EAP Conference 2018: No Innocent Bystanders: Stance and Engagement in Academic Discourse - University of St Andrews, 24 February 2018

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One of the interesting features of the annual St Andrews EAP conference are the thought-provoking conference titles themselves. This year's title was no different. "No Innocent Bystanders" with its crime-thriller appeal, juxtaposed with the more prosaic "Stance and Engagement in Academic Discourse" immediately intrigued. The pairing is apt as innocence, or neutrality, is not actually what academics want to see in their students' work.

Dr Zak Lancaster dealt with the expectations of academics in his opening plenary entitled, "Stance and judgment: what discourse analysis can reveal about successful student writing in the disciplines". These expectations often appear as mystifying paradoxes to students, for example, "take a position and offer judgements – but don't be biased or judgemental"; "use your own words, your own voice – but don't be colloquial or too personal." He demonstrated how using corpus-based linguistic analysis of student writing shows the relationships between patterns of stance expressions and student level (beginning and advanced); disciplinary context; and high- and low-graded papers. More advanced level students and those who receive higher grades show greater contrastiveness (foregrounding problems and disagreements), critical distance, and positive alignment with the concepts and values of their discipline. Zak ended with some recommendations among which was the training of faculty. Zak had run a workshop where academics with different subject specialisms underwent a consciousness-raising of the stance expressions they valued within their disciplines, and then considered ways to make their expectations explicit for their students.

Anna Murawska, Laura Sleeman and George Stevenson, gave a presentation on "Revealing and developing stance through engaged reading." They investigated the unwillingness among students to voice a personal or academic stance, and found the problem stemmed from a general disengagement with the subjects they were studying. Recognising that developing a stance has to be preceded by knowledge about the subject and by exposure to texts demonstrating critical appraisal, they redesigned the early weeks of the EAP syllabus to focus on reading and on reading techniques which encourage a critical engagement and analysis of texts. Activities aimed to identify stance and the

mechanics for achieving stance, as well as to encourage a personal response. These techniques were adopted by subject teacher, George, to approach core social science texts.

Jenifer Spencer also prioritised knowledge as the basis for stance development. The answer to the question posed by the title of her presentation, "Teaching stance: is our approach too simplistic?" was clearly "yes". Pedagogic EAP tasks often encourage students to declare a stance at the outset – "the stampede to stance", which she equates to presenting a solution before analysing a problem. Other tasks can result in students expressing an evaluative stance without meaning to, which may be because they are unaware of the nuances of meaning of various stance expressions. Instead, teaching should focus on the process of acquiring stance. This process can be expressed as an "epistemological journey" – where stance is built through gathering, refining, consolidating and synthesising knowledge. Having acquired a stance via this journey, it can be shaped for an audience, and this is where the expression of stance becomes meaningful through language choices.

The contrast between stance expressions used in real lectures and of how they are presented in EAP coursebooks formed the content of Katrien Deroey's presentation, "Importance marking in lectures: confronting EAP coursebooks with real lectures." Using lecture corpora Katrien analysed importance markers in 25 commonly-used EAP listening course books and found that they were unrepresentative of authentic lectures and therefore inadequate for preparing students for the challenges of real lectures. Using authentic academic lectures with appropriately scaffolded activities were suggested as a more useful alternative to course books.

The "I" question was raised in many of the presentations and was the main focus of some. Bella Ruth Reichard in "Who uses "I" and for what purpose?" offered an analysis of how scholars of theology referred to themselves in journal articles and demonstrated how more established scholars use more "text-external" references, often in a self-promotional way. Helen Taylor and John Goodall examined how the genre of writing seems to influence how "I" is used in "A preliminary investigation into the rhetorical function of "I" in different genres of successful student academic writing". These were interesting as they challenged a common belief that "I" should be avoided at all costs and that a less "simplistic" approach is once again needed.

As it is impossible for one person to attend parallel sessions, I apologise for the exclusion of equally stimulating presentations and thank all the presenters for an interesting and rewarding day. An especially big thank you is merited by Kerry Tavakoli and her team for organising this event each year.

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