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Beyond the EAP Bottleneck: An Integrated Framework for Academic English Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) enables university students to engage with disciplinary reading, writing, lectures, discussion, and research. Yet learners can encounter a persistent bottleneck when academic vocabulary, dense texts, genre expectations, oral participation, and access to support are treated as separate problems. This narrative review synthesizes foundational and recent scholarship on EAP and develops an integrated framework for responding to these interconnected demands. It asks: (1) Which linguistic, academic-literacy, cognitive, and affective barriers most often constrain students' participation in EAP? and (2) How can instruction connect these needs to authentic university tasks while remaining inclusive of learner differences? The synthesis identifies five linked domains: vocabulary depth and disciplinary language; reading and source use; genre-based writing; listening and spoken participation; and learner variability, confidence, and access. It proposes a task-centered cycle that diagnoses needs, teaches language explicitly, engages learners in communicative disciplinary tasks, provides staged feedback, and evaluates transfer to new academic contexts. Research on mobile vocabulary learning and inclusive EAP informs the design; work on translation, L2 processing, linguistic relativity, and communicative language teaching provides complementary perspectives rather than direct evidence of EAP outcomes. Because the review is narrative and introduces no new participant data, the framework is a reasoned proposal that requires empirical testing across disciplines and institutions.

Keywords: *English for Academic Purposes; higher education; academic literacy; academic vocabulary; learner differences; communicative teaching*

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1. Introduction

English is a central medium for international research, disciplinary exchange, and access to scholarly resources. University students may need to read research articles, follow lectures, evaluate sources, write evidence-based assignments, present findings, and participate in seminars. These activities demand more than general fluency: they require control of academic language and an understanding of how knowledge is constructed and communicated within particular disciplines (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hyland, 2006; Jordan, 1997).

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is therefore best understood as preparation for purposeful participation in higher education. A student may know many English words but still struggle to identify

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an argument in a journal article, interpret a lecturer's qualification, or organize a paragraph around evidence. Another learner may write accurately yet avoid seminar discussion because of anxiety, unfamiliar interactional norms, or limited opportunities to rehearse. These challenges intersect, and treating them as isolated deficits can leave the underlying academic task unsupported.

The literature has developed important accounts of disciplinary language, academic literacy, genre, and EAP pedagogy (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Lea & Street, 1998; Swales & Feak, 2012). Hyland (2018) also examines the role and scope of EAP within higher education. Recent work highlights inclusive teaching, technology-supported vocabulary learning, and variation in learners' language-processing resources (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2026; Li, 2025; Mohammadi et al., 2024; Mammadova, 2025b). However, a practical challenge remains: how can teachers connect these strands in a coherent programme tied to students' actual university work?

This article addresses that question through a focused narrative synthesis and a proposed teaching framework. It does not report a new intervention or claim measured gains. The analysis is guided by two research questions: (1) Which linguistic, academic-literacy, cognitive, and affective barriers most often constrain students' participation in EAP? (2) How can EAP instruction connect these needs to authentic university tasks while responding to differences among learners? Its contribution is an integrated, classroom-oriented account of the barriers and an actionable sequence for teaching and evaluating academic English.

2. EAP as Academic Participation and Literacy

EAP instruction is most useful when it begins with the communicative work students are expected to perform. Needs analysis, disciplinary context, and target tasks help distinguish academic English from a general course organized around decontextualized grammar or vocabulary (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Jordan, 1997). Students in the sciences, humanities, and professional fields may share broad practices such as explaining evidence, but the genres, terminology, and conventions through which those practices are realized can differ substantially.

Academic literacy also involves social expectations. Lea and Street (1998) show why student writing cannot be reduced to surface correctness: learners must interpret conventions of argument, evidence, authority, and disciplinary voice. Hyland (2006) similarly emphasizes that academic discourse uses language to position claims, acknowledge sources, express caution, and engage readers. These conventions can be taught explicitly. They should not be treated as hidden rules that students are expected to infer without guidance.

For this reason, EAP should connect receptive and productive work. Reading a research text can lead to vocabulary analysis, source evaluation, a short synthesis, and a seminar exchange. Such sequences allow learners to encounter a concept, notice how it is expressed, interpret its role in an argument, and then use it for a meaningful purpose. This task-based logic is compatible with communicative approaches that prioritize purposeful language use and integrated skills (Babayev, 2023), while retaining the explicit instruction in genre and language that academic tasks require.

3. Methodological Approach

The article uses a focused narrative review to synthesize selected foundational and recent scholarship on EAP, academic literacy, vocabulary, reading, writing feedback, communicative teaching, inclusion, mobile learning, translation pedagogy, and individual differences in L2 processing. The literature is organized thematically around recurring learning demands and teaching responses.

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The review is interpretive rather than systematic: it does not claim exhaustive coverage or report formal screening totals, effect sizes, or pooled findings. Its purpose is to connect relevant perspectives into a practical framework. Claims about teaching effectiveness remain within the scope of the cited studies; the framework itself is a proposal for empirical evaluation.

