for purpose?**

## **Framing academic literacy : considerations and implications for language testing**

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# Framing academic literacy



# Some questions to start us thinking...

**Q1:** What do we understand by the term 'academic literacy'?

**Q2:** How do the language tests we commonly use for university admission reflect this understanding?

**Q3:** How might such tests need to evolve in the future to be more 'fit for purpose'?

# Presentation overview

- 1. Approaches to defining a construct of Academic Literacy** – differing paradigms that have emerged over recent decades
- 2. Approaches to operationalising the construct** – as reflected in different tests commonly used for admission to higher education (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL)
- 3. Approaches in the future** – in light of developments in pedagogy and advances in technology

**Professor Cyril J Weir (1950-2018)**  
**‘ assessing academic literacy:  
the work of a lifetime’**



# Cyril Weir's EAP and language testing roots...

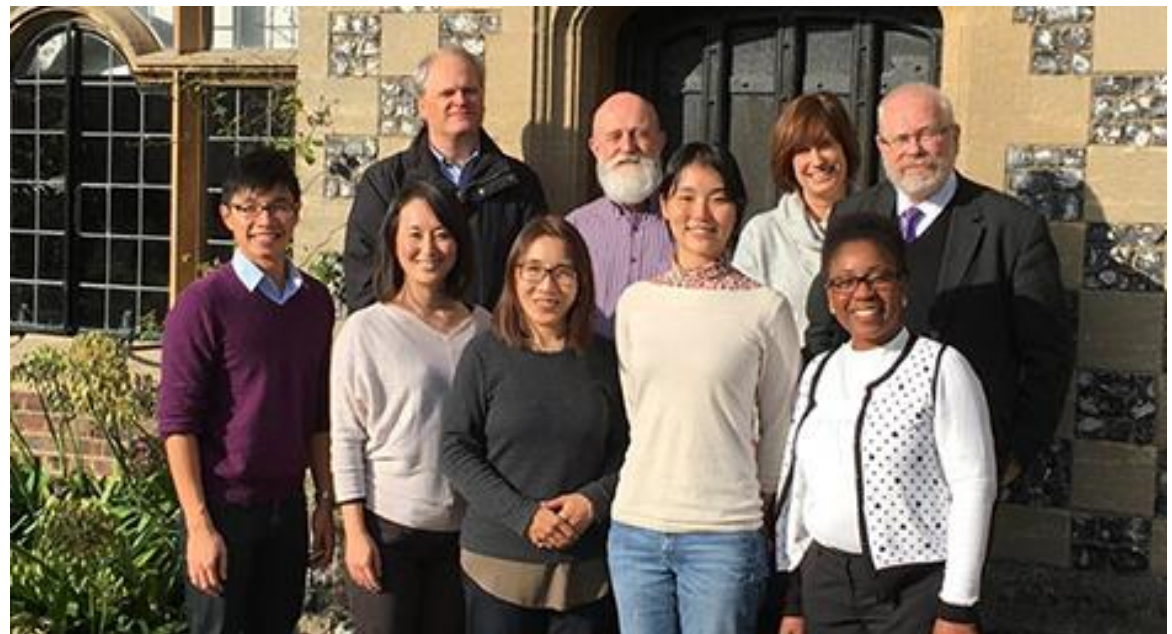
- PhD thesis: *Identifying the language problems of overseas tertiary students in higher education in the United Kingdom*, University of London (1983)
- work for the Associated Examining Board (AEB) in developing the *Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP)* 1978-1983
- test became operational in 1984 – a ‘brave attempt to develop a communicative test of EAP’ (Davies 2008:71)

# Weir and Chan, forthcoming

*Research and practice in  
assessing academic  
reading: the case of IELTS*

Cyril J Weir and Sathena Chan

Studies in Language  
Testing 51, CUP





# **1. DEFINING A CONSTRUCT OF ACADEMIC LITERACY**



**How might we choose to describe  
or define 'academic literacy'?**

# 3 possible paradigms?

1. The *generic study skills* approach
2. The *genre-specific* approach
3. The *socially situated discourse* approach

# 1. A generic study skills approach

From the 1970s, English for Academic Purpose (EAP) teachers approached the teaching of academic literacy through the traditional building blocks of general (high-level) reading and writing skills...

