

# “The past is the future with the lights on”: Reflections on AELFE’s 20th birthday

**Ken Hyland**

University of Hong Kong (China)

khyland@hku.hk

## Abstract

In this paper I offer a brief personal reflection on what strikes me as the main features of this period, focusing on increased specialization, the coming to dominance of genre and corpus analyses, the opening up of teaching paradigms related to social participation, identity and learner experience, and the growth of non-Anglo practitioners in research and publishing.

**Keywords:** English for Academic Purposes, genre, corpora, identity, English for publication purposes.

## Abstract

*“El pasado es el futuro con la luz encendida”:* Reflexiones en el 20º aniversario de AELFE

En el presente artículo realizo una breve reflexión personal sobre aquellos asuntos que a mi juicio son los más sobresalientes de este periodo. Para ello me centraré en el aumento de la especialización, en cómo los análisis y estudios de corpus y género han alcanzado un papel dominante, en la apertura de paradigmas docentes relacionados con la participación social, en la cuestión de identidad y en la experiencia de los aprendices, así como en el crecimiento de profesores no anglosajones dedicados a la investigación y su consiguiente publicación.

**Palabras clave:** Inglés con fines académicos, género, corpus, identidad, inglés con fines de publicación.

## Introduction

AELFE has chosen to mark its 20th anniversary with a celebration of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), inviting a variety of people to reflect

on their impressions and experiences of what has occurred in the field during that time. There is certainly lots to talk about. AELFE's short but distinguished life has coincided with the emergence of LSP as a distinctive and healthy field of endeavour, so that LSP – and particularly the sub-discipline of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which I'll be mainly talking about – is an activity at the forefront of language research and teaching today. Controversies continue and unresolved questions remain, and while we might hesitate to characterize it as a full-blown paradigm shift, the last 20 years represents a movement towards a research-informed view of targeted language instruction which was really just getting off the ground in 1992. In the next few pages I offer a brief personal reflection on what strikes me as the main features of this period, focusing on increased specialization, the coming to dominance of genre and corpus analyses, the opening up of teaching paradigms related to social participation, identity and learner experience, and the growth of non-Anglo practitioners in research and publishing.

## **EAP now and then**

In the last 20 years EAP has done a good job of consolidating a position at the forefront of language education. With English, for the time being, sweeping away linguistic heterogeneity in the name of globalization and a free market of knowledge, EAP is now a major industry, supported by a burgeoning weight of journals, books, conferences and doctoral dissertations and taught in units, departments and centres in almost every university where students need to study in English. Teachers in higher education, in fact, have done extremely well in meeting the challenges involved in helping massive numbers of students to gain control of the peculiar conventions of academic English to navigate their learning.

The scale of this challenge was only really becoming apparent when AELFE published the first issue of its journal *Ibérica*, and back in those more tranquil days before performance reviews and bureaucratization took a firm grip, EAP seemed an altogether more straightforward endeavour. Through the 1970s and 80s cognitivists and structuralists had held the theoretical floor and teachers were left to either roll up their sleeves and teach a sometimes apparently random array of grammar patterns or sit back and watch students struggle through a series of process drafts. This was beginning to change when *Ibérica* became a twinkle in its creators' eyes and theoretical interest

turned to more contextual understandings of language environments and the advantages of analyzing the situations in which students would have to use language. This is not to say that nothing of interest was going on before this. The journal *English for Specific Purposes* had been around since 1980 and, as Swales' (1985) *Episodes in ESP* shows, research had been emerging since the late 1960s which sought to describe (mainly scientific) texts through the pioneering efforts of Ewer and Latorre (1969), Selinker (for instance in Trimble et al., 1981), Trimble (1985) and Swales himself (1990).

