What do EAP practitioners need to know?

 In addressing this question it seems useful to start with an example of practice and to move outwards from there. So I'll use as my starting point a moment of reflection on a typical workshop session for postgraduate research students which I co-taught with a colleague in November 2016. The session was entitled: *Reading and Writing Abstracts*. I'll explore the knowledges we drew on and briefly comment on the place of such knowledges in EAP practice more widely. I'll begin by considering how we used what might be regarded as the more traditional or mainstream knowledge base of EAP go on to explore the role that less well established theory and research, particularly work in the field of academic literacies, has in my practice.

Today's session

Aims:

- To identify and reflect on some of the features of successful conference abstracts, both generally and in your field.
- To reflect on strategies for getting a conference abstract accepted.
- To look at article abstracts and explore ideas around structure
- To begin to write an abstract in relation to your research and receive some initial feedback.

Firstly, we drew on selected 'chunks' of research-based knowledge about the academic genre(s) of the abstract. For example, we used some of Swales' ideas (1990) about the typical structure of conference and article abstracts, including the breaking down of these texts into a series of moves or stages. We used some work by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) on what makes a successful conference abstract, based on their research on successful/accepted (and unsuccessful/not accepted) abstracts for an Applied Linguistic conference in the USA. In this sense, we clearly drew on some examples of what might be described as 'traditional' EAP knowledge, focused on exploring and analysing the linguistic and discoursal features of academic texts so that they can be taught to students. Apart from its usefulness to students, this applied linguistic knowledge base has been key for EAP in establishing its profile as a serious profession, engaged in evidence-based practice with a theoretical underpinning, and with its own knowledge "territory" to command.

In our session we also allocated time for students to examine abstracts in their own fields, identifying discourse markers which signalled moves, and comparing abstracts from each other's fields of interest. We could, if we'd had time, have drawn on any number of scholarly research

articles describing in detail the linguistic and rhetorical features of academic abstracts in a range of specific disciplinary contexts, such as Hyland's work on interactional metadiscourse (e.g. 2000) including his work with Polly Tse on evaluative 'that' (2005). This acknowledgement of disciplinarity and, increasingly, interdisciplinarity has become a dominant characteristic of much EAP research and so of practice, raising students' awareness of the specific norms of their own disciplines and of the variation of academic English according to context and purpose. How this is done varies greatly from one institutional context to another, depending on the institutional positioning of EAP provision, for example whether provision is pre-sessional or parallel, within specific disciplines and areas or on interstitial, interdisciplinary territory. This aspect of the EAP knowledge base applied by practitioners has arguably enhanced its usefulness and relevance to students, making them more 'agile' participants in academic discourse, and has involved fruitful collaborations and exchanges of knowledge between EAP practitioners and academic disciplinary teachers. This way of thinking asserts the value of teacher-teacher collaboration between language practitioners and disciplinary academics, taking the EAP professional beyond the classroom into a mutual peer development role. It is an approach which aligns closely with the Writing in the Disciplines and Writing Across the Curriculum movements which originated in the US (e.g. the work of Charles Bazerman, David Russell and others) and which is advocated in work in other national locations such as Australia (for example by Kate Chanock and Jan Skillen) and South Africa (see for example Morag Paxton's work). There has also been a great deal of cross-fertilisation with work in 'academic literacies' with its focus on the epistemological dimension of academic discourse (see, for example the edited collection by Jones, Turner and Street , 1999). But 'embedded' approaches to EAP have also got it into trouble at times, as academics feel their disciplinary knowledge territory is threatened by the encroachment of "amateurs" whose job it is to teach "skills" or "language" rather than "content".

Abstracts are a rather traditional (though evolving) academic genre (e.g. Gellaerts and Van der Velde, 2010). So in the session I'm using here as an example, we did not draw on the ever-expanding body of research in EAP which departs from the traditional modes and genres and which has begun to map the plethora of new genres which have begun to occupy – and even crowd – the academic scene. There is valuable work on digital genres such as academic blogging, and multimodal genres such as the presentation, web page and video-essay, to name a few (see for example chapters in Hyland and Shaw, 2016 and in Archer and Breuer, 2016). A further area of expansion is the work going on to explore the nature of new kinds of writing such as the reflective diary or journal where the rules of the game are still highly variable between contexts, despite apparent similarities in terminology. This expansion of the repertoire is valuable not only because of its responsiveness to the needs of students in the contemporary academy, but because it heightens our awareness of the

