

# English for academic purposes: an evaluation of listening skills

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Received: 27/06/2023; Accepted: 06/07/2023; Published

**Abstract:** This article evaluates "Oxford EAP: A course in English for Academic Purposes," highlighting a lack of authenticity in its depiction of the academic experience. Despite its strengths in lecture length and note-taking exercises, the coursebook requires improvement. Recommendations are given to enhance authenticity, including adjustments to language, structure, and note-taking application.

**Keywords:** Oxford EAP, Authenticity, Listening, Lecture, Note-taking

## 1. Introduction

There are more and more foreign students attending lectures that are presented in the English language. This is because of the substantially growing number of non-native speaking learners taking courses in English speaking countries and the increasing numbers of nations where English is not considered the first language offering English-medium higher education level instruction. These students frequently undertake intensive English programs in order to prepare for academic lectures. As part of these courses, learners are often provided with drills in academic listening skills, as well as a textbook utilized as the fundamental practice material.

This paper seeks to provide a critique regarding the treatment of listening skills in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) textbook. Next, the textbook content evaluation in terms of the syllabus will be presented, followed by pedagogical implications for teaching EAP.

## 2. Discussion

The book to be evaluated is *Oxford EAP: A course in English for Academic Purposes*, student edition, by Chazal and McCarter (2012), published by Oxford University Press. This textbook has been designed to develop essential skills and academic language for students who are preparing to study in English at university level. The targeted learners are at upper-intermediate (B2) level. The listening section in *Oxford EAP*, according to its authors, is claimed to:

"... focus mainly on listening to lectures. It uses short, video-based extracts from lectures to help you understand key information and language, as well as

aspects of style and structure. Note-taking is a key part of most modules, and the module usually ends with a critical think task evaluating the content of the lecture".

### 2.1. Language

Importance markers are defined by Deroey and Taverniers (2012) as lexico-grammatical devices which reflect the significance, relevance, or importance of points that are expressed visually or verbally. Deroey (2018), in a research to examine the representativeness of language in lectures from listening textbooks, has pointed out several types of importance markers in lecture corpus of British Academic Spoken Discourse (BASE). Table 1 provides some marker types that are predominant in the lecture corpus. In *Oxford EAP*, these importance markers from listening activities are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Main importance maker types in lecture corpus BASE (N=782) (Deroey 2018: 61)

Type	N	%
V n/clause (e.g. remember that ...)	264	33.7
MN v-link (e.g. the point is ...)	162	20.7
1s pers pron V n/clause (e.g. I want to stress ...)	70	8.9
adj MN v-link (e.g. the importance point is ...)	64	8.2
2 pers pron V n/clause (e.g. you have to remember ...)	41	5.2

Table 2. Importance markers appearing in *Oxford EAP: A course in English for Academic Purposes*

Type	N	%
V n/clause (e.g. remember that ...)	focus on, moving on to, meaning that, ...	8.1
MN v-link (e.g. the point is ...)	the purpose of today's lecture is, the focus of this lecture is, the point is, ...	8.1

1s pers pron V n/ clause (e.g. I want to stress ...)	I'm going to start by, I also want to look at, I should just say that, I just want to look briefly at, I'll explain this in more details, as I said, I'm referring to, I mean, ...	33.5
adj MN v-link (e.g. the importance point is ...)	a clear second in the list is, the main point to make here is, the key points are, our central question, ...	29.5
2 pers pron V n/ clause (e.g. you have to remember ...)	as you will remember, if you have done the reading, ...	20.8

Capital letters denote the key element in the pattern.

V = lexical verb; n = noun/ pronoun; MN = metalinguistic noun; v-link = linking verb; 1s pers pron = first person singular pronoun; adj = adjective; 2 pers pron = second person pronoun.

It can be seen that *Oxford EAP* offers a number of explicit phrases that perform a highlighting function by the usage of 'I' (33.5%), provide markers regarding adjectival evaluation (29.5%), and direct learners' attention through 'you' (20.8). Yet, the language stressing points, which is rather multifunctional and implicit (Deroy and Taverniers 2012), namely V n/ clause (e.g. *focus on*) (8.1) and MN v-link (e.g. *the point is*) (8.1) is rarely presented in the book. It can be concluded that when compared to Deroy's (2018) findings concerning main importance markers used in a large corpus of authentic lectures, *Oxford EAP* tends prefer more transparent markers, with preference given to 1s pers pron V n/ clause (e.g. *I just want to look briefly at*). This illustrates that explicit markers that are rarely found in authentic lectures are likely to be what learners are frequently trained to identify in listening textbooks. Gilmore (2007: 98) also advocated this idea that 'the language presented to students in textbooks is a poor presentation of the real thing'. More prevalent phrases are phrases which do not consist of transparent defining verbs that make it less noticeable for listeners in order to discern something being given definition. Consequently, it is assumed that language learners tend to miss relationships that are signaled by the importance markers (Rodgers and Webb 2016).

