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Learning transfer in English-for-academic-purposes contexts: A systematic review of research



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A B S T R A C T

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A fundamental goal of EAP instruction is learning transfer to students' other courses. Although research has provided evidence of such transfer, gaps exist regarding its circumstances. However, a related body of research, focusing on learning in EAP contexts, is of value here: While this research does not provide evidence of transfer specifically to other courses, it does provide evidence of transfer across situations in EAP contexts, and an analysis of this can shed light on transfer to other courses. Therefore, 41 studies that investigated learning in EAP contexts were analyzed using the transfer taxonomy (Barnett & Ceci, 2002) (i.e., a 9-dimension analytic tool developed to clarify research on transfer and used to analyze studies in experimental psychology). This analysis revealed much about what is possible for transfer in EAP contexts, specifically that (a) instruction can result in transfer, and such transfer can (b) involve various kinds of learning, (c) have a positive impact on the quality of students' work, (d) occur in situations that place minimal demands on students' memories and in situations that place greater demands on students' memories, and (e) occur across varying distances. Implications for research and practice in EAP contexts are discussed.

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1. Introduction

English for academic purposes (EAP) describes “any English teaching that relates to a study purpose” (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p.34). In other words, EAP instruction aims to help students who are non-native speakers of English to participate in academic contexts or in academic activities that involve the use of English, for example to study in English-medium elementary/secondary schools, colleges, and universities. It is critical, then, that when students are participating in such contexts or activities, they are able to successfully apply whatever EAP instruction has helped them to learn. This is reflected in the notion that the goals of EAP instruction are “transcendent” (Leki & Carson, 1997, p.39). Meeting these goals therefore involves *learning transfer*, which occurs “when learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with another set of materials” (Perkins & Salomon, 1994, p.6452). For EAP instruction to be considered successful, learning transfer is necessary.

However, promoting learning transfer from EAP instruction poses a substantial challenge. Generally speaking, successful learning does not automatically lead to successful transfer: A vast body of research findings in psychology, education, and human resources development indicates that learning does not inevitably transfer and that transfer can be difficult to stimulate (e.g., see reviews by Detterman, 1993, and Haskell, 2001). Furthermore, academic contexts in which transfer is

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expected to occur are complex. In these contexts, students often need to be able to participate in a variety of activities that deal with diverse issues from a range of disciplines, and this must be done in a regularly shifting landscape of people (e.g., teachers and classmates) and places (e.g., classrooms) over an extended period of time (e.g., 3 or 4 years in a secondary school, 4 years in undergraduate studies). Furthermore, these activities may not include explicit clues (e.g., in a teacher's instructions) that lessons learned during EAP instruction would be helpful, and when transfer does occur, it may involve various kinds of learning (e.g., a strategy for listening to lectures, a rule for documenting sources) and various kinds of impacts (e.g., higher grades, faster work). This complexity is apparent in needs analysis research that has identified numerous challenges faced by non-native speakers of English in English-medium academic contexts (e.g., [Bacha & Bahous, 2008](#); [Bosher & Smalkoski, 2002](#); [Cheng & Fox, 2008](#); [Evans & Green, 2007](#); [Harklau, 1994](#); [Leki, 2001, 2003, 2006](#); [Spack, 1997](#); [Waters, 1996](#)). The challenges are evident, for example, in the model of communicative language proficiency in academic contexts developed by [Chapelle, Grabe, and Berns \(1997\)](#). This model describes academic language use as occurring in at least 12 different settings (e.g., classroom, laboratory, library, office), with 40 different text types (e.g., informal conversations, lectures, textbooks, research papers), involving 21 different kinds of tasks (e.g., comprehending main idea and details, inferring, persuading, summarizing); based on these numbers, the academic activities in which students participate could involve any of over 10,000 different combinations of setting, text type, and task type.