4. Interconnected Challenges in EAP Learning

4.1. Academic vocabulary and disciplinary meaning

Academic vocabulary knowledge involves more than recognizing a word's basic definition. Learners also need to know its collocations, grammatical patterns, disciplinary meanings, and appropriate use in speaking and writing. Read and Dang (2025) treat depth of academic vocabulary as a multidimensional construct, while research on mobile-assisted vocabulary learning suggests that digital flashcards can support receptive and productive knowledge, with the two dimensions not necessarily developing equally (Mohammadi et al., 2024). Accordingly, vocabulary instruction should combine noticing and retrieval with repeated use in authentic sentences, discussion, and written work.

A word list detached from course content may offer limited preparation for a student who must interpret a concept in a lecture or use it precisely in an assignment. Teachers can instead select high-value terms from course readings, teach common word families and collocations, and ask learners to explain or apply each term in context. Short retrieval practice can be followed by a productive task so that recognition is not mistaken for usable command.

4.2. Reading complex texts and evaluating evidence

Academic reading asks learners to locate a text's purpose, follow its reasoning, distinguish claims from evidence, infer the meaning of unfamiliar language, and evaluate the relevance of sources. Difficulties may arise from limited vocabulary, complex syntax, unfamiliar background knowledge, or unfamiliar conventions of argument. A single reading task cannot reveal which of these demands is causing difficulty.

Scaffolded reading can make the process visible. Before reading, instructors can activate relevant knowledge and clarify the assignment question. During reading, students can annotate claims, evidence, definitions, and transitions. After reading, they can summarize the argument, compare sources, or explain how evidence supports a claim. These activities align reading with academic writing and speaking, rather than treating comprehension as a collection of isolated questions (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Hyland, 2006).

4.3. Writing, genre, and feedback

University writing requires learners to make a clear purpose visible, organize claims, support them with evidence, acknowledge sources, and follow disciplinary and assignment conventions. Swales and Feak (2012) provide a task-oriented account of academic writing, while Lea and Street (1998) frame student writing in relation to broader academic practices. Both perspectives support explicit teaching of genre expectations alongside practice in drafting, revising, and editing.

Feedback is most actionable when it identifies a priority and gives the learner a next step. Zhang and Cheng's (2021) study of comprehensive written corrective feedback demonstrates the relevance of feedback design in L2 EAP writing, while also cautioning against assuming that every linguistic dimension changes in the same way. Teachers can combine focused comments on language with

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feedback on argument, organization, and evidence. Peer review can help learners notice reader expectations, provided that students receive clear criteria and examples.

4.4. Listening, speaking, and academic confidence

Academic participation includes following lectures, identifying signposts, taking notes, asking questions, presenting information, and responding to others. Learners who are more comfortable with written English may still hesitate in discussion because they have had little rehearsal, are unsure how to enter a turn, or fear that an error will undermine their credibility. EAP should therefore teach both language resources and the interactional routines of seminars and presentations.

Communicative techniques can provide purposeful practice through pair work, problem-solving, information gaps, discussion, and presentations (Babayev, 2023). These activities become more relevant when anchored in course content and supported by language frames, rehearsal time, and explicit feedback. Students can first prepare a short response in pairs, then contribute to a group exchange, and finally reflect on how they used evidence, clarification, and turn-taking. Such sequencing gives speaking practice an academic purpose rather than making participation a test of spontaneous confidence alone (Alexander et al., 2008; Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002).

4.5. Learner variability, multilingual resources, and access

Students enter EAP with different levels of English proficiency, educational histories, disciplinary knowledge, confidence, and access to learning resources. Inclusive instruction recognizes this variation without fixing students into permanent ability categories. The recent review by Bakogiannis and Papavasiliou (2026) foregrounds inclusive practice in higher-education EAP, and Li (2025) discusses learner-centered, multimodal, and technology-supported teaching alongside practical constraints such as uneven proficiency and teacher preparation.

Cognitive demands also vary. Working memory and language aptitude may influence how learners process forms and integrate information in real time, but these differences do not justify lowering expectations or labeling students. Mammadova (2025b) reviews individual differences in L2 processing and their relationship to online form recognition. For teaching, the careful implication is to vary pacing, task complexity, rehearsal, and opportunities for retrieval, while maintaining meaningful academic goals and monitoring learner response.

Multilingual learners also draw on knowledge built through other languages. Sadigzadeh (2024) discusses the relationship between linguistic relativism and universalism, a perspective that can prompt EAP teachers to consider how language and prior conceptual frameworks shape interpretation. This does not imply that every linguistic difference causes a learning barrier. Rather, teachers can invite comparison across languages when it clarifies a concept, while explicitly teaching the English expressions and genre conventions needed for the target task.

Translation can function as one such reflective resource. Mammadova (2025a) discusses translation as a cognitive and pedagogical process involving analytical decisions and cultural interpretation. In EAP, brief translation or contrastive-analysis tasks may help learners examine terminology, register, or meaning shifts. They should supplement, not replace, sustained reading and writing in English. A learner ultimately needs to interpret academic texts and produce disciplinary work in the language and genre required by the course.

