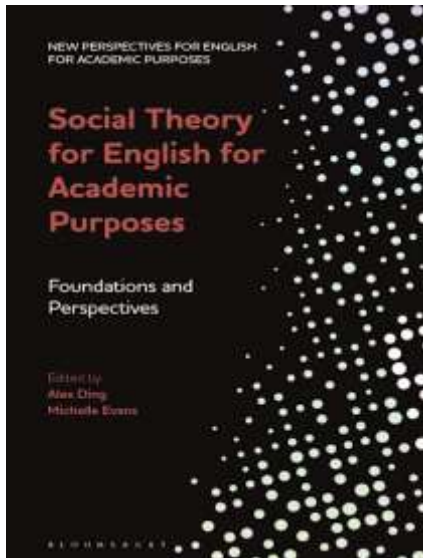# BOOK REVIEW

PLAYING WITH SOCIAL THEORY FOR EAP

Alex Ding and Michelle Evans (Eds.).
SOCIAL THEORY FOR ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES: FOUNDATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES (2022), London: Bloomsbury. 248 pp., ISBN 978-1-350-22766-8 (HBK); ISBN 978-1-350-22920-4 (PBK); ISBN 978-1-350-22918-1 (EBK).

This new addition to the Bloomsbury series 'New perspectives for English for Academic Purposes' comes after titles focusing on writing, pedagogy and contextualising EAP. This edited volume makes a claim that social theory for EAP offers an extension to the linguistically-oriented knowledge base of EAP. In doing so, the volume answers a call from over 20 years ago for a "social-theoretical stance […] to fully understand what happens in institutions to make discourses the way they are" (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002: 9). While social theory has had some influence in EAP, the editors of this volume argue that this is the first that puts theory centre stage (p. 6). The use of the preposition *for* in the title points to this practical application of social theory, revealing the editors' goals of encouraging practitioners to reflect on the role that social theory already plays in our work and to consider how other less known social theories may contribute. Throughout the volume, the term *theory* is used loosely, as a stand in for approaches, frameworks, paradigms as well as individual theories. This inclusive approach to terminology also orients the text towards practitioners, with the affordances for practice eclipsing such technical distinctions. The book is divided into two main sections, *Foundations* and *Perspectives*, bookended by an introductory chapter by Alex Ding and an afterword by Michelle Evans.

The three chapters that open this volume at first glance cover familiar territory: genre, Academic Literacies and Systemic Functional Linguistics, all of which were included in *The Routledge handbook of English for academic purposes* (Hyland & Shaw, 2016) and are grouped in this volume as *Foundations*. However,

rather than introductions, each chapter emphasises the role that social theory plays in their chosen approach.

Michelle Evans's chapter explores the sociological theories that underlie genre approaches, distinguishing between those that take a more deterministic focus on social structures and those which emphasise individual agency. These different perspectives are used to consider a wide range of approaches to understanding genre, providing deeper insight into how different genre traditions understand familiar pedagogical concepts such as social purpose, author intention and context. Linking this to pedagogical applications, Evans suggests extensions to an existing *genre analysis template* to consider less commonly discussed purposes such as gaining kudos in a field or challenging the status quo. She also suggests that identification of rhetorical functions could move from description to explanation by linking instances of language with other textual and contextual information. By grounding discussion of theory in a familiar template approach, Evans supports her argument that an understanding of the theoretical origins of genre can enrich current EAP practice.

Jackie Tuck's chapter on Academic Literacies (AL) also focuses on origins, emphasising the range of work within the UK, South Africa and the USA that has shaped the approach. Similar to genre theory, AL sees language and literacy as social and shaped by its social context. However, Tuck distinguishes AL from genre as being primarily interested in text producers, rather than in textual analysis, using the concept of *practice*, which focuses on the diverse ways that people routinely use language within and across contexts. An important implication of this approach is a need for provisionality in how we go about our work, the feedback, advice and explanations we give. So rather than a *settled theory*, Tuck argues that AL calls for a "commitment to theorizing" (p. 40) with the knowledge that, well, it is complicated. She emphasises that AL is a critical theory – in that it focuses on power and inequality – and that one of its contributions to EAP has been to help to "legitimise conversations" (p. 52) about these issues.

