

Second language writing, genre, and identity: An interview with Ken Hyland

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On page one of his new book, *Disciplinary Identities: Individuality and Community in Academic Discourse* (2012, CUP), Ken Hyland identifies himself as a middle-aged, British, vegetarian hiker. He is also Professor of Applied Linguistics and Head of the Center for Applied English Studies at Hong Kong University. His book credits as author include, *Teaching and Researching Writing* (2002, 2009, Pearson Longman), *Second Language Writing* (2003, CUP), *Genre and Second Language Writing* (2004, University of Michigan Press), *English for Academic Purposes: An Advanced Resource Book* (2006, Routledge), and *Academic Discourse* (2009, Continuum), along with a number of co-edited volumes such as *Innovation and Change in Language Education* (2013, Routledge) with Lillian Wong. He has taught in seven different countries and in addition to book chapters, his papers (see <www2.caes.hku.hk/kenhyland/>) have been published in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *English for Specific*



Purposes, *TESOL Quarterly*, and *Applied Linguistics*, where he is currently co-editor.

In February 2013, Professor Hyland conducted lectures at Temple University in Tokyo and Osaka as part of the Distinguished Lecturer Series and he returned in August as a plenary speaker for the 52nd JACET International Convention in Kyoto. He took time to share his reflections on teaching and researching academic writing, genre, and identity in academic disciplines.

GR: As 10 years have passed since your publication of *Second Language Writing* in the Cambridge Language Education Series, what are some of the interesting developments you have seen in this area?

KH: When I wrote that book, certainly teachers were not very familiar with corpus work. I think now I see far more use of it in the classroom and also as an out-of-class learning resource in that teachers direct their students towards online corpora for homework and additional practice. I also see teachers referring to corpora themselves. If a student wants information about how best to express something or what the meaning of a word is in a particular context, then they are just as likely to go to a corpus as a dictionary. I've also seen teachers using corpora far more with their students in class to develop writing skills and I think this is an interesting development. We are seeing more of an interest in out-of-class learning as well. Instead of sending students away with an essay to write for homework, teachers are beginning to use flexible programs like Moodle and Blackboard to help manage the

delivery of classes and the practice of writing, out of class, where they can set tasks and very focused activities involving writing. I think we have also become more focused on learning rather than teaching: we've become much more goal-directed. We are more interested in what the learning outcomes of what we are doing in class are. Instead of asking or assuming that what we teach will be learned, we are now asking, "What do I have to do to accomplish effective learning?" And what that means I think is being more sensitive to learners—where they are now, where they are going—rather than making assumptions about them and taking materials and activities into class. I think a lot of this comes out of teachers' own curiosity and action research. Teachers have always tried new things in class, particularly when they find they don't work with their students. Changing things around—giving students different things to write, giving them different sources to write from, giving them different stimuli to produce writing, scaffolding the writing in different ways. I think a lot of that is very productive, particularly when it involves talk around writing. Teachers are recognizing that students don't just write in an isolated, quiet way in a class or at home, but they need to do other things as well. Writing is the product of reading, of talking about writing, of sharing ideas in groups, so I think we see far more writing workshop type classes where instead of teachers just giving students an essay topic, there are a lot of things going on. I think all of those things have really evolved in the last 10 years or so.

GR: In your recent lectures, you talked about assumptions about writing and literacy.

KH: I think the assumptions about what writing is and what literacy is have really been questioned in the last 10 years. The New Literacy people writing out of London at King's College and so on have shown us that literacy is really relative to particular contexts. The whole English for Specific Purposes movement has encouraged the view that students can't just write in a particular way irrespective of the context. There is always a purpose to the writing. There is always a particular audience and that audience has assumptions, things it already knows, doesn't know, might need to know. It has an attitude toward what is being written about and all of these things have to be considered in how an author shapes a text. That kind of thinking is feeding into the teaching of writing, making it

far more context specific rather than the idea that there is a single way of writing or way of teaching writing.

