Guest Editorial

English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) Writing

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This special issue of Writing & Pedagogy is dedicated to English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) writing. The demand for Academic English is growing exponentially with the increase in numbers of students for whom English is not their first language studying through the medium of English, whether overseas in Anglo-sphere countries or in their home countries, where English is the medium of instruction. Arguably the most important of the four macro-skills that students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) will need is writing, as reflected, for example, in the number of EAP writing courses offered and in the demands put on students in their content courses. This is reflected also in a comparable increase in the amount of research on academic writing published in the field of EAP, as exemplified by the increasing submission and publication rates of articles on writing of journals such as English for Specific Purposes, Journal of English for Academic Purposes, Journal of Second Language Writing, and Written Communication, and the creation or expansion of newer international, regional, local and open access journals such as Asian ESP Journal, English for Specific Purposes World, ESP Across Cultures, Ibérica, and Journal of Academic Writing, all of which publish articles on academic writing.

There is a long-standing debate within the field of EAP concerning the degree of specificity that should be the target of the endeavor. Proponents of English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) argue for a broad-brush or wide-angle approach, seeking to prepare students who have English as an additional language (EAL) in a general way for their academic studies, whatever their field of study. Advocates of ESAP, in contrast, promote a more specific, or narrow angle, approach, taking into account the
particular disciplines that their students will be studying in the future or are already studying and preparing them with the specific language and skills needed in those disciplines. As I make clear in my Featured Essay, the goal of this special issue is not to argue that ESAP is superior in all circumstances to EGAP. There may be conditions where ESAP is not suitable and EGAP is the preferred alternative. This might be the case where there are not enough students in any single discipline or field of studies to make ESAP feasible from a resources point of view. It might also be the case that EGAP is to be preferred because the teachers involved are not adequately prepared or willing or able to put in the extra time necessary to target specific disciplines, or there may be problems of access to the relevant content courses. On the other hand, there are sound theoretical and pedagogical reasons for focusing on ESAP, as I set out, again, in my Featured Essay. Although the EGAP/ESAP argument is well documented, there is no volume or special journal issue, to my knowledge, either in the EAP or the Second Language Writing field, which focuses specifically on ESAP writing. This is the justification for this special issue.

The special issue is divided into the regular sections for Writing & Pedagogy: Featured Essay, Research Matters, Reflections on Practice and From the E-sphere.

In the Featured Essay, I set out a range of issues in play as far as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing is concerned, but with a special emphasis on English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) (as opposed to English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP)). I then go on to review work in a range of areas of relevance to ESAP writing: register and discourse analysis; genre analysis; corpus analysis; ethnography; contrastive rhetoric; classroom methodology; critical approaches; and assessment. I conclude by arguing that whichever model of writing is chosen (EGAP or ESAP), or if a hybrid model is the choice, if at all possible, students need to be exposed to the understandings, language and communicative activities of their target disciplines, with students themselves also contributing to this enterprise.

There are three articles in the Research Matters section. The first of these, by Elena Cotos, Stephanie Link, and Sarah Huffman, is concerned with the Discussion/Conclusion sections of research articles and uses genre analysis and corpus techniques to develop a description of their move structure, or rhetorical patterning, and how this patterning varies across disciplines. The second article in this section, by Simon Wang and John Flowerdew, also takes a genre approach, focusing on an unusual academic genre, the personal statement that students have to write to gain access to the academy, and like Cotos, Link, and Huffman, applies genre analysis to develop a description of the move structure of this occluded genre (Swales, 1996).
The third contribution in the research matters section, by Ling Shi, focuses on textual appropriation in second language undergraduate discipline-specific writing. Using text-based interviews, another popular research method in discipline-specific writing research, participants’ comments and explanations of how they used source texts in completing two specific disciplinary writing tasks were collected and analyzed.

There are four articles in the Reflections on Practice section: two focusing on undergraduate writing and two on doctoral writing.

In the first of the undergraduate writing contributions, Martha Pennington argues for a ‘3-D’ approach to the teaching of undergraduate writing, with students first discovering and then creating the features of written texts in three dimensions: microtextual (lexico-grammar), macrotextual (rhetoric), and extratextual (context). The approach is fairly wide angle, in preparation for moving on to more discipline-specific texts in the future.

In the second of the (mostly) undergraduate writing contributions, Sheena Gardner describes five linked freely available resources, all based on the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus of proficient student academic writing. The central resource is the corpus itself, which can be accessed in different ways by researchers, teachers and students. Another Key resource is the Writing for a Purpose materials developed from explanatory accounts of the writing in the BAWE corpus. A further resource is a bank of lesson plans developed by teachers which illustrates how they are using the BAWE corpus and/or the Writing for a Purpose materials.

The two articles focusing on doctoral writing both describe teaching approaches developed in Australia. In the first of these, Sue Starfield discusses activities developed to support thesis writing at her university. These activities range from compulsory or optional courses to workshops, writing groups and boot-camps, and the approach is applied to both native and non-native speakers of English, a practice that applies to much ESAP writing at the post-graduate level. Brian Paltridge describes writing retreats, which he sees as an invaluable way of providing doctoral students and early career researchers with opportunities for extended periods of time for their writing, at the same time as offering opportunities for pedagogical input.

Lindsay Miller, in his contribution to the From the E-sphere section, examines the collaborative processes English for Science students go through when constructing a generic scientific text, in his case, a digital video scientific documentary. Undergraduate students in his program had to work in groups to write the text for a digital story based on an experiment they had undertaken. As part of the process these students had to prepare a script. Miller argues that a collaborative approach using new
technologies to writing such popular scientific texts engages the students with their work and that, when given the opportunity, they learn from each other as much as from their teacher.

Although the contributions in this special issue are quite diverse, there are a number of issues which emerge across the ten articles in the collection, the most obvious one being a commitment to discipline-specificity, the idea that specific disciplines have individual uses of language and communicative tasks underpinned by particular ideologies. This does not mean that all authors argue for a very narrow approach, however. This is a point made also in my Featured Essay. Discipline-specificity may be the primary focus in dedicated classes, but it may be the partial focus in wider angle courses, where students consider how individual disciplines do things differently, for example. In line with this view, Pennington and Gardner both argue that students may need to be introduced gradually to discipline-specificity, starting with a wider angle approach.

Another theme running through a number of contributions is the use of corpora. The studies by Cotos, Link, and Huffman and by Gardner both use corpus techniques, either as a research method or as both a research method and a pedagogical tool in the case of Gardner. Both of these studies, along with that of Wang and Flowerdew, also employ the notion of genre, a very popular approach to ESAP research and practice, as again highlighted in my Featured Essay.

In the limited space of a special issue, I have not been able to represent all of the issues set out in my Featured Essay – contrastive rhetoric and assessment have not been focused upon, for example – but I hope to have at least given a flavor of the vibrant research going on in ESAP writing. One thing for certain is that all of the contributions to this special issue are concerned with finding appropriate approaches to pedagogy, whether that be through a process of formal academic research, as in the articles in the Research Matters section, or in classroom practice, or praxis – the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is enacted, embodied, or realized – as in the Reflections on Practice and in the From the E-sphere sections. I sincerely hope you enjoy reading this selection of articles.

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