While researchers were unpacking the features of academic discourse, others were questioning conventional wisdom, and particularly the kind of advice being given to student writers in textbooks and style guides. Janet Holmes (1988), for instance, found massive discrepancies in the ways that hedging was presented in a selection of EFL textbooks compared with what went on in real life while Greg Myers (1992) showed that subject textbooks made poor teaching sources as they did not represent the sort of interactions that students needed to write their own texts. The “moral imperative” driving the home-made production of materials was well underway as teachers responded to their students' need for more nuanced types of English with a blizzard of photocopied texts and tasks. At the same time “relevance” and “authenticity” were becoming synonyms for teacher professionalism, corporate eyes were turning to the commercial possibilities of this new market for its products and by the early 1990s all leading publishers had textbooks on specialised uses of English (see URL: [http://www.uefap.com/materials/history/eap\\_hist.htm](http://www.uefap.com/materials/history/eap_hist.htm)). The debate on the value of a mass-produced response to local needs which continues today was getting into full swing.

By 1992, then, there was a fairly sound understanding of English academic contexts and the next 20 years is to some extent the story of the expansion of this research, by more people and in more areas, and of its filtering into classroom practices. EAP has come to represent the default response of the ELT profession to language education in higher education, having reached the status of near orthodoxy without ever being recognized by those outside of it.

## **A brave new world of specialisation**

At this time I had been teaching ESP for a few years in Saudi Arabia, where I had been at the tail end of the pioneering ESP project at King Abdulaziz

University, and had just moved from Papua New Guinea (PNG) to take up a job in New Zealand. These were exciting times in university language teaching and I was lucky enough to have worked in PNG with ESP stalwarts like Bill Robinson and Colin Baron, who were organizing their classes in innovative ways to link ESP tasks to students' disciplinary work. Colin's approach, for example, was to get his Civil Engineering students to design, build and test model rice silos and cranes using newspaper and string, then to write reports on the process. I had also started to read the genre work emerging from Australia by Jim Martin (1985) and Fran Christie (1985) and even had my first proper research paper published. This appeared in *RELC Journal* (Hyland, 1990) and was based on an analysis of the argumentative essay scripts written by PNG High School students which stood in towering piles around my office. Shortly after, and beyond my wildest dreams, my wife Fiona and I managed to publish a paper in *ESPJ* on syllabus types in ESP, based on our PNG business English course "Go for Gold" (Hyland & Hyland, 1992).

Back then it seemed like we had all the answers: The advice we got was to ignore our intuitions and write our syllabuses and materials using as detailed a needs analysis as time allowed, probably looking at the kinds of texts that our students had to read and write. We were not, for the most part, too concerned with things like the possibility of conflicting stakeholder perspectives, individual student identities, the degree of disciplinary specificity, the need for locally appropriate methodologies, or, crucially, what kind of analysis this might involve. But while ESP had reached a sound starting point with the question "why are these students learning English?", some ESP writers regarded needs analysis as an impartial and scientific process designed to measure goals with precision and accountability; a way of joining the dots between particular students and particular curricula. Teachers soon realised things were not this simple and through the 90s increasingly gained confidence in their interpretations of both their students and their students' texts. They came to recognize that their professionalism involved drawing on their values, beliefs and philosophies of teaching and learning rather than an ability to read off a course from an apparently objective situation.

At the time, and this still tends to haunt many English teachers today, was a concern about the depth of knowledge they needed of a subject. Increasingly, however, this confidence crisis has been replaced by a new self image where teachers see themselves as literacy specialists and not subject

specialists. Recognizing that it is their ability to identify key features of genres, translate them into effective materials and then deliver them in the classroom which comprises their expertise, they saw they did not need to be experts in disciplinary content but they did need to have some awareness and feel for a particular vocational area. This, together with a growing sense that universities comprise a plurality of literacies, and with some universities “embedding” literacy specialists in particular faculties, helps account for the trend towards increased professional specialization. The Jack-of-all-trades EAP teacher, while still part of the university landscape, has largely morphed into a specialist in one or two areas, such as engineering or law, life sciences or fine arts. They have focused their knowledge and sharpened their skills in a particular disciplinary area, satisfying a curiosity or interest in the subject, or perhaps in response to growing familiarity with particular discourses.

