CHALLENGING 'ACCEPTABLE READING STRATEGIES': REFRAMING MULTIMODAL AFFORDANCES FOR ACADEMIC READING IN EAP

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Abstract

This paper deconstructs EAP's preoccupation with reducing academic reading to skills and strategies, arguing that Academic Reading is social interaction.

The purpose of this research was to uncover ways in which conceptually complex academic reading can be approached more meaningfully as part of ESAP (English for Specific Academic Purposes) programmes in our digital, hybrid and blended learning environments, by both practitioners and students.

Some notions of what are often referred to as 'academic reading skills' in EAP are challenged (e.g. Grabe and Stoller, 2019; Newton et al. 2018). Regarding these academic reading skills and strategies, the primary objective seems to be the understanding or navigating of a text as an object or artefact, as opposed to reading as an interaction with a text, where the reader constructs meaning through a combination of resources (Bull & Anstey, 2019). In line with the latter perspective on reading as a social interaction, findings from a project undertaken in 2021 are reported, along with more recent and interrelated findings from a scholarship project with an International Foundation Year programme, exploring how EAP practitioners can help students uncover tacit knowledge when interpreting and interacting with new ideas and concepts in their disciplinary reading. These studies involved qualitative analysis of questionnaires and follow up semi-structured interview responses from some students and their EAP tutors. In brief, to access conceptual knowledge, students must combine multimodal literacy with other language-related competencies, such as grammatical and discourse competence (Kress, 2003). This 'semiotic mediation' (Coffin & Donohue, 2014 p. 24) is a crucial aspect of academic disciplinary reading and implications include considerations of ways we can potentially draw more

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meaningfully on affordances provided by complementary modes for this reading both inside the classroom and as a guide for students' independent study.

By recognising the linguistic repertoire as one of many semiotic resources available for meaning making, suggestions are made for approaching disciplinary reading for our current and future teaching and learning spaces.

Keywords: EAP, Academic Reading, Social Interaction, Semiotic Mediation, SFL
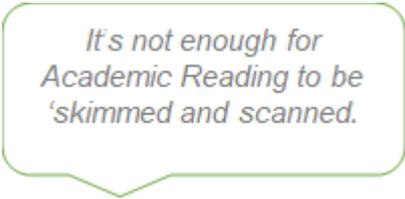
It's not enough for Academic Reading to be 'skimmed and scanned.
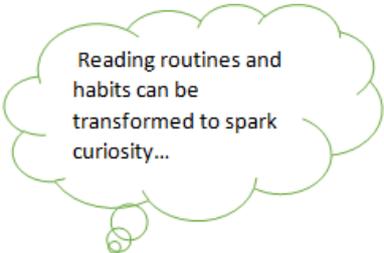
Reading routines and habits can be transformed to spark curiosity...

(Bradford, 2023)

ENGAGING WITH ACADEMIC READING MUST BE MEANINGFUL

I believe that EAP should break with the accepted norm of an approach to reading texts as navigating, consuming and skimming or scanning. This is because academic reading should not generally comprise restaurant menus and bus timetables, nor should academic reading adhere to a 'TALO' (Text as linguistic object) approach (Johns & Davies, 1983) Rather, academic reading is a social interaction: it requires so much more than decoding information by identifying words in a text (Bharuthram, 2012). It is socioculturally located (Baker et al., 2019) and students bring their own rich and meaningful experiences to this tableau. By viewing academic reading as socioculturally bound (Vygotsky, 1978), we cannot avoid considering situated contexts and previous educational influences and worldviews relating to the ways in which students (and EAP practitioners) can work with academic texts less as a linguistic 'object' and more as *text as a vehicle for linguistic information* (Cowley-Haselden, 2021, p. 54). As an EAP community, I argue that we must do more to draw on this – at all levels.

