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Hidden challenges of tasks in an EAP writing textbook: EAL graduate students' perceptions and textbook authors' responses



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ABSTRACT

English as an Additional language (EAL), with a plethora of materials for teaching academic writing at the graduate and research levels, which typically takes the form of textbooks. This study brings attention to an underrepresented aspect of EAP research—EAL students' reactions to textbook materials. Here one of the more influential graduate-level academic writing textbooks has been Swales and Feak's *Academic Writing for Graduate Students (AWG)* (2012). What so far has been largely lacking in the story of AWG are the voices from the students' side of the desk, apart from those reported by instructors and reviewers. Using a semi-structured format, I interviewed eight EAL graduate students and brought their opinions to the co-authors for responses. The students in this study evaluated AWG's genre-oriented tasks in mostly positive terms. However, not all of them benefited equally from its tasks. Students' reflections in interviews revealed hidden challenges to its genre-oriented tasks that have not been previously published nor disseminated in the EAP research community. This study therefore offers some useful implications for genre-based writing instruction and research, not just for AWG but also for many other textbooks supporting EAL writers.

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1. Introduction

The spread of English as the world's preeminent academic and research language (Hyland, 2006) has unsurprisingly given rise to a massive increase in efforts to support all those students with English as an Additional language (EAL), often with a special focus on academic and research writing. These supporting activities are many and manifold and include new courses, new cadres of instructors, more attempts to provide EAP teacher education, more research into target genres, often using specialized corpora, on-line support of various kinds, and a plethora of materials for teaching academic writing, both produced in-house and commercially available. This last typically takes the form of academic writing textbooks (e.g., Canseco, 2010; Swales & Feak, 2000, 2012), which have a venerable history going back to at least the 1970s (Bates & Dudley-Evans, 1976; Swales, 1971); in addition there have been occasional efforts to make the processes of writing such materials transparent, as in the collections edited by Byrd (1995) and Harwood (2014).

As the field of EAP writing matured, attention began to be paid to the graduate and research student levels (e.g., Cheng, 2008; Flowerdew, 2015a; Kaufhold, 2015; Tardy, 2004, 2005). However, this study brings attention to an underrepresented aspect of EAP writing textbooks and materials research—EAL students' reactions to textbooks and teaching materials. Despite

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a perceived lack of research on this topic in the EAP literature, we have been able to learn from the broader language teaching and educational literature that interactions between textbook writers and teachers contribute to curriculum development. For example, Ziebarth et al. (2009) reported on a constructive dialogue between secondary mathematics teachers and authors of curriculum materials as the materials were being developed. The teachers reacted to pilot materials and the authors responded to teacher comments by adjusting and modifying some of their materials in an attempt to make them more teachable.

However, teachers' views on the usefulness of textbooks may differ from those of students'. Previous research (e.g., McGrath, 2006; Peacock, 1998) indicates that while students recognize the value of textbook activities, students and teachers can hold differing views on which activities are more useful to them and how they are supportive. This potential divergence of opinion about textbook activities has important pedagogical implications since these tasks often aim at different pedagogical goals. For example, while open-ended tasks encourage students' engagement in class discussion and active exploration for alternative explanations (Osana, Lacroix, Tucker, & Desrosiers, 2006), close-ended ones (e.g., cloze and grammatical exercises) are often form-focused rather than meaning-focused and therefore can hardly stimulate critical thinking nor constructive peer interaction (Cho, Lee, & Jonassen, 2011; Lightbown & Spada, 2000). Although a conversation between textbook consumers and authors may facilitate curriculum development, it remains underexplored how EAP writing curricular materials are perceived by students within the context of teaching.

To probe how students are taking up key aspects of an EAP writing curriculum, this study investigates EAL students' responses to an EAP textbook used in the graduate-level academic writing classroom and how well students' perceptions align with textbook authors' goals. Here one of the more influential of these textbooks has been Swales and Feak's *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (AWG) (2012), which, after over 20 years since its debut in 1994, has reached a third edition and has sold over 100,000 copies (Samraj, 2016). Like one or two other EAL academic writing textbooks (Ridley, 2012; Weissberg & Buker, 1990), AWG has been able to penetrate the world of EAP research and scholarship, at least as indicated by the number of citations received (in August 2017 over 1700 on Google Scholar). Its relatively wide and regular adoption internationally would seem to derive from its genre orientation, its integration of research findings, its attention to selected lexicogrammatical and textual features (i.e. language focus sections), and the provision of a Commentary volume with guiding principles and recommendations.

EAP writing practitioners have offered their own perspectives on AWG. For example, Ashton-Hay (2014) evaluated AWG's tasks positively and noted that "each sentence is labelled in model texts and followed by focus questions so students can analyse and discuss each text as a class, a small group, or self-access." Along these lines, Coles (2008) argued that the revised version of AWG rightly included "more discussion, and more genres while retaining the same user-friendly and insightful analyses and exploitation of texts" (p. 136). Of course, there have been some important demurrals. Belcher argued for "a more intellectually compelling social epistemic perspective" (1995, p. 176), and, Breeze (2005) contended that students with advanced writing proficiency might "lack the time and patience to work systematically through a textbook of this kind." However, overall, AWG has been both a commercial and a critical success.

AWG is underpinned by Swales' genre theory, offering viable ways of converting the theory into genre-oriented tasks that find their roots in Swales' seminal work *Genre Analysis* (Swales, 1990). In *Genre Analysis*, Swales' pedagogical bent was toward consciousness-raising. Swales' genre-based approach is task-based, aiming to "focus student attention on rhetorical action and on the organizational and linguistic means of its accomplishment" (p. 82). The valid use of Swales' approach has been widely noted (e.g., Hyland, 2007; Tardy, 2006). Its success comes partially from genre-oriented tasks in which students discuss, analyze, and evaluate language features and phraseology in target genres (Flowerdew, 2015b). However, Cheng (2011) found that although his students were introduced to the framework of genre analysis, they sometimes interpreted rhetorical moves and steps in ways that differed from prototypical genre expectations, which suggests that more attention needs to be paid to students' actual perceptions.

Since AWG has been widely used internationally, there may be student evaluations of AWG on course evaluation forms, which are likely to have taken place in different contexts (ESL, EFL, and multilingual) and classrooms (pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP writing courses). Yet, these student evaluations have not been made available to EAP researchers or disseminated in the research community. Without such public scrutiny, it remains unclear how rigorous and informative these student evaluations are. In consequence, what so far has been largely lacking in the story of AWG are the voices from the students' side of the desk, apart from comments reported by instructors. In this small-scale study conducted in the context of an EAP course in the United States, I provide an opportunity for a subset of those student users to reflect upon their classroom experiences of using AWG tasks in interviews and for the authors of AWG to respond to student opinions. The student participants were first-year MA students in education, with different L1 backgrounds. Despite their linguistic diversity, they presented similar levels of advanced proficiency in English. As will be seen, student perceptions can be somewhat different to those expressed by instructors and reviewers. This study therefore offers some useful implications for genre-based writing instruction and research, not just for AWG but perhaps also for many other textbooks supporting EAL writers.

2. The genre-oriented tasks in AWG

As Swales (1995) puts it, textbooks "may consolidate and apply recent scholarship, incorporate new research findings, and generate interesting new topics worth further study" (p. 3). Based on the latest research, particularly corpus-based findings, the third edition of AWG explores innovative ways for presenting EAP research and corpus studies to writing instructors and

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