This move towards specialization among teachers and curricula has perhaps been the major classroom change in EAP over the past twenty years. Back in the 1980s there were plenty of voices raised against subject-specific teaching. Hutchison and Waters (1987) and George Blue (1988), for instance, felt the emphasis should be on learners and learning rather than on target texts and practices, while writers like Ruth Spack (1988) believed that language teachers could never teach specialists discourses effectively. Things have changed enormously since then. Coming from a liberal arts/rhetoric background Spack had no faith in EAP teachers and did not understand applied linguistics. She therefore misjudged the professionalism of teachers and their willingness to engage with the texts and practices of the disciplines and so failed to foresee how far the pragmatic needs of the classroom would drive teachers’ attempts to overcome their “outsider” status. The explosion of research into the writing of academic disciplines over the last 20 years means we are far better informed about texts than we were back then and so better able to advise students on their subject studies, particularly on their reading and writing.

In many ways, and despite appearances to the contrary, this specialization has accompanied a revised understanding of what it means to focus on the learner. Following the ideas of Lisa Delpit (1988), Patricia Bizzel (1992) and others, teachers came to recognize the frustrations of students who were taught using “hands-off” process classroom approaches. Stepping back to let students “find their voice” and express personal meanings (so-called “learner-centred” methods) were not feasible in EAP contexts, yet the learner’s familiarity with a particular subject matter and interest in getting

good grades were powerful motivating factors which teachers have sought to harness in their pedagogies. Crucial to this shift is a constructivist position which recognizes the importance of language in the construction of knowledge and disciplinary identity and a greater respect for students' subject knowledge, interests and perceptions. This has accompanied a fresh appreciation of how process might be integrated with product: "product", seen as a purpose-driven creation, means treating grammar as a resource for crafting disciplinary specialized meanings rather than as atomized curiosities; while "process" is no longer merely a series of unscaffolded drafts but a wider concept of contextually-situated research and reflection.

### **“What does the corpus say?” Changes in research**

At around the time AELFE was established I registered for a part-time PhD at the University of Queensland in Australia, deciding to look at scientific writing. I was beginning to read Patricia Bizzel (1992), Chuck Bazerman (1988), Greg Myers (1990) and John Swales (1990) and encounter the idea that authors shaped texts for their readers and how this meant they were influenced by the potential response of those readers to write in particular ways. Following up references in these texts I found myself reading Sociologists of Science like Karin Knorr-Cetina (1981), Bruno Latour (Latour & Woolgar, 1979) and Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mullkay (1984), all of whom showed how scientific consensus is socially constructed through discourse. This was exciting stuff as it meant that certain ways of saying things not only carried the individual position of a writer but also the values and beliefs of a discipline. While the sociologists did not get their hands dirty delving into the linguistic nuts and bolts of this consensus, it was obvious that there was plenty to research.

I hit upon hedging for my PhD. This was then largely the preserve of serious, larger-than-life linguists like Geoffrey Leech and Frank Palmer, who saw modality as an abstract grammatical category, and of epistemic philosophers, who were often more concerned about “how” we can know rather than how we made claims about this. I thought it would be interesting to look at how scientists talked about how they knew something, or actually how they tried to persuade others of what they felt they knew. This seemed to be linked to how the apparently “author evacuated” prose of the sciences allowed writers to construct a stance and

themselves as credible insiders. I settled on biology to study, which seemed a relatively accessible discipline enamoured of rhetorical flourishes and elegant models, and I set about collecting what I grandly called my “corpus”: sixteen research articles photocopied in an hour in the library. I mention this as it illustrates another major shift since AELFE came into being: the rise of the corpus.

The last twenty years, in fact, have witnessed a transformation in not only the amount of research conducted into academic and professional discourse, but also the ways that it is conducted, with genre and corpus analysis crowding out alternative methods to such an extent that it is now almost impossible to think of doing EAP research without a corpus. Both methods have contributed enormously to how we understand the language used in particular contexts. Swales’s *Genre Analysis* in 1990 was arguably the most influential book in the history of EAP (Google Scholar shows 6500 citations to it as I write in February 2012) and its impact touches almost every paper on academic discourse since then. While other versions of genre were being used in the 1980s, to empower working class Australian school kids and unpack the subconscious rhetorical understandings of various US writer groups, Swales brought to EAP a socially informed theory of language and an authoritative pedagogy based on research of texts. Here was a method which helped us to see the realities of social communities, and particularly disciplines, as constituted through their recurrent use of conventionalised forms; it showed us how individuals used language to develop relationships, establish communities and get things done. It also opened up research into the ways genres differed across disciplines and language groups and so encouraged research into languages other than English and the ways speakers of those languages used English.