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This short account of scholarship relating to Academic Reading as social interaction and knowledge building within both our classroom and professional context draws on a mix of genre conventions and does not adhere solely to one of them. I mix personal blog with an interweaving of student testimony and my own thoughts, with informal register and more formal. I include seminal and more recent underpinning theory and literature which has resonated with me along the journey so far. It's an ongoing endeavour…and one that's important for the EAP community as we continue to question our approach to EAP teaching materials both in-house as well as those which are published. It is within these questioning contexts that I also noticed students saying they couldn't understand a text because 'they didn't have the technical vocabulary'. This frustrated me as I knew that academic reading entails so much more than decoding isolated words, but more pervasive views of EAP reading found recourse in 'word lists' such as the AWL (Academic Word List) coined by Averil Coxhead (2000). I therefore felt the drive to investigate more socioculturally related approaches to Academic Reading to enrich my own understandings and teaching and crucially, to help to underpin my teaching practice with theory that I had some agency in implementing as part of the teaching syllabus.

EAP CONTEXT: A FOCUS ON INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION YEAR EAP

Despite some of my discoveries in relevant literature having potential portability across various contexts and levels, this account focuses on International Foundation Year. Students embarking on an International Foundation Year (or 'IFY') have generally completed high school in a country outside of the UK. IFY students need to complete a full academic year and achieve required progression grades in all their modules to progress onto their desired Undergraduate degree. Within my context, the EAP module is a standalone, 40 credit core module which runs concurrently with other subject based modules.   It's important to foreground this, as these students – although at the very beginning (for the most part) of their trajectories in Higher Education, bring with them a certain breadth and depth of experience and previous knowledge. It is through drawing on this that academic reading can become a much more exciting endeavour, showing that interaction with, rather than consumption of, various academic texts (in the broadest sense) – is a way to join these new discourse communities that students are plunged into.

> How can EAP practitioners help students to approach conceptually difficult reading more meaningfully?

THEORY INTO PRACTICE

It is important to draw on literature to underpin syllabus and curriculum design and a focus on academic reading needs to work in conjunction with this.

Considering the 'Language as a Social Semiotic' (LASS) approach in the classroom (Coffin & Donohue, 2014, p. 4), 'we can see that 'knowledge, behaviours and language develop symbiotically'. When working with students across a whole academic year, it's possible to observe this symbiotic development over time. It is within this context that disciplinary reading can move beyond wearily applying 'academic reading strategies' and can expand to encompass much more interesting social facets of reading. This includes drawing implicit and explicit links between texts, noticing both the more explicit intertextuality and more implicit interdiscursivity (Bhatia, 2010), and feeling more empowered; both as a student and an EAP practitioner, to question and challenge assumptions and agendas in texts written by various actors attached to the disciplinary fields in which students will study. If we consider academic and, more specifically, disciplinary reading as meaning-making rather than as a 'skill' to be 'acquired efficiently', I think the following foundation student testimonies are quite telling of their experiences as explorers of these new genres they're encountering in the EAP classroom. These students were asked in a questionnaire about their approaches to their academic reading and the ways in which they make meaning from the (sometimes multimodal) texts they're required to read:

> **S1a (STEM)** *a lot of people say you should just read the important things like the introduction and the conclusion. But I know I can't do that I have to read the whole paragraph and go through every graph to understand the concepts.*

> **S3a (STEM)** *I sometimes found textbook images to be a distraction from the content, but I found graphs and charts to contain a lot of important meaning in the academic articles we read and compared.*

