# Drifting with the current or steering our own course? EAP practitioners in New Zealand

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In 1997 Pennycook wrote a landmark article in which he argued that English for academic purposes (EAP) practitioners are in a servant /master relationship with faculties. Very little appears to have changed in the intervening years. Turner (2011) argues that the work of EAP practitioners is "seen as a remedial 'service' peripheral rather than central, to the mainstream operation of the university" (p.34). Research suggests their work is not sufficiently understood or valued and that their input into the teaching/learning process is marginalised. Practitioners are kept on the back foot, obedient to the whims of faculties. This perception is supported by the literature both in New Zealand and overseas (Carter & Bartlett-Trafford, 2007; Chanock, 2007; Clerehan, 2007; Craswell & Bartlett, 2002; Craven, 2009; Crozier, 2007; Laurs, 2010; Quiddington, 2009; Stevenson & Kokkin, 2007; Velautham & Picard, 2009).

Yet at the same time it is these practitioners who have a wealth of knowledge about the diverse student cohorts now studying at our universities, and great insight into the linguistic challenges these students face. In addition they are acutely aware of the linguistic imperialism that still dominates practice at Western universities, and are sensitive to the damage this dominance causes. Also as Quiddington, (2009, p.21) points out EAP practitioners are "able to range feely across disciplinary boundaries, faculties, departments and whole institutions". In this paper I explore what I regard as the greatest challenge facing EAP practitioners – the need to assert themselves so that they can play an influential role in the changes that I believe need to take place if English is to retain its role in the academic world not as a colonial dinosaur, but as "a living English, one that rejuvenates the language by contesting standardized, dominant English … in the light of ongoing, and differing, lives, contexts, values" (Horner, 2006, p.573).

The massification of higher education has affected the composition of universities globally (Alexander, 2000; Guri-Rosenblit, Šebková & Teichler, 2007; Tynjälä, Välimaa & Sarja, 2003). Tertiary education has expanded five-fold in the period 1970 - 2007 (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2009) but the seven years prior to 2009 have

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seen a particularly marked increase. This increase in tertiary enrolment has been accompanied by the global mobility of students. In 2007 nearly 3 million students enrolled in education institutions outside their countries of origin. The number of these mobile students has grown by 53% since 1999 (Altbach et al., 2009).

The enrolment at universities in New Zealand mirrors the diversity found at Western universities around the world. New Zealand has approximately 3% of the international student market and is thus a relatively small player (Verbink & Lasanowski, 2007), but, in a country with a population of around four million these students have a considerable impact on university cohorts. This change means that a "culturally socially and linguistically diverse student population" now bring "different identities, understandings and habits of meaning–making to a more diverse range of subjects" (Hyland, 2008, p.4). At the same time, however, higher education has become more commercialised – universities are expected to generate more of their own funding. As Altbach (2001) notes "universities have to think more like businesses and less like educational institutions". International students are "big business", especially for OECD countries, where over 90% of international students are enrolled (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007).

It is, however, not just international students who are swelling numbers at universities. There are more mature and non-traditional students, many of whom juggle work and study commitments (Hyland, 2009; Robotham, 2008; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009). Greater numbers of students study part-time or at a distance (OECD, 2007). The diversity in both student background and modes of study blurs traditional distinctions between the support needs of native and non-native writers of English, and many researchers now acknowledge that an increasing number of students require support for writing in academic contexts, regardless of their linguistic background (Baynham, 2000; Casanave, 2008; North, 2005; Strauss & Walton, 2005; Wingate & Tribble, 2011).

One of the great advantages of such a diverse cohort, particularly international students, is that it offers all students at these institutions a truly multi-cultural education – or so it is argued. Reality however would seem to be far less sanguine. One of the more disappointing aspects of this broadening of our student body is that it does not appear to have brought about a more tolerant and culturally aware student body (Halualani et al., 2004; Salz & Trubowitz, 1997; Summers & Volet, 2008). Halualani et al. argue that students appear to believe that attending a university that hosts a number of different nationalities is "a substitute and stand-in for actual intercultural interaction on a personal and individual level" (p.10). It seems that as far as domestic students are concerned the presence of these international students is sufficient. The possibility that they might be able to add something of value to the western academy does not appear to be entertained.

This devaluing of non-traditional input affects what is deemed acceptable academic language. What is acceptable is described by Turner (2011) as linguistic features

which can be “highlighted as germane to specific disciplines” (p.19). She gives as examples the use of tentative language and modals. Although it would seem obvious that language must embrace change if it is to reflect our rapidly changing realities (Widdowson, 1994). Shelton (2007, p.60) points out the suggestion that academic English could be modified “appals or even terrifies some who think there is a purity to be defended”. As a result it could be in danger of losing its vitality and its communicative and communal value Widdowson (1994, p.384). Ryan and Viete (2009, p.305) cite Schmitt’s (2005) argument that “native speakerdom [is] derived not from creative language use but from the shared set of memorized stock phrases that native speakers understand and tacitly agree are efficient and expected ways of expressing ideas”.

The insistence that, for the most part, traditional academic English not be challenged is somewhat ironic if one considers how little attention is paid to what this desirable English is. When pressed as to what kind of language they do find acceptable, discipline lecturers are vague, usually indicating that while they can’t describe what they want “I know it when I see it”. This would tend to lend support to Schmitt’s argument.