Genre analysis provided us first with plausible descriptions of genre staging and then of features of register, style, lexis and other rhetorical features to be found in particular texts. As text analysis software for personal computers was appearing around this time, we gleefully fed these features into our concordancers, looking for the ways that imperatives, hedges, personal pronouns, passives, and other potentially productive items behaved. This not only gave us language data which represented a speaker’s experience of language in a restricted domain, but we also learnt a great deal about a whole range of genres that nobody had noticed or cared about before. Acknowledgements, journal descriptions, submission letters and promotion applications all had their moments in the sun, and revealed evidence of

typical patterning in (mainly) written discourse. We also began to discover a lot of things we did not know about academic language, particularly when we delegated the task of identifying features to the computer in what Tognini-Bonelli (2001) calls “corpus-driven” studies. Some surprising high frequency lexical items and keywords have emerged as well as some previously unanticipated collocations, but the discovery of semantic prosodies, or the meanings created by routine associations, and the role of lexical bundles and extended collocations in structuring discourse, have been genuinely fundamental to the ways we think about language.

Of particular interest to me (and after all, this is a reflective paper) are the ways that corpora have been taken up to show how participant relationships sit at the heart of language use and of academic persuasion. There is now almost a cottage industry of corpus research demonstrating how some feature or another helps reveal the writer’s awareness of the text’s context and the readers which form part of that context. While not synonymous with identity, these features perhaps provide the most immediate access to its rhetorical construction because they focus on what individuals do to project themselves within a shared professional context. They reveal most clearly how writers, in pursuing their personal and professional goals, embed their writing in a particular discipline through approved discourses. This has told us a great deal about the workings of the disciplines and how we might understand “community” and how persuasion is accomplished through framing ideas in reader-familiar ways. It has also generated a great deal of improved teaching materials which help learners to become both more disciplinary-sensitive and self-aware writers, better able to construct appropriate authorial selves.

However, because it is a method which privileges community practices over individual preferences, often neglecting actual texts in favour of a focus on specific features, corpus analysis has come under fire for “fetishizing” data at the expense of what real people are doing in the world. This kind of decontextualisation is not a disaster, of course, particularly when corpora are used by teachers and researchers as a resource to test intuitions and see how things work in particular genres. It is also rewarding when we are just studying a text to familiarize ourselves or our students with a genre. It does mean however, that we have also seen something of a correction over the past 20 years; a parallel growth in qualitative studies into LSP. As corpora get ever larger and analytical tools ever more complex, qualitative, more ethnographic, studies have continued to grow apace and contribute to what

we know about the activities surrounding the production and reception of texts and how participants actually understand what they are doing with them.

## Everybody's doing it: global publication

A decade into AELFE's life, Liz Hamp-Lyons and I persuaded Elsevier to launch the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, which we edited together for seven years until I moved to co-edit *Applied Linguistics*. This experience partly prompts the final major change I want to mention in this reflection: the increasing participation of multilingual scholars in research and publishing. During this time the publishing world, including the bits of it relevant to us, has been enormously enriched by the perspectives brought by non-Anglo scholars from around the world. This obviously has had many consequences, but I just want to mention three which impact LSP teachers most heavily: our participation as reviewers; our involvement in teaching "writing for publication" courses; and the pressure we have to get ourselves published (for instance Hyland, 2009).

