BOOK REVIEW: THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

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Title: The Routledge Handbook of English for Academic Purposes
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Notions of a handbook for any particular undertaking immediately raise the expectation that the text is one that the reader can browse, peruse and survey before selecting articles that are of interest or practical use. It is therefore the aim of this review to attempt to provide the potential reader an overview and orientation of the forty-five different contributions within the handbook. According to the publisher’s cover blurb, this compendium provides an essential reference for EAP practitioners, claiming that each article delivers “a state-of-the-art review of the key ideas and concepts” pertaining to the discipline. However, on consideration of the readership of this journal, I wish to take a more pragmatic approach to discussion of the contents of this text, and examine how it can be of relevance to teachers, lecturers, researchers and academic managers working in China. Therefore, in addition to offering a more general synopsis of this wide-ranging text, where possible I attempt to focus more on issues and topics that may be more pertinent to the job of teaching EAP in China.

In introducing the set of forty-five chapters, the editors Hyland and Shaw remind us that EAP has gone beyond the job of preparing our students to cope with the academic and linguistic demands of attending institutions or taking courses that require working in the medium of English. The authors point out that EAP is now an interdisciplinary endeavour closely related to the field of applied linguistics, but one that also embraces broader ethnographic and pedagogic studies. However, it is pointed out that rather than suffering from “a possible overindulgence in theory” (p. 2), EAP is nevertheless still grounded in and committed to “research-based language education” (p. 3). I would advise that the reader hold on to that thought, as busy professionals seeking new and interesting ways to help our students, one could be forgiven for only seeking out texts with more practical utility. The book does include numerous articles directly relevant to the EAP classroom and study skills, but it also raises important questions about the realities of the position of English as an academic lingua franca, an area of study that is of importance to China.

ENGLISH AS AN ACADEMIC LINGUA FRANCA
Many articles in the handbook should prompt us to consider and provide principled responses to the fact that today the number of non-native speaker staff involved in the course management and teaching of EAP is increasing, especially in China (see Chapter 8). While the handbook fails to address the area of non-native speaker EAP staffing, notions of native speaker dominance are both implicitly and explicitly dealt with (see Chapters 3, 7, 8, 17, 22). Moreover, the rising number of academic publications in all disciplines written by speakers of languages other than English also requires consideration from EAP practitioners.

In Chapter 4, Mursaal, Ayninn and Ranta point to the English language publishing rankings in the field of Science across the world; these tally in following order: US, China, UK, Germany, France and Japan. It is clear then that their assertion that “academic English has no native speakers” (p. 52) has considerable validity. Controversy and argument therefore arise as to who should be the gatekeepers of standards of language usage, style and expression, if it is not native speakers. While this handbook cites much of this controversy, many of its chapters may dismay the reader as to the lack of useable practical research into this area of how universally acceptable language standards might change or evolve. Nevertheless, anyone seeking a comprehensive overview of the debate concerning the rapid spread of English as an academic lingua franca has a rich resource of references to draw on. As with all chapters in the handbook, a comprehensive survey of the key writers and participants in each sub-discipline of EAP and applied linguistics is cited. The reader is also presented with an overview of developments and challenges in each sub-discipline.

Highlighting the challenges of addressing the needs of EAP students in a world where most readers and writers of academic texts are not native speakers, Hyland and Shaw discuss the often-cited criticism that EAP plays a part in reinforcing institutional power structures that privilege native speaker values and practices (see Introductory Chapter, Mauranen et al. Chapter 4, & Macallister Chapter 22). Such criticism includes censure of an academic system which allegedly imposes views of what constitutes acceptable language and patterns of rhetoric and argumentation. Such analysis also includes a validation of academic language as the propagation of Western cultural beliefs and notions of how knowledge itself is constructed. In this regard, in Chapter 3, Lillis and Tuck provide an overview of the relatively new field of Academic literacies (now often referred to as “Ac Lite”). While the field has its roots in widening participation movements in the UK and post-apartheid South Africa, it now forms much of the basis of criticism of EAP education as one that focuses on “a fixed set of competencies which can be possessed or lacked” (pp. 31-32) resulting in negative “binary perceptions of learners as literate/illiterate” or “remedial” (p. 32). Ac Lit questions how students are socialized into the academic community and proposes that we rethink and transform all current practices to accommodate newcomers. In Chapter 8, an ethnographic approach to EAP is taken that, in the words of Hyland (2006), seeks “to achieve deeper understandings of the social influences on language use in EAP settings” (p. 68). Macallister in Chapter 22 takes discussion of academic English as
students requiring the ability to read or write within their subject-specific discipline. The need for more tailor-made EAP courses is highlighted by the fact that larger numbers of postgraduate masters and doctoral students are being required to publish in English-language medium international journals as a part of their courses. Due to the fact that the number of postgraduate students in China is increasing, reaching 63,300 in 2014 (projected to pass one million in the next five to ten years), the importance of developing an EAP provision is clear. While calling for greater recognition of EAP across the Chinese university sector, Cheng advocates a move away from current exams such as the CET or its reform at the very least.