At all levels but especially at postgraduate level this insistence on a particular kind of English is problematic. Because English is a global language, many countries are now familiar with its discourse features (Canagarajah, 2001). A number of these countries now insist that postgraduate and sometimes even undergraduate students receive at least a part of their education through the medium of English. At postgraduate level there is often a requirement that dissertations and theses be submitted in English. This means that many non-native speakers of English have already developed their own voice in the language, and are disinclined to change this for what Cheney (1991, p.123) has described as “the institutional non-voice ...the ‘beige’ voice”. It must be pointed out that the institutional voice cannot be seen as synonymous with correct use of English. Quite often it appears that the perception of what is ‘acceptable’ depends on what is familiar to academics. Students might not be using language in a way that academics are accustomed to, not employing the “shared set of stock phrases”. This does not make their use wrong, simply different, and it is worrying that this too is often seen as unacceptable. A study at AUT (Strauss & Walton, 2005) found that a few students resisted the institutionalisation of their voices arguing that their writing reflected who they were as academics. However it is a brave student who is prepared to go this route.

However, despite the arguments outlined above, what is regarded as appropriate English is not a topic of hot debate in higher education. Turner (2011) points out that language in the academy is usually invisible and that it only becomes an object of discussion when it is perceived as faulty. This is what is happening at the moment as the number of non-traditional students on our campuses is increasing. It is difficult for them to develop acceptable writing skills by a process of osmosis as students in the past have been able to do. This is because they are drawn from diverse backgrounds

and “the assumption of osmosis is predicated on sameness” (Turner, 2011, p.21). Even if they are able to adopt what lecturers see as acceptable, a brave few are not willing to do so. What is being debated then is not standards of appropriacy or how better academic English can serve the needs of the academy, rather it is around how we can help students meet linguistic standards that very few academics seem to feel need to be debated or negotiated. We are all familiar with complaints from lecturers about students who are inadequately equipped to deal with course demands.

I do not want to suggest that there is not a great deal of merit in these concerns. There appear to be many students in our institutions who do not possess sufficient knowledge of English to be able to meet our standards. Indeed I would argue that for some the experience is unpleasant and far from educational. These students are at our institutions because as pointed out earlier in this paper university education has become big business. It is all about “bums on seats”. I was present at a discussion where staff in a discipline were arguing passionately that some of the non-English speaking students on their course were completely out of their depth and were unhappy and desperate. Plagiarism was a growing problem as these students struggled to submit assignments in language that the lecturers could understand. The programme leader was very sympathetic but pointed out that raising admission levels would simply mean that students would enrol at another institution. This would mean that the problems would simply move to another place, and, as he pointed out to them, might well mean a loss of jobs.

There is very little that discipline lecturers, often overworked and without linguistic backgrounds, can do other than send such students to EAP practitioners to be ‘fixed’. Yet as noted earlier these practitioners are not highly regarded by the institutions. Their services are “routinely sidelined” (Turner, 2011, p.3) and they operate at “the margins of academic life” (Chanock, 2007, p.272). The centres at which they work are subjected to continual reviews, as is the international trend (Palmer, Holt & Challis, 2011). In the Palmer et al. study, 83% of the Australian universities that participated indicated that they had undergone a change in their configuration in the past three years or that such a change was imminent. Staff are continually having to defend their academic status, a battle that some have lost. It is hardly surprising then that the energies (and their research opportunities) of these centres are often directed towards proving that the services are indeed beneficial to the institutions at which they are located (Challis, Holt & Palmer, 2009; Manolo, Fraser & Marshall, 2010).

It is quite an ask then for us to assert ourselves in such a climate. Yet I feel that this is the role of EAP practitioners. Rowland (2007) acknowledges the tensions and challenges that practitioners face in their work but maintains that their role is more than just enhancing student learning, that there comes a point when they “need to articulate clearly what they believe higher education is for” (p.12). I believe that we have reached such a point where the stimulus for such reconsideration and renegotiation of the role of English must come from those of us involved in the teaching of academic language.

I argue that unless we move to reconsider and renegotiate the role of English in the academy with all its speakers there can be no real sense of inclusiveness. This consideration is not just essential for second language speakers of English. Non-traditional students are often stymied by the linguistic requirements of the academy. We need what Phan describes as "a healthy and sensible sharing of the ownership of English" (2008, p.202), a recognition that it is "both futile and inappropriate" to insist on a single standardised English (Horner, 206, p.572).

What is also clear though, is that first there are issues that must be resolved within our own ranks – at least to some degree. I have encountered numerous practitioners who argue that their first responsibility is to the student and not to challenging the status quo. They point out that the vast majority of students they assist simply want to get the best marks they can, and have no wish to become embroiled in some kind of language crusade. I respect and understand this perspective but at the same time I am uneasy about the implications of such an approach and whether it is ultimately in the best interests of the students we assist. After all Quiddington (2009, p. 22) refers to EAP practitioners as the "educational linguists of the international university". Is it also ultimately in our own best interests that we adopt the position of those who serve the faculties instead of being considered those who assist and who are regarded as equals? While debate and robust discussion in our midst is to be welcomed - after all we are academics - we need to unite in our quest for greater recognition of the work we do. Unless we improve our status it is unlikely that faculties will consider our input with the respect it deserves.

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