*Academic language proficiency is ... the literacy of the educated, based on the construct of there being a general language factor relevant to all those entering higher education, whatever specialist subject(s) they will study.*

Davies (2008:113)

# 1. A generic study skills approach



- based upon the traditional building blocks of *general* (high-level) reading and writing skills
- *generalizable* discourse across disciplines
- *core components* of skilled literacy

# “What is academic language proficiency?”

Davies (2008) addresses this question in his book on testing English for academic purposes:

- academic proficiency involves *performing the appropriate discourse* **generalizable** across all disciplines
- the **core components** of skilled literacy : *argument, logic, implication, analysis, explanation, reporting*
- the case for **a single general approach** relevant to all those entering higher education, whatever their area of specialism

# A complementary approach in testing

- **communicative language testing (CLT)** supports the argument against discipline-specific modularity
- testing the skills and features underpinning communicative behaviour, i.e. the **abilities** rather than the behaviour itself
- a **single** test of Academic English based on cross-cutting EAP skills

# Test of English for Academic Purposes (TEAP)

- **Research:** survey of academic activities in UK tertiary-medium education, esp problems encountered with language-related study skills (Weir, 1983)
- **Sample:** 940 overseas students, 530 British students and 560 academic staff; 43 postgraduate courses, 61 undergraduate courses and 39 'A' level (higher secondary) courses
- **Findings:** considerable overlap in reading activities and writing activities across academic levels and across subject boundaries
- **Outcome:** Associated Examining Board (AEB) development of a generic language-based study skills test - TEAP

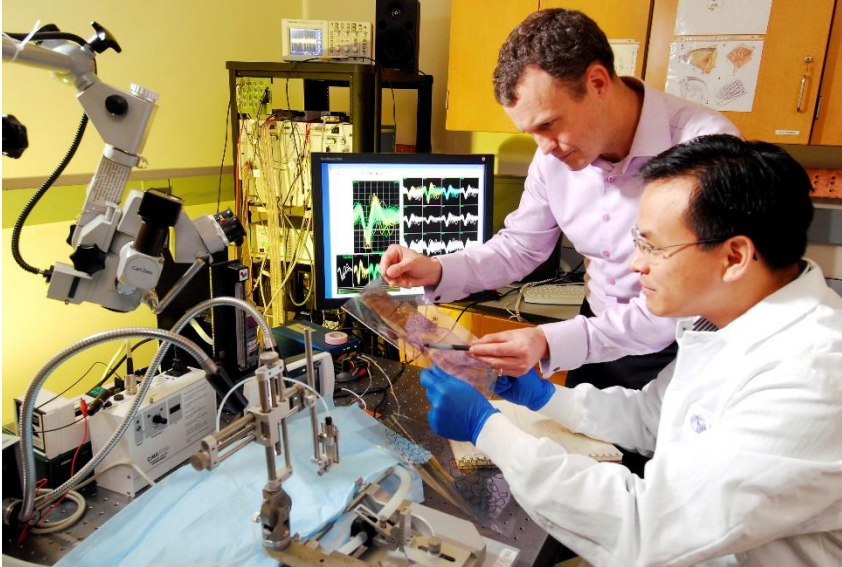


**An alternative perspective...?**

## 2. A genre-specific approach

- growing interest in **discourse/genre analysis** in the 1980s (Brown and Yule, 1983, Swales 1990)
- developments in **corpus linguistics** in the 1990s (Sinclair 1991, Biber 1993)
- identification of **diverse genres according to subject and context**, incl. academic disciplines
- does a *genre-based* (as opposed to a *generic study skills*) approach better prepare students for the discipline-specific demands of academic study?

