

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING AND LEARNING ACADEMIC ENGLISH IN TURBULENT TIMES

Edited by James Fenton, Julio Gimenez,
Katherine Mansfield, Martin Percy, and Mariangela Spinillo



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This volume shares proven strategies for Academic English teaching, research, and development in challenging circumstances. Through original first-hand experiences from around the world, the collection reveals how educators in higher education have responded to the specific needs and challenges of teaching second language learners in turbulent times, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organised thematically, the book covers rapid responses to crises, adapting to teaching online, collaboration and online learning communities, and assessment practices. The volume provides original insights and practical suggestions for a range of practices across English for Academic and Specific Purposes that can address new and unfamiliar circumstances, both now and in future challenging times.

The collection includes a wealth of effective strategies, varied research methodologies, and resources for practice making it an invaluable reference for practitioners, students, and researchers in the field of academic English, ESL/EFL, and online language instruction.

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Cover image: © Getty Images

First published 2023

by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-032-25479-1 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-25478-4 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-28340-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003283409

Typeset in Bembo

by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to the contributors to this volume who, among the challenges posed by the pandemic, found time to write their chapters and share their experiences with us; without their work, this project would have never been possible.

We would also like to thank Karen Adler at Routledge who supported the project and guided us all along. We are equally grateful to Andy Pitchford and colleagues at the Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation for their support.

London, February 2022

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INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON ACADEMIC ENGLISH IN TURBULENT TIMES

An introduction

*James Fenton, Julio Gimenez, Katherine Mansfield,
Martin Percy, and Mariangela Spinillo*

Introduction

Since the late 1970s Academic English (AE) has increasingly become a central teaching and learning activity in higher education (HE) contexts, both in English-speaking universities and also in many HE institutions around the world (Jordan, 2002). Although the origins of AE, which developed from English for Specific Purposes (ESP), can be traced back to British universities, it rapidly developed internationally under a range of umbrella terms, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP), college English and study skills, gradually earning its own place in both language teaching and research (Hyland & Jiang, 2021). Although these terms vary in focus and emphasis, they all refer to the teaching, learning, and assessment of the skills and competences needed to succeed in an academic environment (Hyland & Shaw, 2016).

The contributors to this volume conceptualise AE as a specific register of English used for study, teaching, and research purposes in “formal higher education” (Russell & Cortes, 2012, p. 3). They also highlight its strong focus on academic writing, linked to the key role that written assignments play in HE. This broad definition has a number of different connotations, depending on the purposes for which and the contexts in which the term is used. When asked about the way they conceptualise AE, some of the contributors to this volume mentioned that it:

- is a formal type of language which requires the use of complex grammar and vocabulary that is not commonly used in informal contexts

2 James Fenton et al.

- implies the writer has a command of the language necessary to convey ideas in an L2 while at the same time dealing with the differences in cultural conventions and expectations
- is a specific use of English for the purpose of communicating ideas, theories, data, and/or perspectives on subject areas in educational settings
- entails teaching learners the specialized registers of AE, particularly in writing but also for speaking
- aims to prepare students to participate in discursive practices in HE
- is English to prepare students for successful matriculation into their major colleges/departments, and
- is a stepping stone for students to succeed in their future university studies.

The 21 chapters in this collection reflect such a range of terms, foci, and emphases in the context of the shift to emergency online learning when the pandemic struck, providing at the same time teaching and learning experiences that may resonate with colleagues working in similar contexts. The changes to teaching and learning AE brought about by the pandemic, the areas of activity that have been mostly affected by it, and the actions that the contributors to the collection took in order to deal with the crisis are the most significant contributions that the volume makes and what we explore here as a way of introduction.

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on teaching academic English

The global crisis brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic significantly affected all activities in HE, and teaching and learning AE was no exception. As the chapters in this volume exemplify, an effect of the pandemic was the demand for a rapid transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. Almost overnight, lecturers of AE were faced with the unprecedented challenge of having to embrace new pedagogies for online learning, adapt their teaching practices as well as materials, and manage expectations of both their institutions and students.

The contributors to the collection share their experiences of having to incorporate online tools while teaching their students how to make the best of such tools for learning as a social activity (Bolster & Levrai; Ishii; Mežek & Kaufhold). They also highlight the need to support lecturers through professional development so that they felt better prepared for the transition to online teaching and to develop resilience and adaptability (Donovan; Knežević), at the same time taking the local culture into account (Manasreh, Raza, & Sarfraz). Similarly, some contributors recount how they worked hard during the crisis to keep students at the centre of the learning process (Alhasani (Dubali), Colombo; Deroey & Skipp; Pereira-Rocha) and even experimented with new pedagogical approaches (Wette), while others had to take a more conservative approach to teaching and

learning (Akhmedjanova & Akhmedova). The introduction of e-tools and online platforms to facilitate learning is another recurrent feature in these narrated experiences (Akhmedjanova & Akhmedova; Bolster & Levrai; Colombo; Knežević; Mežek & Kaufhold). All this had a considerable effect on the workload of lecturers as they established their new online courses, designed new materials for online learning (Deroey & Skipp; Pereira-Rocha; Colombo), as well as motivated their students (Akhmedjanova & Akhmedova; Alhasani (Dubali)).