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Multimodal approaches, meaning a recognition of the need to build up a variety of semiotic resources for conceptual understanding in academic contexts including image, linguistic resource, gaze speech and gesture (Jewitt et al., 2016), can facilitate reading as part of meaning-making and social interaction. This includes analysing reading texts multimodally, which might also include text design and the combination of elements on the page (Kress, 2011). To access conceptual knowledge, students must combine multimodal literacy with other language-related competencies, such as grammatical and discourse competence (Kress, 2003). This 'semiotic mediation' (Coffin & Donohue, 2014 p. 24) is a crucial aspect of academic disciplinary reading for students (and again, their EAP teachers) regardless of their academic journey stage. It's quite complex and multi-layered! Nevertheless, I believe we can start deconstructing these layers by working together with students to interpret a vast array of multimodal resources available to us both inside and beyond the EAP classroom, including a variety of disciplinary genres and 'complementary modes'. These complementary modes include the electronic creation of concept maps (one starter student example based on the first text used during Semester 1 - used with permission - is shown below) – driven by each individual student to aid their understanding and interpretation of their module reading, creating visual links for their own records as they progress. As ever, examples of how this can be done should be woven into classes.
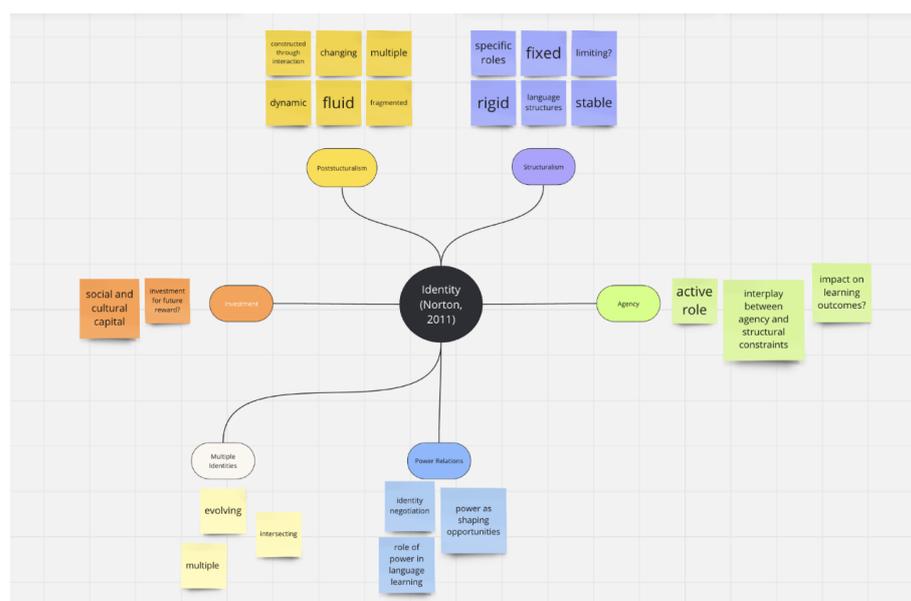

Figure 1: Beginnings of a student concept map using one of our Semester 1 texts: Norton and Toohey (2011).

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Returning to multimodality and its affordances, Bull and Anstey (2019) remark that student interaction with texts as rich, multimodal resource plays a role in the construction of meaning, facilitating them to become critical readers as they progress on their reading journeys. How to begin to do this practically though, within the classroom? How can we use our expertise in our pedagogy as language teachers and applied linguists? Read on...

## LINGUISTIC FOCUS TO UNCOVER COMMUNICATION IN OUR READING

As part of reading analysis and noticing activities, in the last academic year, I incorporated elements of SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics theory) influence in the classroom, including using some of the metalanguage with students.

These reading and noticing activities (as part of five workshops placed within the teaching syllabus in Semester 1) were based on an understanding that lexicogrammatically, choices are made as part of a language system of meaning making – articulating ways in which meanings are negotiated in different disciplinary discourses (Hood, 2016). Therefore, my question was: how could we work with students to uncover this? As Monbec (2022) states, 'language can be analysed and taught at whole text, paragraph and sentence level with a focus on **how users make meaning to achieve a communication purpose** (rather than how they apply rules).' This is appealing due to the depth of noticing this type of analysis can generate, especially when considering discourse levels of language, and how these build on discrete lexico-grammatical choices made by writers.