## 2. A genre-specific approach



- recognition of the **discipline-specific demands** of academic study
- **diverse genres** according to subject and context

# Lea and Street (1998)

Academic literacy as involving:

*how to write specific, course-based knowledge for a particular tutor or field of study. Problems lie with a lack of familiarity with the subject matter of a particular discipline and how to write knowledge in that discipline, for example the need to abstract theory rather than attend to factual detail as evidence; deeper epistemological issues associated with knowledge in different disciplines.*

Lea and Street (1998:164)

# Lillis (2003)

Lillis characterises the genre-based approach as a form of 'academic socialisation' - with two dimensions:

*Language as discourse practices which learners will/must gradually come to learn implicitly. Socialisation (1) teaching as (implicit) induction into established discourse practices.*

*Language as genres which are characterised by specific clusters of linguistic features. Socialisation (2) explicit teaching of features of academic genres.*

Lillis (2003:194)

# Key research to support this

ESRC study: *'An Investigation of Genres of Assessed Writing in British Higher Education'* (Project No. RES-000-23-0800) by Hilary Nesi, Sheena Gardner, Paul Thompson, and Paul Wickens (2007):

- comprehensive description of the genres encountered in academic study
- first large-scale attempt to identify and describe the range of writing produced by university students for assessment purposes
- students in British universities are required to produce a range of different genres of assessed written work, reflecting a range of rhetorical structures, communicative purposes and audiences

# Findings

- clear **cultural differences** in academic literacy between discipline areas
- existence of at least 13 **genre families** in academic writing - each with own stages of production
- even **greater diversity** beyond that of genre families



*... Undergraduate student writing is clearly complex, with many variations in practice dependent not only on discipline, level of study and educational approach, but also on the nature of the higher education institution, the particular focus of the department within that institution, and the idiosyncrasies of the lecturers who assign written work.*

Nesi and Gardner (2006:102)

# Conclusions so far...

- academic literacy is more than just acquiring a set of basic, generic study skills
- involves awareness of and increasing familiarization with the genres and modes of discourse that characterise academic study within field or discipline (i.e. discoursal and surface language features)
- paradoxically, commonalities do exist, e.g. pervasiveness of the argumentative essay across disciplines + agreement on the assessment criteria for marking among academic tutors (content vs style)

**A third way...?**

# 3. A socially situated approach

Critical literacy adherents argue that we must go even further and consider academic discourse as *socially situated*, involving issues of power and authority as well as genre (Lea and Street 1998, Murray 2016).

# 3. A socially situated approach



- based on **socially situated discourse practices** (as well as the generic and disciplinary specific approaches)
- **institutional/departmental** culture
- **level** of study
- **power/authority** dynamic

# Lea and Street (1998)

Criticised the generic study skills approach because it:

*...takes no account of the interaction of the student with institutional practices and is based on the underlying principle that knowledge is transferred rather than mediated or constructed through writing practices... the implicit models that have generally been used to understand student writing do not adequately take account of the importance of issues of identity and the institutional relationships of power and authority that surround, and are embedded within, diverse student writing practices across the university...*

Lea and Street (1998:170)

# Lillis (2003)

Argues for considering a model based on socially situated discourse practices **as well as** the generic and disciplinary specific approaches:

*The academic literacies frame has helped to foreground many dimensions to student academic writing which had previously remained invisible or had been ignored; these include the impact of power relations on student writing, the centrality of identity in academic writing, academic writing as ideologically inscribed knowledge construction ...*

Lillis (2003:195)



- Lea and Street (1998) argue that the academic literacies model: ‘incorporates both of the other models into a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities’.
- According to this third approach, academic literacy thus embraces an additional dimension on top of generic and discipline-specific study skills: that of the socially situated nature of academic interaction.

# To summarise across the field....

When reflecting upon the nature of academic literacy (or literacies), the theoretical and empirical literature seems to highlight a wide range of issues and considerations associated with attempts to define a rich and comprehensive construct of academic literacy.

# Multiple elements

- general study skills
- general language abilities
- generic activities/tasks
- discourse practices
- discipline-based genres
- subject specificity
- epistemological differentiation
- author identity/stance
- audience idiosyncrasies
- processes of socialisation
- institutional culture
- departmental culture
- level of study
- power/authority dynamics

## **2. OPERATIONALISING THE CONSTRUCT FOR ASSESSMENT PURPOSES**

# So... a key question to consider...

- To what extent do tests that are commonly used for academic purposes reflect features of academic literacy as articulated across the 3 paradigms?