The expression "publish or perish" has probably never been as cruelly applicable as it is today. Universities in many countries now require their staff to present at international conferences and, more crucially, publish in major, high-impact, peer-reviewed Anglophone journals as a pre-requisite for tenure, promotion and career advancement. Academics all over the world are increasingly less likely to publish in their own languages and to find their English language publications cited more often. *Ibérica* itself, an international, peer reviewed journal with a European editorial board and published in English is a good example of this trend. Publication equals "productivity" and is used as a crude measure of worth, with institutions conferring promotion and tenure on the length of cvs. Most recently, universities in Asia and the Middle East have started to make doctoral graduation and tenure dependent on acceptance in the most prestigious ISI journals and government agencies such as the Chinese Academy of Sciences are rewarding such publication with large cash bonuses. Participation in this global web is thus no longer optional for many academics.

All this activity has placed considerable strain on journals and reviewers. While publishers celebrate the additional revenue in subscriptions and article downloads it creates, editors view the massive increase in submissions with

considerable alarm as the deluge threatens to overwhelm an already shaky peer review system. Submissions to *Applied Linguistics*, for example, have doubled in the last ten years, leading to additional pressures on reviewers with almost 750 invitations to over 500 reviewers in 2010. Multiply this by 50 or more international journals in the field (Thomson ISI has 54 journals in this category and TESOL lists 75 journals on its website) and we can see the system is under serious strain. Colleagues labour under increasing pressure at work and have less time to review papers, but the additional work falls on all of us who are active in our profession. The problem is exacerbated by increasing submissions from students who are encouraged by their teachers and supervisors to submit to journals for the experience, laying the onus of (under) graduate training on unpaid and overburdened volunteer editors and reviewers.

All this would not matter if the increase in submissions was accompanied by increased diversity of perspective and fresh avenues of research. Clearly there are colleagues publishing now who bring something novel and exciting to our field, but very often we find disappointing papers which simply retread all too familiar ground – or dig ever deeper holes in it.

The increased demands on academics to publish has also impacted on us as EAP practitioners increasingly find themselves called upon to venture into this unfamiliar terrain to improve the writing for publication skills of colleagues from other departments. Writing for publication can be a laborious task involving constantly reworking the rhetorical goals of a paper to more clearly meet the perceived needs of readers of a particular community and journal. It not only involves control over the apparently arcane conventions of a variety of English, but also decisions about which journal to submit a finished paper, how to navigate reviewers' comments, and (often) how to interpret editors' decisions.

These requirements are daunting to all academics, and it might well be, as John Swales has suggested, that the most important distinction in publishing is not between native and non-native English speakers, but between novices and experienced academics – between newbies and those who know the ropes. This is an area where linguistic research has outstripped pedagogy and we are still far from understanding whether the linguistically, socially and disciplinary heterogeneous individuals we lump together in this category actually form a single group at all. Whoever we find in these classes, however, this is an expanding and important new challenge for us as teachers which is only likely to increase.

The final, and rather obvious, point to make here is that we are all increasingly part of this expanding web of scholarship. The stick of institutional demands and the carrot of personal satisfaction present a dual motivation to see our work in print. As language education, EAP and specific purposes teaching generally become more recognized, more widespread and more professional, and as publishing outlets increase, opportunities and encouragement to share our research, our ideas and our teaching innovations become greater. This is an excellent development and the sign of a maturing field of study. Research and publication strengthens our claim to disciplinary status and our identities as teachers and researchers. Moreover, the situated learning theorists and social constructionists are certainly right when they argue that the redrafting involved in response to journal reviewers is not just the transformation of a text, but also the apprenticing of an individual writer into the knowledge constructing and using practices of a discipline. The local interactions that occur in negotiating the passage of a paper to publication is a mode of learning, of professional development.

The encouragement that LSP gives us to research the texts and practices of our students and their disciplinary communities helps to apprentice us into a professional community of our own. It gives us a greater understanding of the field and of a community of readers who may read and make use of the research we conduct. I think that this increased research and publishing activity has been one of the major changes in the past 20 years and has worked to tie us more closely into a global web of professional and social associations, reinforcing a sense of community and fortifying an emerging discourse community.

