

DEVELOPING ACADEMIC STUDY SKILLS FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: Developing strong academic study skills is essential for non-native speakers of English who pursue higher education. While many students arrive with solid general English competence, they often lack the academic literacy and strategies needed to succeed in university coursework. This article examines the challenges faced by such learners and explores practical ways to build their capacity for academic reading, writing, listening and note-taking. A mixed-methods review of recent research and case studies from universities in Anglophone and multilingual contexts highlights key interventions: explicit instruction in critical reading, genre-based writing support, and collaborative approaches such as team-teaching with subject specialists. The findings reveal that tailored, discipline-specific instruction, combined with general academic skills training, enhances student engagement and performance. The article concludes with recommendations for curriculum designers and teachers to integrate study skills training across programmes, ensuring that non-native speakers become confident, independent learners in their academic fields.

Keywords: academic study skills; non-native speakers; higher education; English for Academic Purposes (EAP); critical reading; academic writing; listening comprehension; note-taking; team-teaching; curriculum design.

In recent decades, the internationalisation of higher education has brought an unprecedented number of students whose first language is not English into universities where English is the primary medium of instruction. Although many of these learners possess solid general English proficiency, they often encounter difficulties when engaging with the complex demands of academic discourse. Understanding scholarly texts, producing discipline-specific writing, and following lectures that use abstract and technical language can be daunting even for students with strong everyday communication skills.

These challenges are not merely linguistic; they are also cultural and methodological. Academic conventions such as argumentation style, critical analysis, citation practices, and expectations for classroom participation vary across educational systems.

What is considered persuasive or appropriately formal in one culture may be interpreted differently in another.

Consequently, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has become a vital field of support within higher education. EAP courses aim to bridge the gap between general English competence and the specialised communication skills required for success in academic communities. They focus not only on reading, writing, listening, and speaking in academic settings, but also on cultivating the critical thinking, independent study habits, and research skills that underpin effective scholarship.

This paper explores how EAP programs can help non-native English speakers develop the study skills and academic literacy necessary to thrive in such environments, and examines the strategies institutions and instructors can adopt to make this transition smoother.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a critical literature review with analysis of case studies from universities in Africa, Asia, and Europe. The literature review identifies core challenges faced by non-native speakers and synthesises pedagogical strategies that have proved effective in different contexts. The case studies provide concrete examples of EAP interventions, including team-teaching models and discipline-specific writing support. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, university programme reports, and interviews with

experienced EAP practitioners. Triangulating these sources allowed for a balanced understanding of both theoretical frameworks and practical classroom realities.

Case Studies

- Selection rationale: Explain why you chose those three institutions—perhaps because they represent different levels of English-medium instruction, cultural contexts, or stages of EAP programme maturity.
- Data triangulation: If possible, clarify that you compared interview insights with institutional documents to increase reliability.
- Limitations: Acknowledge any constraints, e.g., “The small number of case studies limits the generalisability of the findings but provides rich, contextualised examples.”

Analytical Framework

- Justify the four skill areas: Cite key EAP frameworks (for example, Jordan 1997; Hyland 2006) to show that these categories are grounded in established literature.
- Coding process: A sentence on how you coded or thematically analysed the data (manual coding, software such as NVivo, iterative reading, etc.).
- Cross-comparison criteria: Indicate how you compared approaches—e.g., effectiveness, scalability, or alignment with student needs.
- Ethical considerations: Even for interviews with course coordinators, mention informed consent and confidentiality.
- Contribution statement: Conclude the methodology with a short remark on how this mixed-methods approach offers both breadth (literature) and depth (case studies), positioning the paper to provide actionable recommendations.