Another issue that needs to be taken into consideration is that the lecturers in *Oxford EAP: A course in English for Academic Purposes* are from English speaking countries. It should be commented

that due to inadequate exposure to different accents of English, listeners have a tendency of facing challenges of recognizing words in lecturers' accent.

### 2.2. Lecture structure

It is stated by Rodgers and Webb (2016: 171) that: Most EAP listening programs are based upon commercial textbooks. The downside of this is that these textbooks tend to present the structure and language of the lectures as simply organized and transparently coherent. Actual lectures, however, are a much less tidy form of discourse.

It is also commented by Thompson (2003: 14) that 'read aloud texts are much more listener-friendly, the texts are shorter and less informationally complex, and their organization is more carefully signaled'. It should be noted that while *Oxford EAP* seems to be relatively explicit, coherent, and self-contained (see Appendix 1), the authentic listening materials are much more 'messy' in the style of delivery (Flowerdew and Miller 1997: 32). One essential characteristic differentiating authentic lecture discourse from scripted lectures or written texts is how they are structured at micro level. Authentic listening materials are structured in accordance with groups of tone, commonly in the form of incomplete grammatical units, while it can be seen from the listening extract of *Oxford EAP* that clauses are complete and separated by punctuation. In addition, pauses rarely occur in the textbook.

The length of the lectures is also a factor that affects the authenticity of a listening script. MacDonald, Badger and White (2000: 260) believe that 'as with many published EAP materials, the audiotaped lecture was a miniature synthetic lecture'. It is supposed to be much shorter than a majority of academic monologues. *Oxford EAP* provides listening practice tasks of between 30 and 50 minutes. By the inclusion of longer texts, there is a likelihood that language learners of *Oxford EAP* could be greatly assisted with real lectures.

### 2.3. Note-taking in lectures

It should be noted that information presented in the form of a note is recorded is deemed to play a vital part in what the learners do in higher education setting. Note-taking can be understood as a process which is considered to be rather complex and personal. It serves to improve the clarity of the content of the lecture by paraphrasing lecturers' words, summarizing long stretches of information, and highlighting items in order to make them more

noticeable. There are several substantial benefits of note-taking that could greatly assist EAP listeners. Note-taking has been proved to offer learners opportunities for organizing the content of the lectures while listening, aiding the encoding process of memory, maintaining concentration during the lecture, and consolidating the knowledge in the pre-reading part of the lecture. Accordingly, note-taking seems to be of great necessity in EAP courses, notably in discerning and documenting the topics and subtopics discussed.

In *Oxford EAP*, note-taking occupies a crucial role in each module. Learners are required to listen attentively to the recordings and take notes on the main ideas. However, this type of listening practice exercises might be comparatively outdated. This is because of the wide use of PowerPoint and Moodle which is an open-source learning management platform. To be more specific, the materials of the lecture are made available on Moodle prior to the class. As a result, learners can take notes directly on the actual slides' printed copies or the lecture handout. I consider this an advantage as it eases real strain of having to record all the key points. Notwithstanding, it is likely to change the way information is recorded and tends to be rather taxing for L2 listeners (Rodgers and Webb 2016: 172). Because lecturers have a tendency of paraphrasing information instead of reading directly from the slides while making sure that the main points are embellished with examples and definitions, the purpose of note-taking has been changed to recognizing verbal information that is not presented on the slides.

#### 2.4. Implications for teaching EAP

Considering the above discussion, several pedagogical implications for teaching EAP listening skills can be made. First, teachers might want to supplement the teaching with 'simplified texts that gradually approximate with authentic ones' (Gilmore 2007: 108), which would, according to Flowerdew and Miller (1997: 44), assist the development of strategies 'to deal with the 'messiness' of real lectures'. Additionally, a better preparation could be provided for their more implicit signposting.

Second, there is a recent change in how lectures are delivered, and the resulting shift in how notes are taken. As a result, EAP learners should be provided with instruction in terms of how to read PowerPoint slides and take notes. Also, direct instruction in the way to extract appropriate information from

paraphrased lecture materials is necessary because it tends to be difficult for students to comprehend the lecturers' paraphrasing of information.

### 3. Conclusion

*Oxford EAP* displays a general lack of authenticity in its approach to teaching the subject matter. Despite this overarching concern, it should be noted that the coursebook does include relevant exercises centered around the appropriate length of lectures and the practice of note-taking skills. These aspects may be seen as valuable by some students and educators but fall short of delivering a fully authentic experience for learners seeking proficiency in EAP.

In conclusion, the evaluation of *Oxford EAP*: has led to the identification of key areas where improvements can be made to enhance the authenticity of the learning experience. Through thoughtful recommendations, the coursebook's approach can be refined to offer a more genuine and effective learning path for those pursuing English for Academic Purposes. The focus on language, structure, and note-taking skills represents a holistic approach to addressing the challenges faced in teaching this specialized form of English.

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