## **A never ending story**

I have to repeat that all this is just an individual take on some of the important changes over the 20 years since AELFE came into being and how these have connected to me personally. It goes without saying that any description of the field will always be partial and will always reduce the complexity and fluidity of what it seeks to describe. I also acknowledge the risks in taking this on. We live in an age in which unifying explanations and narratives of progress are rightly viewed with suspicion. I certainly do not want to sound triumphalist. It is true that EAP has travelled a long way in

the last two decades, driven by widening access policies, the increased movement of students and academics around the world and, of course, by the steamroller effect of English in scholarly communication. But there has by no means been an unproblematic and straightforward advance from there to here.

EAP has its shortcomings and limitations, and important questions, issues and difficulties remain which are likely to occupy practitioners for more years to come. What success EAP has had is largely due to the fact that it keeps its feet firmly on the ground and tries to make its research relevant to understanding the communicative realities of the academy and the classroom. This endeavour is often sidetracked, but EAP's commitment to linguistic analysis, to contextual relevance, and to the classroom replication of community-specific communicative events are its main strengths. This research has, however, principally focused on texts and less how people use them and what they mean for those people. As a result, it has largely neglected questions raised by Pennycook (1997), Benesch (2001) and others concerning the political interests which underlie disciplinary practices and the role of power in educational settings. We have generally been more concerned with "critical thinking" as pedagogic goals, teaching students abstract reasoning and problem solving skills, divorced from "critical practice" and an active engagement with social positioning.

How students experience their lives, their studies and their disciplines often remains unexplored yet may generate critical insights into issues which are meaningful for learners and to our professional activities. The privileging of "text" above "practice" can lead us to treat language, and in particular writing, as primarily a linguistic, and perhaps even an autonomous, object rather than something which is socially embedded in particular lives, disciplines and contexts of use. This general reluctance to critically engage with the values of institutional goals and practices has been accompanied by a vulnerability to claims that EAP ignores students' cultures, treating what goes on outside the university as largely irrelevant to learning. The field, in fact, is somewhat polarized at present as we attempt to balance broad generalizations about corpora from which we can generate teaching materials with the sociocultural individualities and identities of students as championed by Brian Street, Theresa Lillis and others of the "Academic Literacies" school. It is likely that we will see a growing move away from texts to more ethnographic, participant-oriented research into the practices which surround their use. Such a perspective will teach us more about our

students, but will also allow us to draw more on the conceptual frameworks of insiders to round out our understanding of individuals, texts and communities.

Finally, EAP has more mundane and everyday problems in establishing its value and status in universities and we are likely to see further struggles in this area. EAP's relatively low standing in universities seems partly due to antiquated conceptions of language by subject specialists and a tendency by EAP units to work "for" rather than "with" these subject specialists. Teachers have, in the past, often too readily adopted a support role to departments rather than developing and then asserting our own independent subject knowledge and skills. Adopting what Ann Raimes (1991) once graphically referred to as "the butler's stance" works to de-professionalise teachers and allows universities to marginalize EAP units. For too long we have allowed the dinosaurs who advocate the teaching of grammar drills or Shakespeare to undergraduate engineers to get their voices heard in decision-making.

The fact that the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge involves an encounter with a new and dominant literacy is often lost on faculty members who see students' communication difficulties as weaknesses which can be fixed up with a few English classes rather than a shift in epistemological perspective and literacy practice. In such circumstances it is easy for both learners and teachers to reify these powerful academic and professional literacy practices; to see them as autonomous, abstract and beyond their control. In this way EAP becomes an exercise in language repair. Only by taking the core principles of research and specificity seriously can we hope to succeed in undermining this "single literacy" view among faculty and to replace "remedial" approaches to teaching with those that address students' own perceptions and practices of writing.

While we recognize these issues, EAP has yet to seriously confront them. It has, however, taken up the enormous challenges involved in trying to tackle the huge growth and diversity of student needs in universities around the world by putting its trust in language research and basing its teaching on this research. I expect this to continue as we also look to our shortcomings. I also expect to see these same issues guide our activities to AELFE's next big anniversary. Happy Birthday AELFE!

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**Ken Hyland** is Professor of Applied Linguistics and Director of the Centre for Applied English Studies at the University of Hong Kong. He has published over 150 articles and 18 books on language education and academic writing. He was founding co-editor of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* and is now co-editor of *Applied Linguistics*.