Institutions, lecturers, and students of AE gradually realised that a greater degree of collaboration was required to recover from the effects of the pandemic. Collaboration was felt to be necessary to manage institutional attitudes and expectations (Caplan), learn from the experiences of other colleagues across institutions and countries (Steyne, Simon, Kam, Timár, & Beneš) and, through explicit pedagogical interventions, encourage students to engage in collaborative learning (Ishii; Rodas) both within and outside the classroom (Ishii; Lennon, Trávníková, Hradilová, & Štěpánek). Coupled with this, institutional support and collaboration, mainly in the form of holistic professional development, was seen as a central endeavour for lecturers to be able to effectively transition from face-to-face to online teaching (Donovan; Manasreh et al.).

The other decisive effect of the transitioning to online learning as a result of Covid-19 was experienced in the area of assessment. As many of the contributors exemplify, practices and procedures for assessing AE had to be revised. Such revision affected not only the nature of the assessment components (Dinneen; Zhang, Jing, & Guoying) but also the formative and summative practices implemented to assess learning (Sitthitiku & Tuvajitt; Smirniova & Shchemeleva; Zhang et al.) whose transformative effects may last longer than expected (Dinneen; Smirniova & Shchemeleva).

Looking forward

The effects of the Covid-19 crisis on AE have been unprecedented in many respects, as demonstrated by the challenges discussed in the previous section and in more depth in the chapters of this collection. However, we cannot be certain that this will be the last time we are faced with such challenges.

Unlike emerging research on teaching AE in times of Covid-19, which tends to emphasise difficulties (e.g., Kohnke & Jarvis, 2021), the contributors to this collection share the strategies and solutions they implemented as responses to the global pandemic in the hope that they would serve as a way forward should we be faced with similar turbulent times in the future.

At the macro level, institutional support and collaboration mainly in the form of culturally sensitive professional development, which includes technology, pedagogy, as well as mental and physical training for online learning, was considered fundamental for an effective response to the crisis (Bolster and Levrai; Donovan;

Knežević; Manasreh et al.). Collaboration is also explored beyond the contributors' own institutional space in the form of cross-cultural and international efforts (Steyne et al.).

At the meso level, context-specific pedagogical responses were seen as the most strategic way of facing the challenges posed by the pandemic. A number of reactions, ranging from trying out new methodologies (Wette) to holding a more conservative teaching approach (Akhmedjanova & Akhmedova), have been shared by the contributors. By the same token, their experiences from experimenting with a wide range of e-tools and online platforms (Akhmedjanova & Akhmedova; Bolster & Levrai; Colombo; Knežević; Lennon et al.; Mežek & Kaufhold) to enhance their students' learning while minimising social isolation (Ishii; Mežek & Kaufhold) are also offered in the pages that follow.

At the micro level, the contributors share their efforts and strategies to avoid learning losing its social quality in the new realities of the virtual classroom. Their efforts resulted, among other things, in a higher level of attendance (Pereira-Rocha), a more dialogic approach to learning (Colombo), a more positive attitude to learning by the students (Alhasani (Dubali)), and a community-based learning experience (Akhmedjanova & Akhmedova). Coupled with this, some authors also provide possible modifications that the assessment of learning may need in similar future turbulent times. The narrated experiences of some of the contributors (Dinneen; Zhang et al.) point to the key role that formative assessment plays in online learning and the ways in which a harmonious relationship and balance between formative and summative assessments can be successfully achieved in AE.

Conclusion

The 21 chapters in this collection represent one of the first attempts to document the experiences of a group of lecturers of AE working in different HE contexts during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors of the chapters provide readers with a detailed account of how they experienced the effects of the pandemic, the areas of teaching and learning that were most affected by it and, possibly more importantly, which strategies they put in place to deal with the dramatic effects on the teaching and assessment of AE.

The contributors have approached the task by sharing their experiences and strategies from a range of methodologies. Some of them have followed an experimental perspective and used the results of analysing data to complement their lived experiences. Others have used a more experiential way of narrating. Still others have resorted to mixing quantitative data with their personal experiences, their colleagues, and their students in an attempt to provide a richer picture of their situation. Although the contributors have taken different methodological stances to narrate their experiences, they all have one aim in common: to share

how they dealt with teaching and assessing AE in turbulent times and point to ways of negotiating similar challenges in the future.

The contents of the volume have been divided into four parts thematically. The first brings together six contributions that recount the responses to the crises. “Adapting to teaching academic skills online”, the second part, explores how contributors from five countries adapted their courses to the online environment in order to respond to the global crisis. The chapters in Part III explore collaboration as a conduit for achieving a constructive relationship among the different AE stakeholders and for building possible collaborations in future times of turbulence. The final part of the collection, “Assessing students online”, examines the transformative impact on assessment of the transition to online learning in the face of Covid-19.

The choice of chapters for the collection, the authors, and their institutional and geographical locations thus aims at showcasing the experiences, efforts, and strategies for responding to the challenges presented by such turbulent times. We hope that the narrations included in the book will resonate with other colleagues working in similar circumstances.

The chapters in this book provide a detailed description of the key changes that were needed to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic in an attempt to prevent learning being disrupted. We sincerely hope that the volume will constitute a legacy of the experiences and actions of colleagues working in many varied, yet similar, contexts of HE should we find ourselves having to teach AE in turbulent times in the future.

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