As part of my scholarship project, by *recontextualising* (Bernstein, 2003) some elements of SFL, the aim was NOT for students to become experts in language description: rather, it was for them to notice communication in their own discipline base, which at foundation level is still necessarily quite broad. It is by unpacking these social functions of language with the SFL metafunctions that we can begin to uncover the ideational: language used to express ideas; interpersonal: language used to show interaction; textual choices: language that structures texts in reading (Martin, 1992). This layering can be quite illuminating for students who are grappling with this level of reading for the first time. Implementation of these ideas in the classroom was done through an inclusion of five Academic Reading workshops which were designed to work as a suite as follows:

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- Workshop 1: Sentence structure and language choice in complex sentences

- Workshop 2: Language used to express and develop ideas (ideational function)

- Workshop 3: Language for interaction and engagement (interpersonal function) (Added as an example in the appendix).

- Workshop 4: Language that organises and structures (textual function)

- Workshop 5: Consolidation: ideational, interpersonal and textual language functions: what ideas are important in the field, who is important and how is this expressed through language choice?

It also enabled our International Foundation Year students to first explore and analyse the texts they were being asked to read, as well as those sources they were asked to find themselves. Going beyond generic source evaluation (reliability, recency and relevance) of sources, students saw value in trying to deconstruct the language through which authors communicated their ideas within those texts. Although these students were being asked to produce different genres across their modules to those they were reading, this noticing was in some ways transferable to their writing - particularly when our final workshop guided students in noticing and comparing the features of student genres. During semi-structured interviews, with two students with very different linguistic backgrounds (one had attended all her education through the medium of English, whereas the other had not), there were some encouraging signs of uptake, for both reflecting on writing and for noticing in reading. A small win, perhaps.
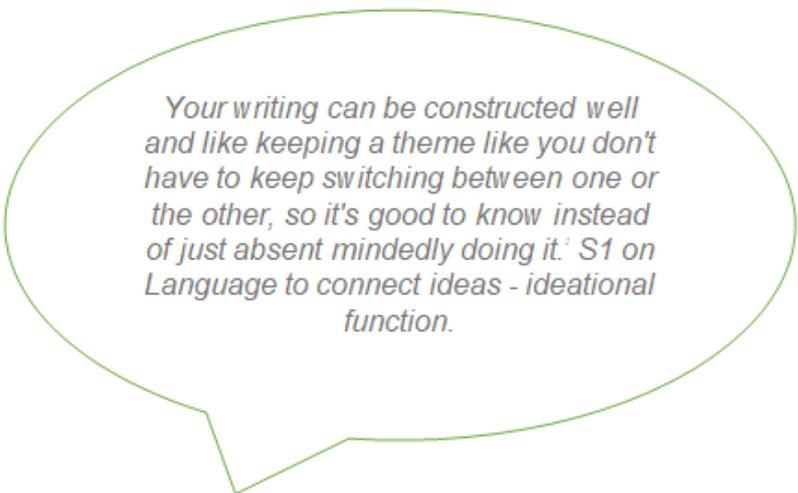
Your writing can be constructed well and like keeping a theme like you don't have to keep switching between one or the other, so it's good to know instead of just absent mindedly doing it.' S1 on Language to connect ideas - ideational function.

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> *You can see the difference from different types of different kinds of text that they're writing. Styles and language using is different.' S2 on Language to communicate - interpersonal function*
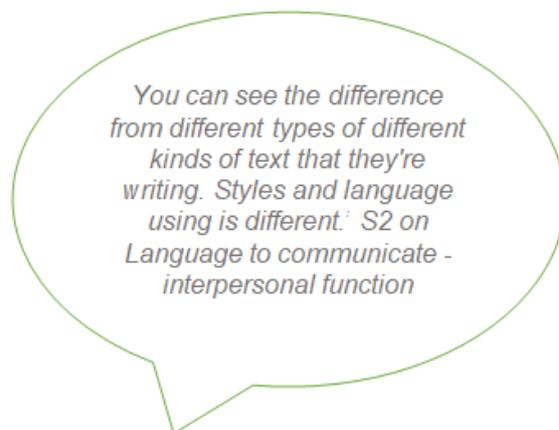
TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Perhaps even more encouraging has been the willingness of other practitioners on the International Foundation Year team to engage with this approach to reading with students, too. This is, in part, due to their own scholarship interests and perhaps a wider influence from BALEAP members to share and engage with different parts of the EAP knowledge base. As ever, this is an evolving discussion and one which takes time and willingness to try. I would like to keep engaging with practitioners outside of my own contexts on the topic of Academic Reading and appliable theory in the classroom and beyond it.