GR: You have also written a lot on discourse and genre, two words which often get widely appropriated. Could you identify what genre is (or isn't) and clarify its relationship to writing "products" such as recipes and business reports and written "messages or functions" such as appeals or persuasion and promotion?

KH: I think you are making two distinctions here. One is between text and genre. A text is a particular physical piece of writing or speech – something that exists in the world, whereas genre is a rather abstract term. It's something we recognize in texts because we see texts as being similar, we can group them together on the basis of certain characteristics. Genre is such a complex idea. It is essentially the repeated use of language to accomplish particular purposes in routine situations. The kinds of things you have mentioned between functions and genres, I think we are really talking about macro and elementary genres, in Jim Martin's sense. We have macro genres like describing or persuading and then specific examples of them where not all persuasions are the same. We persuade someone to buy a fridge in very different ways than persuading people to give up smoking. It's very complex. Some people talk about genre as metaphor. That it is a way of seeing the world, a schema. But essentially it is a routinized way of using language to accomplish social purposes as effectively as possible.

GR: The writing course materials I have looked at from the various ELT publishers are concentrated largely around process writing of specific "types" of paragraphs and/or essays (e.g., descriptions, narrative, opinion, cause and effect, argumentative). In terms of teaching genre or writing for specific academic purposes, do you see these as complimentary or conflicting?

KH: I think they are useful. I think it is good to help students become aware that language varies according to the purpose of the user. Learning how to describe, how to narrate, how to give an opinion are useful skills. But the problem, I think with teaching in this way, is that they are decontextualized. They are generic ways of using language and while students might be able to transfer those into particular genres and particular situations, I am not sure if we can always make that assumption. I think it is more

helpful if we focus on the genres the students need to write. What is it they want to describe - is it a sunset or the new Toyota? Instead of taking a description as an autonomous way of using language, we situate it. We put it into a context that students are going to find useful and can then apply in their lives.

GR: How can writing teachers in foreign language contexts effectively scaffold their instruction with models and practice using examples or appropriate form and discourse, yet bring the writers to produce their own written output and not simply substitute into a template or pour content into a mold of structures?

KH: We need models to learn effectively, to understand "How can I express this meaning effectively in a way that readers or hearers are likely to understand and accept?" Certainly there is a danger in genre teaching or in providing models that students will believe that is the only ways of expressing particular kinds of meanings. They need to see variations, of course. But I am sure even the great piano players learn the scales before they learn the variations in sophisticated concertos. I think starting with models, deconstructing them to look at how they are organized and the language they contain is an essential starting point to then ask, "How else can we do this?" "What other ways are there of expressing these meanings and what do these variations mean?" "What nuances or connotations do they convey?"

GR: If you could wave a magic wand or rub a lamp, what would your three wishes be for best practice in curriculum to teach writing development over the limited contact hours available in tertiary education in a foreign language context?

KH: I understand not having enough time to teach what you have to teach. The first wish would be that we should focus on students' needs rather than trying to teach everything. One of the problems with school curricula is that there is just too much in it. We overload students with demands of what they should learn and teachers have become terrorized by the concept of *coverage* of the textbook or the syllabus, which is often impossible. We need to try to identify what the students need the language for and then teach that kind of language. A second wish would be to start with what the learners know, not what they are assumed to know. Where are they now, what are their proficiencies, what are their interests, what is it that motivates them to

learn language, if anything at all? Because of the limited contact hours, my third wish would be to give plenty of out-of-class learning opportunities to use the language outside of class and the skills to learn autonomously. How students can make the best use of an environment that is not English-rich could be exploited rather more either through the internet or assignments which look for uses of literacy in the local environment.

GR: For those who might be interested in conducting research on their own students' writing, could you prescribe a short list of do's and don'ts?

KH: Ok, the first do would be keep it simple. The second, which is related to the first, is be focused. By that I mean have answerable questions. Instead of "Why do my students have problems with English?" or "Why don't they like writing?" use something finite that you can actually answer through your research like "What structures cause the most problems when they write essays?" or "How can I best help students express emotions in writing?" A third do would be to triangulate, which is just a fancy term to mean collecting data in different ways—talking to students, talking to teachers, looking at the materials they are using, looking at the tasks you are giving them. Most particularly, always look at texts—the kinds of writing they are doing. And look at the writing for particular things, for example not just errors but particular kinds of errors or what is it that they are doing repeatedly that is good or bad or helps you to answer your question.

