

Foreword

Corpora and specialised English in the university curriculum

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Learning the Language of Dentistry: Disciplinary corpora in the teaching of English for Specific Academic Purposes

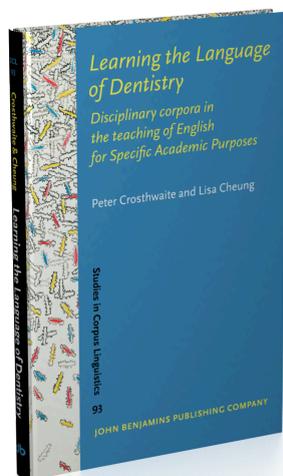
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Foreword

Corpora and specialised English in the university curriculum

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One of the most momentous decisions facing English teachers is the kind of language they should teach. At university this often boils down to following an English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) approach, where teachers attempt to isolate the skills, language forms, and study activities thought to be common to all disciplines, or to seriously engage with the particular target language features their students most urgently need. The course described in this book takes the second path, taking the idea of specificity seriously in English language teaching. The course is the outcome of a particular set of circumstances in Hong Kong which involved the radical restructuring of the entire secondary and tertiary education systems and which provided an opportunity for us to completely rethink our provision of English to students at Hong Kong University.

As the unit responsible for English language teaching at HKU we were fortunate, at the time, to have the support of a forward-thinking Pro-vice chancellor, a considerable amount of autonomy and a group of committed teachers. As a consequence, we were able to respond to the curriculum changes by completely rewriting our entire undergraduate courses to offer students more context-sensitive forms of instruction based on closer cooperation with academic disciplines and research-informed course designs.

What sets English for academic purposes (EAP) apart from general language study is its focus on specific, purposeful uses of language. This is a 'context-reduced' variety which tends to be abstract, and less reliant on an immediate context for its coherence than the language of everyday interaction. But while the notion of specificity is at the heart of most definitions of EAP, debates continue over just how specific its purposes should be, and this influences both research and instruction (e.g. Hyland, 2016). The courses we designed were based on recognising that academic literacy in English presents a serious obstacle to many learners and is very

different to the English they have learnt at school. Our new curriculum therefore determined that all undergraduates would take two English courses:

1. An EGAP course to all first-year students called 'Core University English' (CUE)
2. A more disciplinary specific 'English in the Discipline' (ED) course in later years.

Both types of course presented their own difficulties. CUE is designed to bridge the gap between the largely traditional grammar-focused, exam-oriented English familiar to the students from their secondary schools and the communicative expectations of disciplinary study. Making a virtue of heterogeneity, classes are deliberately composed of students from different faculties and draw on content from their common core courses to develop an understanding of spoken and written texts. There are obviously difficulties in identifying a 'core' in the language used across the university. Nesi and Gardner's (2011) corpus study of writing in UK universities, for example, distinguishes thirteen "genre families", ranging from research reports to empathy writing, which differ enormously in their social purposes, generic stages and preferred patterns of language. This EGAP course therefore sought to help students to structure coherent arguments, to show how they can present a stance through hedging and various kinds of evidence, to develop critical reading skills by identifying how an author's opinions are expressed, and to gain control over features like nominalisation, impersonality and lexical density.

Perhaps more challenging, however, was creating the ED courses because these had to incorporate the fact that the conventions of academic communication differ considerably across disciplines. The ability to comprehend and construct disciplinary arguments is at the heart of a conceptual understanding of a field, so that students must learn to craft their writing in community-specific ways. Language is tied to disciplines because it is inseparable from how we understand the world, and has a powerful influence on how students understand and engage with their disciplines because it reflects particular social practices and epistemologies. This famous quote from Bartholomae captures this perfectly:

Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history, anthropology or economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.

(Bartholomae, 1986: p. 4)

These “ways of knowing” are not learned by mastering grammar rules but by writing, so that learning a subject needs to be closely linked with learning to write a subject.

Learners, then, are required to think their way into their disciplines through writing, and identifying the particular language features, discourse practices, and communicative skills of target groups is a key part of curriculum design. Our conception of “English in the discipline” attempted to be sensitive to the considerable communicative demands which higher education places on students and acknowledge that their difficulties with English is not a linguistic deficit which can be topped up in a few language classes. Instead, it accepts that students have to take on new roles and engage with knowledge in new ways when they enter university. English in the Discipline, then, is our attempt to equip students with the communicative skills they need to participate in particular disciplinary contexts.

The creation of the ED courses therefore involved teachers in conducting investigative projects into the literacy demands and expectations of courses in different faculties and exploring new ways of delivering classes and monitoring progress. This involved, where possible, working in close collaboration with individual faculties and departments to ensure that the English courses aligned with the work students would do in their content courses. It also involved finding ways to offer students the means to extend their learning experience beyond the classroom. Language corpora proved a central resource in seeking to achieve both these goals: providing information on how students used language that was highly regarded by their professors, and as a means of encouraging students to use their considerable analytical skills to explore these uses.

The dentistry course therefore exploits two key aspects of corpora. On one hand they provided teachers and students with robust sources of target language, giving students access to naturally occurring, authentic data instead of invented examples. On the other hand, they contributed to a shift from teaching as imparting knowledge to teaching as mediating learning, allowing students to take a more active and reflective part in their learning.

In sum, the ED dentistry course discussed by my colleagues in this book explicitly rejects the idea that university English teaching involves beefing up generic language skills and shows how corpora can help students towards developing a new kind of literacy. It puts the concept of *specificity* at the heart of language instruction and supports student towards control of the discourses that their tutors and other disciplinary insiders are likely to find effective. I am certain that our efforts to implement English in the Discipline would have been far less successful without the assistance of corpus descriptions of language and a DDL approach to instruction.

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