Comment [C2]: I am here talking about research into the characteristics of 'target genres' rather than the vast amount of work on the characteristics of learners' own academic texts.

constantly changing nature of academic discourse – a useful counterweight to the tendency to reify genres as fixed and uncontested which most of us are prey to. Such work is thus increasingly an essential part of the knowledge-base of EAP practitioners. Learning and teaching about genre innovations - even those we may not even be familiar with ourselves as writers – remind us that we are all 'novices' in some contexts, who need to ask the question "what does a good [insert genre here] actually look like?" Just to give a simple example, I confess am the 'novice' writer of a symposium 'discussion paper'. I feel I should know what my paper should 'look like'. But as is sometimes the case for the new and not-so-new academic writers with whom we work, it is hard to ask, because this risks revealing one's ignorance of precisely what is expected. In the spirit of disrupting the metaphor of the "novice-expert" trajectory (Lillis and Tuck, 2016) I have therefore tried to focus on what I have to bring to the discussion rather than whether it conforms to expectations.

Comment [C3]: It must be said, however, that many of us, when we begin to teach new or neglected genres, are innovating not from a research base, but more often on the basis of insider knowledge – either our own, or that of academic colleagues.

Comment [C4]: As another example, I am currently creating an HEA fellowship application – it is the first time I have done a piece of reflective writing for assessment and find myself asking very familiar questions along the lines of "am I allowed to…?"

In our workshop session on reading and writing abstracts we also drew on a study by Yongyan Li (2006) which examined different versions of a Chinese computer science doctoral student's paper and conducted a series of interviews with her. The study reported on the strategies and problems of the student in negotiation of knowledge contribution in three "layers of discourse communities" (Li, 2006: abstract): her disciplinary community, the domestic discourse community, and the international discourse community. This exemplifies another, growing tradition of research which has added another dimension to the knowledge base for EAP practice, influenced particularly perhaps by work in the fields of Second Language Writing and of academic literacies. In addition to academic genres and discourses, there has been an impulse to know about the practices which underpin these discourses and the ways in which students of EAP respond when they are attempting to acquire 'mastery' of the genres and discourses which will earn them success in their corner of the academy. There has been a recent trend for EAP research to combine text-focused and corpus approaches with other methods, particularly interviews, and in some cases EAP researchers have adopted a consciously ethnographic perspective towards data gathering which has arguably further broadened the knowledge base. Such work widens the lens to consider writers' experiences, strategies and identities as well as their texts and the target genres and practices of their disciplines. The focus is often on student writers/speakers, but researchers have also considered a range of author types, e.g. academics as well as 'novice' writers, E1L as well as E2L/EAL, writers with particular language backgrounds, multilingual scholars, men and women. This aspect of the EAP knowledge base is perhaps less well established, but in throwing attention towards students themselves as writers and speakers and the challenges and dilemmas they face as they write

themselves a place in the academy, this trend is surely of huge value to professional educators in EAP.

Nevertheless, as we reflected on the session afterwards, my colleague and I felt that there had been too much "stuff" in it. We had tried to teach too much – keen, perhaps, to impart the requisite knowledge - and had not really allowed enough time for students to connect with the material, relate it to their own experiences and purposes for meaning-making, their own dilemmas about how to please supervisors while pursuing their own interests. Our attempts to convey what a particular genre of academic writing can be like – despite our caveats about variation, change and context - had somehow been taken up as though this knowledge were – or should be - unproblematic, non-negotiable. For me, it is in these moments of reflexivity and self-evaluation in my own practice that I turn to research and thinking in academic literacies. By 'academic literacies' I mean research-pedagogy which consciously aligns with a view of academic writing as a complex, situated and contested social practice whether or not this work is explicitly badged as Ac Lits. I mean that strand of academic writing research in which issues of power and identity come to the fore through a focus on writer perspectives and where there is a conscious attempt to go beyond the idea of academic literacy as a set of autonomous skills, or even as academic socialisation, to privilege a view of writing as meaning-making. At one level, practitioners do not need recourse to their own research or that of others – let alone to critical or theoretical work - in order to focus their attention on students' needs (however identified), struggles and dilemmas. A sensitive and reflexive practitioner naturally focuses on students' perspectives as well as on what they need to learn and too much theory can be seen as an "overindulgence" (Hyland and Shaw, 2016:2). However, this view is built on the premise that knowledge acquisition (whether of theory or empirical findings or both) on one hand, and pedagogic practice on the other, are separate endeavours for the EAP professional.