The final chapter in the *Foundations* section is Jim Martin's discussion of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a social perspective on language. Unlike the previous two chapters' attention to theoretical origins, Martin explores how SFL itself can be used as a social theory. A key aspect of this is *stratification* (also important to genre and AL) which considers the relationship between the strata of phonology, lexicogrammar and discourse to show how each of these elements contributes to meaning. Martin demonstrates how such an approach can help us explain – rather than just describe – features of academic language, such as nominalisation, by relating it to aspects of social context.

Though they may have different emphases: the context, the text producer or the text, what all three chapters in this section share is a sense of fleshing out what for many readers will be reminiscent of aspects of their existing practice, but in doing so offering innovative ways of extending or possibly combining approaches. The two chapters on genre and SFL use the terminology of their respective fields,

which is quite technical and, for me, needed quite a lot of unpacking to get my head around. Monbec's (2022) recent reading list for SFL could be a useful introductory guide for those interested in finding out more about this area.

The second section of the book, titled *Perspectives*, contains six chapters and presents a wider range of social theories, some of which – feminism, critical realism and field analysis – have rarely featured in EAP. These perspectives focus less on the roots of the theories and more on introduction and practical applications.

Steve Kirk introduces Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) as a way to counteract fragmentation in EAP. A key example he uses is the distinction between theory and practice. This distinction is problematised as resulting in an "unproductive division of labour" (p. 92) where different fields of practice in EAP, such as research and teaching, happen in isolation from one another. To counter this, he focuses on one dimension of LCT, semantics, to provide practical examples of how different types of knowledge – from abstract/theoretical to concrete/practical – can be considered in relation to each other in the contexts of class materials, teacher development and skills-focused lessons to identify areas for development and extension.

Ian Bruce's chapter argues that genre has been used in a mainly pragmatic way in EAP at the expense of developing a more comprehensive theory. Using social realism, he proposes that genres are independent entities, in that while they can be described from different perspectives, e.g., social or cognitive, this description does not change what they are. He uses the concept of *judgmental rationality* as being able to provide a criterion for deciding how such descriptions are accurate and relevant to EAP.

Julia Molinari describes how critical realism can help us see where we, as practitioners, can and cannot exercise agency in EAP. Molinari introduces critical realism's concept of *stratified ontology*: the EMPIRICAL, which is our experiences of the world; the ACTUAL, which is where all possible things might or might not happen; and the REAL, which refers to the invisible "deep structures and mechanisms" (p. 147) that explain the ACTUAL and EMPIRICAL. What such a perspective allows, in a similar way to SFL and genre theories, is the drawing of a line between things we experience and the deep structures that cause them. This opens up space for thinking about how what we currently experience could be different. Applying this to EAP for illustration, Molinari links EAP's role as part of colonialism (REAL) to varied definitions of EAP as a remedial service or an academic discipline (ACTUAL) and then to approaches to EAP which emphasise grammatical accuracy and transferable skills (EMPIRICAL). What I find especially powerful about this approach is that it allows us to look for explanations for the problems that we see in our work beyond those that are immediately visible to us – to think about the deeper causes and where we might be able to improve things.

Alex Ding's chapter uses a close reading of Bourdieu to demonstrate the benefits of a *field analysis* of EAP, which involves examining relationships within the EAP field as well as the relationship of EAP with other fields, such as Higher Education. Ding's chapter explores the potential *rupture within* the field of EAP

between the academic field of high-status journals and careers, and the *ill-defined* field of EAP teaching practitioners. Using a range of Bourdieu's concepts – field, habitus, hysteresis – the author illustrates the many ways that this 'ill-defined' field can be manipulated by external forces, marginalising practitioners and the work that we do. He suggests, however, that through such an analysis, we can identify areas where we can challenge this and gain more control. While this might sound familiar to those who have read Ding's other works (e.g., Ding & Bruce, 2017), this chapter illustrates in much more practical detail how a close field analysis using Bourdieu can be done and what it can reveal.