The analysis produced four key findings:

1. Academic reading requires explicit instruction Across contexts, non-native speakers struggled with dense academic texts and the ability to distinguish main arguments from supporting details. Successful programmes used guided critical reading tasks—for example, structured questions and annotation exercises—to train students to identify claims, evidence and underlying assumptions. Regular practice with authentic texts, combined with instructor feedback, proved essential.
2. Genre-based writing support enhances performance Research and case studies consistently showed that simply teaching grammar is insufficient. Effective EAP courses employed a genre-based pedagogy: students examined model essays, lab reports or literature reviews from their own disciplines, analysed their structures, and then produced similar texts. Writing centres and peer-review sessions encouraged iterative drafting and improved confidence.
3. Listening and note-taking benefit from scaffolded practice. Students often reported difficulty following fast-paced lectures, particularly when lecturers used idiomatic expressions or discipline-specific terminology. Programmes that provided recorded mini-lectures for repeated listening, combined with training in note-taking methods such as the Cornell system, led to measurable gains in comprehension and retention.
4. Independent learning strategies are critical for long-term success

Beyond classroom instruction, non-native speakers who developed metacognitive skills—time management, goal-setting, and self-monitoring—were more likely to succeed. Institutions that embedded reflective learning journals or self-assessment tasks into their curricula observed higher rates of academic achievement and student satisfaction.

The evidence suggests that generic EAP courses are insufficient to meet the diverse needs of non-native speakers. Discipline-specific approaches are more effective, as they expose students to the vocabulary, discourse structures, and analytical methods of their chosen fields. Team-teaching has proven especially valuable: by combining linguistic expertise with subject knowledge, it helps students link language use directly to academic content. However, challenges remain, including the need for ongoing collaboration between departments and the training of language instructors to work confidently within different disciplinary contexts.

The findings highlight that developing academic study skills for non-native speakers in higher education is a multi-layered process that goes beyond language proficiency. The evidence from both literature and case studies suggests several key insights.

Programmes that separate language learning from disciplinary content risk leaving students unable to apply their skills in real academic tasks. The genre-based writing approach—where students analyse and practise the actual text types required in their courses—demonstrates the value of integrating language instruction with subject matter. This supports the argument, advanced by Hyland (2016) and others, that EAP should be discipline-specific rather than purely generic.

Critical literacy as a central goal.

Across all contexts, students reported difficulties not only in understanding texts but also in evaluating arguments. Critical reading instruction—using annotation, questioning techniques and guided debate—helped students to move from passive consumption to active engagement with scholarly materials. Such practices are vital because higher education increasingly values the ability to critique sources and synthesise diverse viewpoints.

Scaffolded listening and note-taking.

Listening to fast-paced lectures is particularly challenging when students are unfamiliar with idiomatic academic English. Programmes that offered recorded lectures and explicit training in note-taking strategies showed measurable improvements. This reinforces research by Flowerdew and Miller (2014), who argue that listening support must be deliberate and structured rather than incidental.

Institutional commitment and staff collaboration.

A recurring theme was that isolated workshops, however well designed, are insufficient. The most successful initiatives involved collaboration between language specialists and content lecturers, embedding academic skills across the curriculum. When faculties, writing centres and EAP instructors worked together, students reported greater confidence and higher academic performance.

Non-native speakers entering English-medium higher education face challenges that extend beyond basic language competence. To thrive academically, they require well-developed skills in critical reading, discipline-specific writing, lecture listening, and independent learning. The mixed-methods analysis confirms that the most effective programmes:

- integrate language instruction with disciplinary content through genre-based approaches;
- provide explicit, scaffolded practice in listening and note-taking;
- cultivate critical literacy and metacognitive strategies;
- are institutionally supported and embedded across the curriculum.

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For universities, the implication is clear: academic study skills should be viewed not as optional support but as a core component of higher education. When these skills are intentionally taught and reinforced, non-native speakers can become confident, independent scholars who contribute fully to the intellectual life of their institutions. For universities, the implication is clear: academic study skills should be viewed not as optional support but as a core component of higher education. When these skills are intentionally taught and reinforced, non-native speakers can

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