Academic literacies as a research tradition arose from the questions and challenges of practitioners. In this respect it is not unlike EAP, though albeit from a rather different standpoint. It formed at the conjunction of New Literacy Studies and radical models of literacy education based on critical educational and linguistic theories such as those of Freire and Critical Discourse Analysis and has drawn on a range of critical social theorists including Bourdieu and Foucault. A particular contribution of Ac Lits as an approach or perspective is that, through its ethnographic methodologies, it introduces reflexivity into the knowledge base itself, not just in the practice of those who apply knowledge to their teaching. This built-in reflexivity brings it into a great degree of overlap with critical work in EAP such as that by Benesch (2001), Harwood and Hadley (2004), as Theresa Lillis and I have argued in our chapter in the recent *Routledge Handbook of English for*

Comment [C5]: For example, much early Ac Lits work also focused on students (mainly as academic writers) but its alignment with an interest in Widening Participation agendas in the UK meant that it was not predicated on the assumption that most or all of these would be learners with English as an Additional Language or 'non-native speakers'. This may be one reason why it has been particularly sensitive to the potential of skills-based language provision to frame students unhelpfully as being in "deficit".
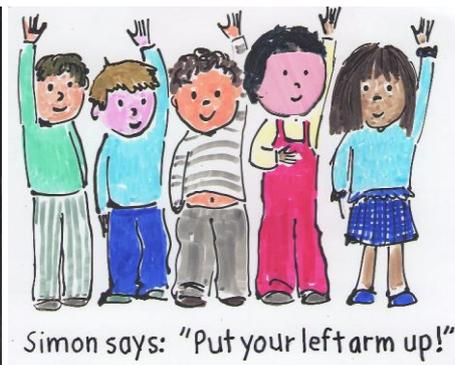
Academic Purposes (Lillis and Tuck, 2016). Its focus on academic writing as a complex social practice rather than a skill provides a menu of heuristics and theoretical frames for interrogating notions of what counts as (good or acceptable) English in any given context, whose English it is and why; of what counts as Academic (or not) within a given discipline; whose Purposes are being served in particular academic practices, genres and texts, and with what consequences. The starting points become questions to be empirically explored rather than statements about what is (and still less, statements about what 'should be').

For me, academic literacies also focuses less on questions of "what knowledge?" and more on the relationships between language users, teachers, students and knowledge (both disciplinary knowledge and knowledge about 'language' which from an academic literacies are inseparable from one another). It allows the space for thinking about those relationships critically without throwing knowledge about the norms and conventions of academic writing out of the window. There is a myth that Ac Lits is only about critique, challenge and contestation and that it therefore has little application to practice in the 'real world', or that research badged as academic literacies has argued for an abandonment of the teaching of structures, features, norms and conventions. However, a fairly cursory survey should be enough to see that this is not the case. Lea and Street in their seminal paper (1998) are careful to point out that an academic literacies perspective incorporates the socialisation and skills tiers of their famous three part model. Lillis' (2006) discussion of the notion of three kinds of "dialogues of participation" around writing makes explicit reference to the need to operate at all three levels. In addition, Lillis' (2003) notion of pedagogic design following Kress, Mary Lea's paper on academic literacies and curriculum design (2004) and the more recent open access volume edited by Lillis et al. (2015) provide ample evidence of the compatibility of a transformative agenda with the need to support students to succeed in normative and evaluative environments of academic communication. Theory and practice are brought more closely together as two aspects of working in a "conscious" way – alongside rather than separately from students - to navigate the complex terrain of academic literacy.

For me, there are three key consequences /benefits in adopting this approach (whatever we call it). The first is that it helps to *begin* to resolve the trickiest conundrum faced by language practitioners including teachers of EAP who want to help students succeed in a highly evaluative environment, without being reduced to a pedagogy which teaches unquestioning conformity to dominant norms and forms, those who puzzle over how to be useful/effective within the system AND to offer the possibility of an academy in which students can be active participants rather than only passive recipients. This issue has been addressed at some length by the US Compositionist Bruce Horner