Haynes Collins and Adrian Holliday focus on a well-known approach in EAP, ethnography, framing it as enabling us to see a *social reality* that may be different to what is claimed by institutions. The social reality in this chapter is the perspectives of students, and the authors present a case study of three students' experiences at university using the ethnographic method of *creative non-fiction*. Creative non-fiction is a reconstruction of "composite events and characters [...] based upon multiple data sources which may or may not have been purposely collected" (p. 181). This is compellingly illustrated with a narrative of the three students' experiences of intercultural communication, academic malpractice and internationalization policies, followed by the authors' analysis. The chapter concludes with principles for an ethnographic approach to EAP, emphasising that ethnography is a way of seeing the world, rather than a singular method, drawing parallels with Academic Literacies.

Taking feminism as her focus, Yolanda Cerdá, highlights the relatively unexamined role that gender plays in EAP. She illustrates this via an examination of gender stereotypes in a popular EAP text as well as highlighting the gendered combative discourse that is encouraged in EAP practice such as the teaching of adversarial argument, rather than, e.g., dialogue and cooperation. Cerdá suggests that a consideration of gender in EAP teaching and scholarship could provide "deeper critical engagement with texts and their discourses [...] and more meaningful and rewarding discussion in the classroom" (p. 215). In this foregrounding of the political and provisional, feminism and Academic Literacies are closely linked (Erdreich & Rapoport, 2002). Cerdá ends the chapter with a set of powerful questions for EAP which could be a productive guide for thinking socially about the field.

In summarising these chapters I have tried to make links between the different approaches. However, the editors are explicit that these are "not a coherent or compatible set of theories" (p. 9) and instead are intended to encourage us to be more engaged in thinking about social theory, or perhaps to develop a *social-theoretical stance* (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002). As such, one perspective is to see this volume as a kind of academic fashion show, with authors invited on the stage to demonstrate the cut of their chosen theory, how it works and what it can do for EAP practitioners. Another perspective is to see each theory as a musical demonstration, an instrument played by a proficient musician for us to see how it sounds, what

range it has, if it is worth the effort to learn it (theory as musical instrument is explored in more depth in Kellogg, 2021). From this perspective, the volume offers an inspiring array of possibilities for practitioners, though the editors call for readers to make the case for other theories which can also contribute.

One pleasure of the book is the unconventional form that some of the authors take, in keeping with the critical orientation of the volume. Collins and Holliday's use of narrative enriched and extended their theoretical discussion while Cerdá's reflective comments interspersed throughout her chapter disrupted the usual air of authority that published work can take, inviting us to think alongside her. The editors also play with form, with Alex Ding's introduction replaced with a manifesto for using social theory in EAP, and Michelle Evans's Afterword bringing together reflections of the volume's authors on their writing experiences. These subversions of typical academic conventions make this a stimulating read but by eschewing the traditional introduction and afterward sections, the editors miss an opportunity to draw these specific theories together or guide practitioners towards heuristics for making sense of them. While the stated goal of the volume to persuade practitioners of the merits of social theory certainly worked for me, an additional focus on the relations between these specific theories, e.g., overlaps and distinguishing features, could provide useful contextualisation for practitioners. To continue with the theory as musical instrument metaphor, it would be useful to consider what these various theories can do when played alongside each other.

A final question is about the intended audience of this volume, EAP practitioners. I wonder what *kind* of practitioner this is aimed at, in terms of their dispositions of background knowledge. For example, how much knowledge of the *Foundations* theories of SFL, genre and AL does a practitioner need to make sense of this? While these chapters contain an abundance of practical illustrations and analyses from those with expertise, complementary accounts of how practitioners may learn to *play* these theories, the false starts, the dead ends, the innovative adaptations, could be a valuable extension to the exciting perspectives that this volume has brought together.

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