Amplifying this challenge is the complexity of transfer itself, as transfer can be influenced by multiple factors and can occur in multiple ways. For example, one factor that can influence transfer is the degree of similarity/difference between situations. [Perkins and Salomon \(1994\)](#) distinguished between *near transfer*, which occurs between similar situations, and *far transfer*, which occurs between different situations, and researchers have pointed out that near transfer is easier to achieve than far transfer (e.g., [Brooks & Dansereau, 1987](#); [Clark & Voogel, 1985](#); [Detterman, 1993](#); [McKeachie, 1987](#)). Another factor that can influence transfer is the learning involved. [Perkins and Salomon \(1988\)](#) explained that transfer can occur along the *low road*, which means transfer involves “the automatic triggering of well-practiced routines” (p.25), or along the *high road*, which means transfer involves “deliberate mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge” (p.25); therefore, specific facts or procedures may be expected to transfer differently than general principles or rules. A third factor that can influence transfer is the presence of clues. [Detterman \(1993\)](#) pointed out that many studies that claimed to show transfer involved “just telling the subject to transfer by using hints or outright suggestions” or “manipulations that call the subject's attention, in obvious ways, to what the experimenter expects on the transfer problem” (p.15). Finally, whether transfer is identified depends on the impact one looks for. [Perkins and Salomon \(1994\)](#) pointed out that the impact of transfer can be positive or negative. Furthermore, this impact might involve different aspects of an activity, for example efficacy (e.g., the quality of a student's work), efficiency (e.g., the speed of a student's work), or approach (e.g., the procedure a student uses).

Despite the substantial challenge, evidence does exist to suggest that learning can transfer from EAP instruction to students' work in other courses. Such evidence comes from studies of EAP instruction in various contexts, including institutions of higher education in Australia ([Dooey, 2010](#); [Terraschke & Wahid, 2011](#)), Bahrain ([Hayes, Holden-Rachiotis, Kavanagh, & Otoom, 2011](#)), Canada ([Currie, 1999](#); [James, 2006a](#)), New Zealand ([Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002](#)), and the United States ([James, 2010](#); [Kasper, 1997](#); [Leki, 1995](#); [Leki & Carson, 1994](#); [Moulton & Holmes, 2000](#); [Snow & Brinton, 1988](#); [Song, 2006](#); [Spack, 1997](#)).

However, gaps are apparent because these findings provide limited detail about the transfer that occurred. Some of these studies produced evidence of transfer through analyses of academic records of students: [Kasper \(1997\)](#) and [Song \(2006\)](#) compared students who received content-based EAP instruction to students who received non-content-based EAP instruction and found that the former group outperformed the latter in terms of success in subsequent English courses, graduation rates, and overall GPA. This superior performance suggests that content-based EAP instruction led to some kind of transfer; however, beyond a general indication of where transfer occurred, the circumstances associated with this transfer are unclear.

Although more information is available in the studies in which evidence of transfer came from students' reports (i.e., in survey questionnaires, interviews, or email dialogs) and from students' performance (i.e., on writing tasks in other courses), there are still important gaps. These studies point to various kinds of learning that can transfer from EAP instruction to students' work in other courses, including learning related to reading ([Hayes et al., 2011](#); [James, 2006a](#); [Snow & Brinton, 1988](#); [Spack, 1997](#); [Terraschke & Wahid, 2011](#)), writing ([Basturkmen & Lewis, 2002](#); [Dooey, 2010](#); [Hayes et al., 2011](#); [James, 2006a, 2010](#); [Leki, 1995](#); [Leki & Carson, 1994](#); [Moulton & Holmes, 2000](#); [Snow & Brinton, 1988](#); [Terraschke & Wahid, 2011](#)), listening ([Hayes et al., 2011](#); [James, 2006a](#); [Snow & Brinton, 1988](#)), speaking ([James, 2006a](#); [Moulton & Holmes, 2000](#)), and academic study in general, for example managing time ([Hayes et al., 2011](#); [Snow & Brinton, 1988](#)), finding sources ([Leki & Carson, 1994](#); [Moulton & Holmes, 2000](#)), preparing for tests ([James, 2006a](#)), and conducting analyses ([Currie, 1999](#)). However, there is little detailed information about this transfer in terms of impact or the characteristics of the activities involved. Furthermore, there is little information about the relationship between EAP instruction and the learning that transferred. In some studies ([Leki 1995](#); [Leki & Carson, 1994](#)), students were asked about EAP courses they had taken in the past, without reference to any specific EAP courses. The other studies focused on specific EAP courses, but because non-experimental research designs were involved, it is difficult to determine what role the EAP instruction played in any transfer, for example whether the EAP instruction helped students to learn new skills or to improve existing skills, and whether the EAP instruction was the only source of support for this learning. Pointing to this potential problem, [James \(2010\)](#) explained that the transfer observed in that study could have originated in the EAP course under investigation but could also have originated elsewhere, and suggested that “to generate sharper images of the impact that particular instructional settings (e.g., a specific EAP writing course) have on transfer, future research might examine more directly the learning that occurs in that instructional setting” (p.199).

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