Subsidiary questions:

- To what extent **should** they?
- To what extent **can** they?

**Tests commonly used to sample and evaluate academic literacy skills for the purposes of university admission**

**IELTS**<sup>TM</sup>  
English for International Opportunity

Cambridge English  
**Advanced**  
Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)

**PTE** | PEARSON TEST OF ENGLISH  
Academic

 **TOEFL**<sup>®</sup>

# **A preliminary analysis for reflection and discussion.....**

*(... and a purely personal view!)*



	IELTS	CAE/CPE	PTE - Acad	TOEFL-IBT
general study skills	✓	✓	✓	✓
general language skills	✓	✓	✓	✓
generic activities/tasks	✓	✓	✓	✓
discourse practices	✓	✓	✓	✓
discipline based genres	?	?	?	?
subject specificity	?	?	?	?
epistemological differentiation	?	?	?	?
author identity/stance	?	?	?	?
audience idiosyncrasies	?	?	?	?
processes of socialisation	✗	✗	✗	✗
institutional culture	✗	✗	✗	✗
departmental culture	✗	✗	✗	✗
level of study	✗	?	✗	✗
power/authority dynamics	✗	✗	✗	✗

# A common perception....

Current tests used for university entry are sometimes criticised for being a 'blunt instrument', i.e. failing to be sufficiently well-designed and sensitive for the purposes of academic admissions.

# So are these tests fit for purpose?

In some respects this may be true: recent research has shown that a test may not necessarily sample enough of the higher-level reading and writing skills that are generally considered relevant/important for academic literacy – an issue of cognitive and context validity of the test.

[e.g. see Weir and Chan, forthcoming, with regard to the sampling of higher level academic reading skills]

***“Couldn’t students take an English language test based on the discipline area in which they intend to study, and which is therefore tailored accordingly?”***

**A simple question?  
Or a naïve assumption?**

# Easier said than done...?



*... so which branch of engineering?*

# Note the challenge of predictive (or criterion-related) validity...

- Should we interpret a test score as:
  - (i) an **indicator** of 'readiness-to-enter' an academic domain?
  - OR
  - (ii) a **predictor** of future academic outcomes?
- What skills are required for readiness to enter the academic domain, i.e. prior to entry?
- What skills are most likely (or only likely to be) acquired within the academic domain post entry?

## Generic EAP vs. discipline-specific tests

A discipline-specific test might appear a logical option, but does it make sense if:

- a) we cannot assume that students will come equipped with adequate conversancy in the literacy practices of their future disciplines as a result of their diverse prior educational experiences?
- b) those literacy practices they need are actually inherent to the academic journey they are about to embark upon, and will therefore be embedded within their future curriculum?

# Generic EAP vs. discipline-specific 'academic literacies'

*The high-profile gatekeeping tests that are currently employed by English-medium universities the world over focus on generic EAP and, as we have seen, this fails to take account of **the particularity of literacy practices within specific disciplines** and associated with an academic literacies perspective.*

Murray (2016:8)



# Generic EAP vs. discipline-specific 'academic literacies'

*...[future academic] performance is largely dependent on students' conversancy in those practices pertinent to their particular disciplines, conversancy in which, I have argued, **we cannot assume or expect students to come equipped to university; hence the need to embed tuition in academic literacies within the curriculum.***

**Some difficult questions we need to  
ask ourselves when using tests in  
EAP contexts...**

# The 'burden of expectation'

- Are we tempted to lay too great a burden of expectation on a particular test?
- What is it realistic for us to expect in terms of score interpretation?
- What other sources of useful evidence could (or should) we use alongside the test results?
- How might test design need to evolve to meet changing requirements, processes and contexts in higher education?