I would argue that EAP practitioners are well positioned to promote academic reading as social interaction and not only to achieve an outcome in an assessment. Comparison of features of disciplinary texts enhances awareness of intertextuality, while concept mapping as explored earlier in the account allows for explorations of interdiscursivity. Here, an ability to work towards more implicit understandings of text linking can be applied both inside and outside the classroom.

Looking ahead, the vast array of electronic resources available to practitioners and students will only keep expanding with the advent of publicly accessible forms of Artificial Intelligence. This has the potential to change the way we view, use and crucially, critique and question language in social settings. Considering Jewitt et al. (2016) and O'Halloran's (2022) stance, language is a semiotic resource which organises and structures realities and human experiences, particularly in relation, most recently, to technologies which have come out of those constructions. For developing Critical AI literacies, we must begin at the foundation – developing those bases so that we can interact with LLMs (Large Language Models) both ethically and effectively – calling out the machine when it reproduces false information or bias (Sharples, 2023). My next stage of scholarship in EAP will deal with these areas.

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Finally, unpacking social functions of language with the SFL metafunctions may help to raise awareness of language choice at the very beginning of an academic trajectory with our International Foundation Year students. Let's keep learning on that journey alongside our students, as discourse continues evolving along with our social and technological realities in academia and higher education in general.

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APPENDIX

WORKSHOP 3: LANGUAGE FOR INTERACTION AND ENGAGEMENT IN TEXTS

Concept of the day:
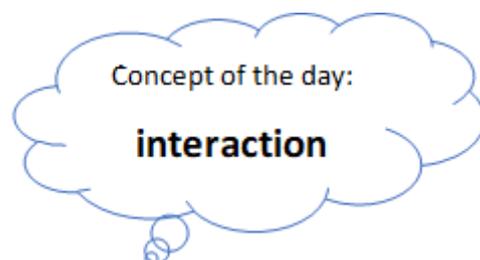
interaction

WORKSHOP 3 AIMS:

- To focus on language used at whole text, paragraph and sentence level;

- To notice ways language is used in texts to interact and engage with the audience and other texts;

- To start to think about how we are using language for interaction in our own writing.

During language workshop one and two, we thought about how language choice is used and how this can develop ideas in a text through cohesion between sentences and paragraphs. This week, we will focus on the way language is used to interact. This is called an 'interpersonal' function.

TASK MENU: YOUR CHOICE!

During the workshop, it can be a good idea to track your progress. Each task is linked from this menu to the correct place in the document.

Task Number	Task Name	Click when completed/add your reflections and notes
1	Text structure	☐
2	Interacting with the reader	☐
3	Analysing your own writing	☐

Overall suggested time: 2 hours

1.SESSION RATIONALE

Following Workshop two – looking at how language is used to express ideas in texts, today we will focus on how language is used for interaction with the audience and other texts.

As you read and listen to more texts during Semester 1 leading to your Assessed Annotated Bibliography and Seminar, you should start to notice some of the language choice made, so that you can reflect on and apply your own.

TASK 1: TEXT STRUCTURE: LANGUAGE TO EXPRESS INTERACTION

During Week 1 and for your Annotated Bibliography, you have been reading Chapter 5 in the following source:

Block, D. (2009). *Second language identities.* London: Continuum

You have also discussed the following text in your formative seminar during Week 5 and examined the way ideas were expressed during the Language Workshop in Week 6:

Situmorang, K., Nugroho, D., & Sihombing, R. (2021). International Student's Language Learning Identities in English as a Lingua Franca Context in Indonesia'. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Linguistics*. *6*(2), 383-394.