5. An Integrated Framework for EAP Instruction

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The literature suggests that EAP programmes should connect explicit language instruction with the academic tasks in which students need to use that language. The framework below treats learning as a cycle: identify a real academic task; diagnose its language and literacy demands; teach the relevant forms and strategies; rehearse the task through communicative practice; provide staged feedback; and check whether learning transfers to a new text or situation. The cycle is adaptable across disciplines and proficiency levels.

Table 1 summarizes the proposed framework. Its indicators are suggestions for classroom evaluation, not results from a study conducted for this article. They focus on observable performance so that teachers can distinguish familiarity with terminology from the ability to use it, and general confidence from participation in actual academic activity.

Table 1. Proposed EAP teaching cycle

Learning demand	Instructional response	Possible evidence of progress
Academic vocabulary	Teach high-value terms, word families, collocations, retrieval, and productive use in context.	Accurate use of target terms in a new paragraph or discussion.
Academic reading	Model annotation of claims, evidence, structure, and source relationships.	A concise, accurate summary with relevant evidence identified.
Academic writing	Use genre models, guided drafting, peer response, and focused teacher feedback.	A revised source-based text aligned with an explicit rubric.
Listening and speaking	Combine lecture/listening practice with rehearsal, discussion, and presentations.	Comprehension notes and contributions that respond to evidence or peers.
Learner variability and access	Vary scaffolding, pacing, modality, and practice while retaining shared goals.	Progress across repeated tasks and participation in more than one format.

Note. The framework and indicators are proposed for future classroom use; they are not findings from an intervention reported in this article.

6. Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The central implication is that EAP challenges should be addressed as connected demands on academic participation. Vocabulary supports reading and writing, but its value becomes visible when learners can use it to explain a concept or make a claim. Reading supplies ideas and evidence for writing, while discussion provides opportunities to test interpretations and rehearse disciplinary language. A coherent sequence can make these relationships explicit and help students understand why each activity matters.

A practical course can begin with a needs map built from assignment instructions, sample readings, lecture materials, and brief learner consultation. Teachers can then identify recurring genres and language demands. A weekly unit might ask students to read a short field-specific text, notice a small set of high-value terms, identify the author's claim and evidence, discuss one interpretive question, and write a short response using cited support. Feedback can target one or two priorities at a time, with later tasks revisiting earlier learning.

Differentiation should preserve a shared intellectual purpose while adjusting support. Some learners may need a glossary, audio replay, model paragraph, or additional planning time; others may benefit

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from a more challenging source or a requirement to synthesize contrasting positions. Digital tools can support access and retrieval, but they should be chosen for a defined learning function and paired with active use. Evidence from mobile-assisted vocabulary work (Mohammadi et al., 2024) supports the potential of digital practice for vocabulary development, not the claim that technology alone resolves EAP barriers.

Assessment should reflect the tasks students need to perform. A useful programme can combine vocabulary checks, reading annotations, short source-based writing, seminar contributions, and presentations. Rubrics should make expectations transparent and distinguish language accuracy from argument, evidence, organization, and interaction. Repeated low-stakes assessment can show progress and guide instruction; it should not be used to label students according to a single test or performance.

Institutional support matters as much as classroom technique. Universities can coordinate language instructors with disciplinary faculty, provide accessible academic resources, make tutoring available, and offer professional development in inclusive EAP design. The wider literature emphasizes that academic writing and participation are shaped by institutional conventions as well as individual skill (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Lea & Street, 1998). An EAP programme is therefore strongest when it helps students navigate real expectations while also making those expectations teachable.

7. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

This article is a narrative synthesis, not a systematic review or empirical classroom study. Its coverage is selective and does not claim to represent the full EAP literature; no formal database screening protocol or exhaustive search is presented. The proposed framework has not been tested with the author's students or in any specified university course. Accordingly, the discussion should be read as a literature-informed proposal rather than evidence of intervention effectiveness.

Future research could test the framework in discipline-specific EAP courses using a clearly described sample, teaching sequence, and assessment plan. Studies might compare learners' performance on source-based writing and oral tasks before and after instruction, examine how vocabulary recognition relates to productive use, or investigate which supports improve participation for learners with different proficiency profiles. Qualitative interviews and classroom observation could clarify how students interpret feedback and academic conventions. Reporting context, instruments, duration, and limitations would allow other institutions to judge whether results transfer to their settings.

8. Conclusion

Academic English learning is demanding because university participation draws on vocabulary, comprehension, genre knowledge, evidence use, listening, speaking, confidence, and access to support at the same time. The literature reviewed here points away from fragmented instruction and toward an integrated, task-centered approach. EAP teachers can make academic expectations explicit, connect language practice to authentic disciplinary work, support interaction through staged rehearsal, and use feedback and assessment to guide further learning.

The proposed framework offers a practical starting point for that work, not a claim that one method fits every learner or institution. Its value will depend on adaptation to students' disciplines, needs, and resources, followed by careful evaluation. When academic English is taught as a means of participating in knowledge-making—not simply as a list of grammatical forms—students gain clearer routes into the reading, writing, and exchange that higher education requires.

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Declarations

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