# **3. APPROACHING THE FUTURE? OPPORTUNITIES AND CAVEATS**

# The emergent nature of academic literacies

- the impact of a living, studying and working in a digital age (i.e. academic life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is changing)
- the changing nature of academic literacies due to technological advances
  - rapid growth of digitisation
  - standardised online courses, MOOCs
  - access to and use of social media, e.g. Youtube, TED talks
  - cooperative learning networks and online learning management systems, e.g. Blackboard
  - use of electronic devices, e.g. tablets, smart phones
  - academic study no longer confined by presentation mode (lecture) or physical location (library)

# The emergent nature of the assessment of academic literacy(ies) in future?

- reshaping of assessment tools to harness new technologies
  - the need to move beyond simply converting paper and pencil tests to a computer-based format
  - options for: more integrated task formats using multimedia; domain-specific + interdisciplinary activities; collection of ‘big data’ from/about learners
  - increasing personalisation of both learning and assessment, and the integration of both of these

# Some considerations and caveats

- test format comparability across modes
- increased visual/aural as well as text-based input
- greater integration of word and image and the blending of spoken/written style
- ‘digital immigrants’ vs ‘digital natives’
- biometric data capture
- evolution of language and cognitive processing
- artificial intelligence and cyber-physical system combinations

# Research areas for the future?

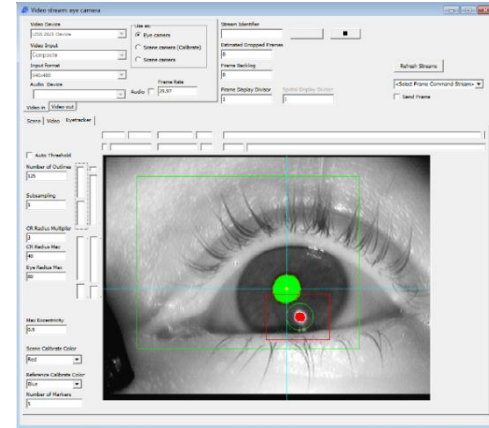
- issues of **test format comparability** (e.g. print vs computer vs small screen)
- impact of **increased visual as well as text-based input** in academic study (TED talks)
- greater **integration of word and image**, blending of spoken and written
- **effects on cognitive processing** of onscreen study and interactive devices



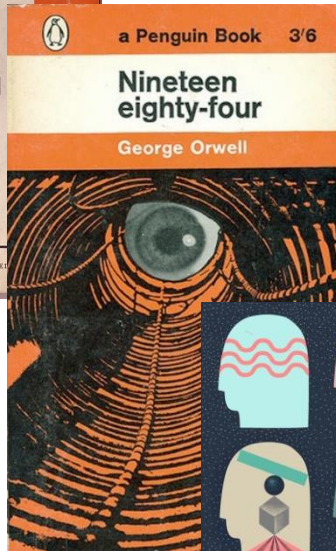
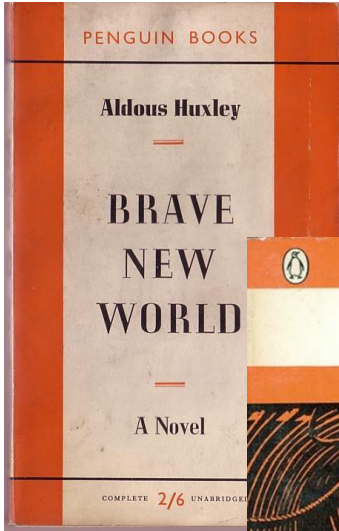


# Ethical questions for the future?

- risk of marginalisation – ‘digital immigrants’ vs ‘digital natives’
- protection of personal data (e.g. eyetracking, MRI scans)
- impact of artificial intelligence and cyber-physical combinations



# A brave new world? or ...



3 book covers :  
1932 to present  
day



# Cyril Weir's abiding interest in history ...

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”*

*[Ecclesiastes 3.1]*

The astronomical clock in the old town of Prague





# ***Sadly missed, fondly remembered***



***Dedicated to my friend, colleague and  
mentor - Professor Cyril J Weir, OBE***

**Thank you for your interest  
and your attention!**