**UNIVERSITY COURSES**

A number of the areas of the handbook set aside examination of specific EAP skills. Chapters 14 and 24 specifically deal with university lectures, since lectures are very often the predominant mode of delivery in China, these articles may be of more practical use to many readers. In addition the difficulties enunciated by Chinese students in regard to coping with long stretches of academic monologue may also be the need for greater attention on the teaching of bottom-up listening skills for lower level learners. While a combination of both top-down and bottom-up strategies are vital for weaker students, focus on the more direct teaching of note-taking skills is advocated. Research also points to the need for more input in regard to aural and visual cues. However, vocabulary size and knowledge is singled out as the most important element in improving bottom-up processing. Studies cited in regard to vocabulary acquisition and the complexity of spoken discourse draw on data from British Academic Spoken English (BASE) and other corpora. Results reveal that to obtain 95% coverage, students need knowledge of about 3000 to 4000 word families together with input on proper nouns and marginal words. In addition, this needs to be complemented with subject specific input. The difference in difficulty across the various subject disciplines is, however, very significant and it is pointed out that blanket coverage of vocabulary through more English for Academic Purposes (EAP) strategies may be of little help to students when preparing them for listening skill for lectures. Here is an area for a genre or subject-specific approach to EAP to show its worth. Hyland in Chapter 2 offers extensive discussion on dilemmas over tone-setting. Taking for example the complexity of real language as opposed to the usage of fixed or specific expressions that express particular language functions (e.g. asking for action, confirming, disagreeing, or giving reasons). Referring to the inadequacies and limitations of many such language corpora, Basturkmen points to ways in which authentic recordings of group tutorials and seminar discussions can be more beneficial to the development of the reader’s language expression. Outlining various ways that authentic material can be adapted, she provides useful commentary on the design of an EAP resource: the need for authentic materials is also an important consideration. In Chapter 43, Fredricka Stoller discusses how authentic materials can be framed in the classroom. To the linguistic quality and the importance of authentic recordings is also the need for students to activate the use of genre specific language. This can also form the basis of EAP classroom activities. Hopefully the reader can see creative possibilities here. Scaffolding activities also suggest the use of authentic recordings and the analysis of transcripts can stimulate language learning (learning to speak), develop problem solving and critical thinking skills and activate the use of genre specific argumentation (speaking to learn). However, such materials may need to be modified for lower language levels that we often encounter in China. If authentic recordings are too challenging, an edited version could be produced.

**ACADEMIC SPEAKING**

Basturkmen in Chapter 12 offers discussion in regard to possible directions for speaking skills in EAP curriculum design. From my own experience of teaching academic English and study skills in China, I believe her ideas could be applied to help both the linguistic quality and the academic content of our student’s spoken discourse simultaneously. Basturkmen’s focus is not just on learning to speak the target language but also on what she describes as speaking to learn. The notion here is that language and content should go hand in hand in the learning process; building subject knowledge and language should operate together. Importantly, Basturkmen points out that authentic discourse forms a part of a student’s socialization or disciplinary acculturation into their discipline, and for this reason Basturkmen in Chapter 2 also provides discussion in this regard with his reference to students “ability to construct the disciplinary arguments” that form such a language might take like in concern. I have argued for that this discussion to continue producer, more concrete language data is also pointed out not form a large part of an EAP student’s timetable. How students can benefit better from authentic recordings and the design of programmes. For China a better balance may need to be struck where both the more general aspects of academic English and more specific academic discourse is accommodated.