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Academic Literacies and systemic functional linguistics: How do they relate?

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A B S T R A C T

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Two approaches to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research and teaching which have arisen in recent years are systemic functional linguistics (SFL) approaches in Australia and elsewhere (e.g. Hood, 2006; Lee, 2010; Woodward-Kron, 2009) and Academic Literacies approaches in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. Lillis & Scott, 2008; Thesen & Pletzen, 2006; Turner, 2004). Although these approaches both draw from ethnographic and sociocultural traditions, they have tended to focus on different aspects of EAP. SFL as a theory of language has employed linguistic analysis to establish the nature of disciplinary discourses and ways of encouraging students to engage in these discourses; research and pedagogy have concentrated on texts, language in use and the language system. Academic Literacies as a research paradigm has maintained a strong commitment to ethnographic investigation and to critiquing dominant academic and institutional practices; methods have concentrated on identifying practices, student identities, and conflicts that individual language users experience in university writing.

This article reflects on the two approaches by reviewing their two literatures, uncovering key questions that characterise each, and illuminating similarities and difference in epistemology and methodology. The article concludes by recognising the potential of dialogue and collaboration across the SFL and Academic Literacies research and teaching communities to address current imperatives facing EAP.

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1. Introduction

There are a wide range of theories, concepts and analytical tools which have been drawn on to research, critique, support and assess the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (for example, composition theory, critical theory and Swalesian concepts of discourse community and genre, to name a few). In this article we focus on two approaches to researching and teaching academic literacy which have been gaining currency over the last decade and which are relevant to both first and second language contexts. One of these is referred to as Academic Literacies¹. The other is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Whereas Academic Literacies focuses on practices in context, SFL focuses on texts in context. This difference in focus and, in particular, Academic Literacies' challenge to the textual bias they identify in the researching and teaching of EAP (Lillis & Scott, 2008) has generated debate (e.g. Wingate and Tribble, 2011). This article sets out to move the debate forward. To do this we will unpack what SFL text focused approaches and Academic Literacies practices focused approaches offer and,

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¹ Whilst conventions vary we have used capitals to distinguish Academic Literacies as a research paradigm from the use of the term to refer to different forms and modes of academic writing.

through review and reflection, we will consider the potential of each for contributing to the field of EAP, independently and in collaboration.

1.1. Systemic functional linguistics and Academic Literacies – definitions, differences and alignments

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language which highlights the relationship between language, text and context. Its scope is wide in that it sets out to explain how humans make meaning through language and other semiotic resources, and to understand the relationship between language and society. As an 'Appliable Linguistics' (Halliday, 2007) it is designed to be a strategic tool and a guide to action, a means of responding to everyday real-life language-related issues in diverse social, professional and academic contexts. Academic learning and teaching is just one of the contexts that it has been applied to.

Academic Literacies as a theoretical research paradigm is more focused in scope, having evolved in response to issues of literacy in an expanded higher education system and the way in which 'student academic writing and the pedagogy in which it is embedded, seems to thwart opportunities for a higher education premised upon inclusion and diversity' (Lillis, 2003, p. 192). In their position paper, Lillis and Scott (2008) state that one of the main goals of Academic Literacies is to problematize the definition and articulation of perceived 'problems' in student writing. In this way, Academic Literacies is positioned as a *critical* field of enquiry. Furthermore, as Lillis and Scott (2008) point out, it has a specific epistemology, that of *literacy as social practice*, and a specific ideological stance, that of *transformation* in which there is an emphasis on addressing inequalities in social relations.

Whereas *literacy practices* are a primary object of study in Academic Literacies, *text* is the primary unit of analysis in SFL. In Academic Literacies, literacy practices are both individual behaviours that participants display in a literacy event and complex and abstract social phenomena which include the larger social and cultural meanings that participants bring to, and deploy, in their participation in a literacy event. In SFL, text refers to units as small as a clause or as large as an entire academic monograph. In either case, texts are amenable to linguistic analysis to different degrees of delicacy (from text level staging/schema, to discourse semantics, to clause level meaning and function). Crucially, SFL text analysis is not only the analysis of linguistic resources but, in addition, the analysis of their social, cultural and ideological meanings. The theoretical framework and analytical tools are designed to make explicit the relationship between text and context. For this reason, SFL analysis of text is not reducible to the analysis of linguistic form and structure, detached from its context of use.

Lillis and Scott argue that a focus on text and an absence of a focus on practice characterizes much academic writing research and that the (pre) identification of problems in student writing as textual in nature 'leads to pedagogical 'solutions' which are overwhelmingly textual in nature' (Lillis & Scott, 2008, p. 10). In their view, this is problematic. The Academic Literacies lens, in contrast, includes in its scope aspects of academic writing beyond student texts and disciplinary genres and, as a critical field of enquiry, sets out to interrogate and challenge academic norms and conventions as well as institutional policy, particularly in relation to issues of identity and power. Whilst SFL research has the potential (theoretically and analytically) to pursue such dimensions of academic writing, to date, this has not been its primary goal.

Significantly, although Scott and Lillis question research into academic writing which concentrates on texts rather than practices, they imply that text analysis still has a place within an Academic Literacies approach. More importantly, as discussed in greater detail below, it would seem that text, as defined within SFL, resonates with the Academic Literacies view of literacy as fundamentally a social phenomenon. Where there is less resonance, however, is how the different dimensions of writing, context and ideology and their interrelationships are treated analytically within each approach.

1.2. Systemic functional linguistics and Academic Literacies – blurred boundaries?

As with any theory or field of enquiry there is, unsurprisingly, a range of positions taken up by those affiliated to them. Gardner (2012) and Woodward-Kron (2004), for example, whilst located primarily within an SFL tradition, recognize the usefulness of ethnographic approaches in developing descriptions of academic genres and the contexts of student writing. Whilst the use of ethnographic approaches does not entail analytical commitment to the category of practice (as conceptualized within Academic Literacies) such an orientation comes close to an Academic Literacies position in that it gives a different kind of attention to context, seeking a greater understanding of participants' expressed understandings of context, rather than depending on an exclusive focus on a 'text in context' (register) description. Baynham (2000), on the other hand, whilst in many ways aligned to a *literacy as social practice/Academic Literacies* approach makes a strong argument for the place of text. Similarly, Ivanič in her research into social interaction in writing comments that 'these issues need to be addressed in general and also tied specifically to linguistic evidence – linguistics has tools to offer for this analysis which should not be ignored' (Ivanič, 1998, p. 333).

1.3. Aims of article

A major aim of this article is to elucidate the orientations of SFL and Academic Literacies to researching academic writing and to consider the implications of these for the field of EAP. We examine in turn:

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