

# ELT



## Ireland bulletin

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Social Media Numbers by Joanne Mitten

Treasuring ELT Ireland by Liliana O'Reilly

Acknowledgements by Editor, Peter Lahiff

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## How I moved from ELT to EAP and what I learned along the way

by Stephen Bruce (DIFC)

As an EAP teacher (English for Academic Purposes), I occasionally mention my struggles with academia to the students I now work with. In 1995, I failed my Leaving Certificate. Three years later, I scored single digits in my second year Philosophy exams. The year before that, I'd attended one tutorial and no more than a dozen lectures. Back then, you'd hear all the old chestnuts about university – throw you in at the deep end; what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. These Nietzschean platitudes are all well and good if you do eventually start swimming, but God, university can be a tough place if you start to sink. By any measure, my early academic career was a series of abject failures, each one nudging me back out the door I'd barely managed to get through in the first place.

Within the field, there is some debate as to what exactly EAP entails and what represents best practice, but I think the ultimate goal of this branch of ELT is fairly straightforward: to help international students who are trying to enter (or have recently entered) a university environment. And the help that I feel best qualified to offer is in preparing my students to stay afloat, to persist when the language, the course load and the idiosyncrasies of a Western third level university threaten to overwhelm them.

Like most EAP teachers, I started out teaching general English. I spent five years or so moving up and down the Headway scales. I was busy in the summer, less so in the winter. I wore jeans to work and I agonised over the best way to teach the present perfect. My students tended to be Europeans, over in Dublin for a cultural experience and a chance to improve their fluency, and generally appreciative of my efforts and tolerant of the ludicrously complex role plays I inflicted upon them. Then, around 2005, I noticed that everyone seemed to be really concerned with exams. Initially, it seemed that students were taking these exams to enhance their professional CVs, but as I started to get more students from outside of Europe, the purpose of taking these tests became much more about entering university.

Quite quickly, my teaching life changed. These students were under tremendous pressure to do well in exams that I had no control over. For these students, the exam was everything and class time that was not directly relevant was viewed with suspicion. Reacting to this change in the stakes, I stopped wearing jeans to work, rationalising that trousers and a shirt and tie would show I was taking things as seriously as the students were. Instead of the present perfect, I began to lose sleep over how best to summarise a graph. My goal as a teacher was to help my students get the grade that would get them through the door of their chosen university. I didn't give a whole lot of thought to what would happen after that; there didn't really seem to be time and the exams loomed so large that it was hard to see what was waiting on the other side.

To a large extent, EAP concerns itself with what is on the other side. Of course, in many EAP programmes exams do play a part in student assessment but really, the focus is on the academic skills a student in university will be required to call upon. So many of these skills are simply not covered in standard examinations: writing a research paper; referencing; giving presentations; taking part in seminars; critical thinking; note-taking; paraphrasing. Then there are the expectations (either from the student or the lecturer) that can cause difficulties if left unspoken. For instance, a grade of 65% might be a respectable mark to the professor giving it but a disheartening failure to the student receiving it. That might not seem like such a big deal but too many instances of that kind can erode the student's confidence and affect their ability to do well.

And we want them to do well. International students contribute a lot to the university directly through higher fees, indirectly through increased internationalisation and overall, to the country's economy through the rents they pay and the goods and services they spend their money on. And we in the teaching profession are obvious beneficiaries of all of this as well. Increasingly, there are job opportunities here in Ireland for EAP teachers. In the UK, EAP is a much more established area. During the summer months, most large universities employ EAP teachers to work on pre-sessional courses at far more generous rates than we would be used to here. Here in Ireland, summer tends to mean increased numbers of tourist/students from Europe. In that context, qualifications and teaching experience are not so valuable; a TEFL cert and enthusiasm are usually enough to do a very good job.

**“preparing my students to stay afloat, to persist when the language, the course load and the idiosyncrasies of a Western third level university”**

Teaching EAP, to me, is an avenue the long serving ELT teacher should explore. There are opportunities out there – far more in the UK, but I believe that things in Ireland are beginning to change. As more students come to Ireland intending to study at university, as the needs of these students become better understood, there will be increased demand for teachers to help them. In the UK, there is a global forum for EAP professionals called BALEAP (it used to be called the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes but I think it prefers to see itself as a name in and of itself rather than an acronym). At their 2015 conference, much of the conversation was around the topic of academic discourse. Essentially, English for Academic Purposes is no longer seen as something exclusively for international students. Instead, the conventions and language of academic discourse are viewed as a particular set of skills that all students need help learning, regardless of where they come from. As a result, many of these language support providers in universities are dropping the English part from their names and rebranding as Academic Skills. In essence, there is a growing view that academia is a unique place, with its own language and conventions, that can baffle and overwhelm the outsider. An exam can never really teach all of that. An EAP teacher can.

Further reading:

BALEAP: This is the forum for people working in EAP. Has very good jobs board and information about CPD opportunities and their conferences, [baleap.org/home000](http://baleap.org/home000)

Teaching EAP An excellent blog on various areas of interest in EAP. Dr. Alex Ding is especially good on where EAP sits within the wider university and the identity of EAP, [teachingeap.wordpress.com](http://teachingeap.wordpress.com)

Alternatively: Twitter – lots of wonderful people in EAP at #tleap

## Thoughts on digital re-entry

by Mary Shepherd (ATC)

Having stepped out of the classroom for a few years, re-entry appeared the same at first sight: same classroom formations, same issues, same grammar, but there are a few extra wires and a yoke sticking out of the wall overhead. Not daunting. Until you realise that the smart board requires different writing, and you need to know what the wires do, where they go and how they differ between devices. And everyone is addicted to their phones.

Well, if you can't beat them, join them. There's no time like the present. Strike while the iron's hot. You aren't getting any younger. Just do it. All the posters tell me so. Cliches and proverbs aside, I really did have to decide if I was going to get on board the tech train or just retire quietly. Tech isn't going away and students are more tech-savvy with every month that goes by.

So, how did I do it? Start I mean. I'm learning something new every day – just like my learners. I took the bull by the horns. Swallowed my pride and my 25 years experience and ... gulp ...asked for help.

Simple things to start with. Each class had at least one student who was more than willing to be the IT guy. I also twinned with a tech savvy teacher and after a few months I got the hang of what wire goes in where; it was just a matter of making sure the volume wasn't left on mute and so on. I also found out that by using my own personal hotspot on my 4g phone I could access wifi if I didn't want to plug the internet cable in directly. But that is going too fast. I must explain that each of these things took about a month to master. That was hard. Maybe because I was the same age as some of the students' mothers, they seemed to be more patient with me than I was with myself. Frequently, I caught those across the classroom glances which my teenager has also mastered. These say: 'sheesh, typical dinosaur, will she never learn.' So I adapted. I learned to laugh at myself and they learned the phrase 'bear with me'.



A good egg. Joining the #ELTChinwag on twitter is a good start to getting technical.

Pic by ELT Ireland