This week, we will compare the stylistic features of these two text types, by considering the 'interpersonal' language function, using the table below as guide.

Whole text	Section/paragraphs	Sentence
1. What is the purpose of the text? (e.g to report? To persuade? To argue?) 2. Does the text make an overarching claim? (Which sections can you look at to find this out?)	1. How are examples used to support the claims made? 2. Are other sources cited in the text? Why are these used? 3. Look at the abstract/introduction section. Which ideas/vocabulary do you notice that you already have some knowledge about from Weeks 1-6?	1. How do writers express confidence? • Modal verbs (can, may, might, must, should...) • Adverbs (particularly, slightly, unfortunately...) 2. How do writers indicate their commitments to the sources? • Neutral attributions (according to...) • Reporting verbs that are neutral, stronger or weaker (claim, argue, prove, contend..) • Integral or non-integral citations or footnotes 3. How do writers show opinion, evaluation and judgement? 4. Are any personal pronouns used? When and why/why not?
Text 1: Book chapter	**Text 1: Book chapter**	**Text 1: Book chapter**
Text 2: Academic Journal Article	**Text 2: Academic Journal Article**	**Text 2: Academic Journal Article**

Adapted from: Caplan, N. (2019). Asking the right questions: Demystifying writing assignments across the disciplines. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* **41**: pp. 1-8

TASK 2: INTERACTING WITH THE READER: USING PERSONAL AND IMPERSONAL LANGUAGE

During your foundation year, you are asked to write different types of texts for assignments. Some are reflective and some are more 'academic'.

Once you have completed the table below using our two published texts today, consider how you might use these structures yourself in your foundation year assignments. For what purposes do you think you might or could use 'I' or 'We', or passive or inanimate subjects?

In which assignments would you be more likely to use pronouns? Why?

Personal pronoun + verb	The passive voice	Inanimate subject + verb
'**We argue** that a reflective stance is important' '**I discuss** that...'	'A reflective stance **is considered to be** important...'	'**This study recognised** the importance of a reflective stance'
Example 1 from Block Chapter 5 (2009)	Example 1 from Block Chapter 5 (2009)	Example 1 from Block Chapter 5 (2009)
Example 2 from Situmorang et al. (2021)	Example 2 from Situmorang et al. (2021)	Example 2 from Situmorang et al. (2021)
Example 3		
Example 4		

Quick analysis: what is happening here? What does the use of the inanimate subject + verb/passive voice tell the reader? Why isn't a personal pronoun used?

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Extract taken from: INTRODUCTION (Situmorang et al., 2021).

Several studies regarding the students' study abroad identities negotiation have flourished in the past decade in Indonesia. The studies have covered countries like Australia and the United States as the most desired countries to study abroad, with participants ranging from students in general, students of TESOL, and English teachers (Helnywati & Manara, 2019; Mardiningrum, 2017; Nanda, 2019; Sabaruddin, 2019; Ubaidillah & Utami, 2021). The findings generally indicate that identity construction is significant to English language learning regardless of who the participants previous identities were. Students in general, including graduates students, were found to negotiate their identities across time by moving from peripheral to full member of the community (Sabaruddin, 2019; Ubaidillah & Utami, 2021). The students were struggling and conflicting between their current and previous identities (Helnywati & Manara, 2019). Meanwhile, English teachers experienced a transformation in their linguistic self-concept as they defined themselves as inept and speaking very formal English (Mardiningrum, 2017). These findings add the importance of unpacking the identity negotiation process during the study abroad program.

TASK 3: LOOKING AT YOUR OWN WRITING

Now take out an example of your own writing done in the last 2-3 weeks. This could be your reflection in Week 3, annotated bibliography draft or some summarising you have done while reading. It may also be some writing you have done on a different foundation module.

Consider the ways in which you used personal and impersonal language to show interaction and engagement, OR how you can use this knowledge to help you improve your writing for specific purposes.

Use today's examples to help you!

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Notes

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