(2016). As he argues in conversation with Lillis (Lillis et al., 2015: 327-337), agency can be achieved in the act of re-making particular academic forms and repeating particular practices, if such repetition is done with an awareness of the different choices available, their implications for meaning, for what they do and don't allow the writer to say or to achieve with their writing. Familiar anxieties about the need to teach normatively (to enable students to succeed) and the conflicting desire to teach transformatively need not paralyse us if these forms are not treated as the 'default' but are engaged with consciously and with a transformative criticality. Students are free to reproduce established forms and adopt norms if this suits their purposes – for example, if their main aim is to get through a particular test or exam – but they can do this consciously, in the knowledge that there are always choices – and consequences of those choices. In the session on abstracts, we used a quotation from the student Li (2006) studied to trigger a discussion of the following questions: *How far is there room to do anything different or new with a conference or article abstract in your field? Would you want to? What are the costs and benefits?* Students (and other academic writers, their helpers and teachers) are also free to negotiate, adapt, innovate and challenge if this suits their purposes too. They learn to be flexible in responding to the demands made of them in different disciplinary contexts and institutional locations, but their efforts to adapt are self-directed and not for performance or conformity. I think of this as being a bit like the difference between practising yoga and playing "Simon says". But the challenge entailed by this more mindful way of working cannot be underestimated in a sector where academic writing especially is fast becoming an impoverished activity, with a focus on hoop jumping (Tuck, forthcoming). The pressure on EAP professionals is therefore often to deliver good hoop jumpers.

Comment [C6]: However, I note as I review the notes and powerpoint slides we produced for the session that the only trace of this discussion is the single slide – whereas a great deal of Swales' material on the structure of abstracts is preserved over several slides – which perhaps says something about the relative emphasis we were giving to these different knowledge-bases in the session, and so explains our partial dissatisfaction with it.

Images found at:

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https://comicphonics.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/simon-says-put-your-left-arm-up1.jpg

The second consequence is the decentring of language norms in ways which allows the possibility that students of EAP will not always be either on the periphery, or securing their place in the centre by conforming as strictly as possible to the language norms of their disciplines. Although the traditional knowledge-base of EAP, as I set out above, is not static and has evolved to take account of new and changing genres and practices, normativity is still at its core. The student's (or the writer/speaker's) task can be likened to trying to grab hold of a fast-spinning carousel, in order to get on board safely. I wonder if EAP shouldn't be more like the dodgems – a space for rehearsal, yes with some safety barriers, but with many routes to choose from, some choice over the speed and direction of travel, and the chance to learn the ropes by bumping into other discourses, positions and levels of language "expertise", allowing students to follow in a range of slipstreams and finally to steer their own course.

Images found at:

https://encrypted-tbn2.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcQBBw880acJF3AHBTEaGQyZz4NKqs3ABuoSu_PEm2nKJX4-XT5ICQ

http://shawsleisure.com/img/rides/dodgems.jpg

The third positive consequence, which has been very important in my own research, is that academic literacies foregrounds institutional contexts. EAP, along with much other literature in Higher Education pedagogy, often focuses on individual teachers and learners, and on classroom interactions, materials and strategies. Academic literacies research deliberately adopts a wide lens and "context", instead of being treated as background, is treated as part of the data (Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006). The practices and decisions of professionals (as well as students) can be understood as enmeshed in context, shaped by the material and discursive conditions which prevail in their

location. Thus, as I argue elsewhere (Tuck, 2015, 2016 and forthcoming), an academic literacies approach is useful for understanding more about pedagogic practices around academic writing from insiders' perspectives, and for dispelling unproductive blame (and there is still plenty of blame flowing back and forth between language practitioners and academic teachers in the disciplines). It enables us to be at the same time realistic about what individual EAP (or other language) practitioners can achieve without losing sight of the possibility of something better - perhaps an academy which celebrates and is open to the diversity of resources and experiences which students bring with them to their studies, rather than simply inviting them to cling on to the academic roundabout.

To return to reflection on the session about abstracts, an academic literacies perspective has helped to sharpen my awareness of how the power relationships in my own classrooms and wider institution might result in a normative rather than a transformative level of effectiveness. However, it also reminds me that what might count as valuable transformation is ultimately for the learner to decide. Despite our dissatisfaction with the session, one student emailed later that day to say: "Wow! Today was a lightbulb moment! ... This training was so helpful." So we must have been doing something right, for some students, for some of the time. Ultimately, academic literacies challenges us to redefine student/learner/writer/speaker (not ourselves as language professionals) as the key practitioners of EAP, to place them at the centre of our thinking. From this perspective, as Horner (2016: 43) puts it: "Rather than a choice between service and scholarship, pedagogy or theory, it is possible to see the pedagogic scene as itself the site of writing study – not just by teachers, but students as well." My knowledge of academic literacies reminds me that the most important question is not "What do I need to know?" or even "What do students need to know?" but "what might students need to think about?" and "what do they want to say?"

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January, 2017

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