GR: Your most recent title in the Cambridge Applied Linguistics series, *Distinguishing Identities*, talks about disciplinary identities. Could you explain these and position them in relation to your definition of identity?

KH: The mantra is that "identity is performance." We are what we do. I wanted to find one way how we might get at that idea. If identity is a performance, it is a performance that has some kind of stability, it is repeated. We do it again and again because it works for us and helps us to align with others. So identity is really certain kinds of behavior, and particularly I am interested in language behavior, that we engage in to become members of social groups—what it is that is valued by particular disciplines. To get at that, you need to look at how language is used repeatedly by members of social groups. To me, that means looking at corpora. How is language

used by particular disciplines, how is it used in different disciplines, how is it used by individuals in particular disciplines, and how does that differ from others? Identity isn't what we say we are or think we are, it is what we do—how we represent ourselves in talk again and again and again. It is about belonging to a group and being an individual member of that group. It's always a balancing act between community and individuality.

GR: In your book, you mention the increased attention given to the topic of identity in the human and social sciences over the past 25 years. What makes a title drawn from a disciplinary perspective so timely and how do you see it adding to the literature?

KH: I think there are so many definitions of identity and so many ways of understanding it that it is beginning to lose its meaning a little bit. It's the lens through which the social sciences view the world. It is the way of approaching everything. Identity is often used as "who I think I am" and so interviews are often used where people tell stories about themselves and that is often construed as their identity—how they reflect on their lives. Another way it is used is by conversation analysts who see identity changing in talk all the time—there is a listening identity, a controlling identity, a supporting identity—where identities can change almost by turns of speech. I think that really undermines the idea of identity because identity should have a core that is relatively stable or unchanging. If we see it as a performance, it is not a performance that we change all the time. It comes to represent us, it has continuity. What I think I have done is try to establish that idea and add it to the literature by providing an empirical way of getting at identity. Corpora of different communities exist, so what does it mean to have an identity as an applied linguist or as an English teacher in Japan? What I think it means is that people use language in a certain way to relate to their community in a way that they value. It is a complex term, but one that I think does have value and we just need to find ways of getting at it.

GR: Near the end of the book, you state "every act of communication is an act of identity" (p. 195). How can researchers look to digest identity into manageable research investigations?

KH: I think that people generally accept that we express some kind of identity in the clothes we wear, our accents give us a regional identity, our

age probably has a bearing on identity. All those things seem to index something about us. I am saying that looking at what individuals do again and again, particularly how they use language again and again, and how others respond to this provides another way of understanding identity. So I guess researchers should start with this: What is it? What kind of language are we using which makes us engineers or taxi drivers or policemen? What are the repeated rhetorical actions that people use? Because that is where we find identity, not in interview responses or who we think we are.

GR: Or surveys reflecting on who we think we are?

KH: That's right.

GR: Much of the research in the book makes use of corpus data. How might writing teachers make better use of corpora?

KH: There are now much bigger, more contemporary corpora of student writing, of published writing which are available freely online—the BAWE corpus (British Academic Written English corpus) is a corpus of A and B grade undergraduate assignment writing and that is a really rich resource. There are corpora of lingua franca Englishes with different language groups. There is the MICASE corpus of academic speech. So there are a lot of corpora around that teachers can get free access to. What they are then going to do with them is something else. Teachers tend to use corpora in two ways (1) as a reference that they can use to create materials and give to students. With a lot of the concordance programs that analyze corpora, you can make gap fill exercises, you can create word lists. Or teachers can use them (2) as references of how language is used as authentic content that they can turn into tasks. Perhaps more difficult is what Tim Johns calls *data driven learning* where the students become the users of the corpora themselves. They become researchers to explore questions the teacher gives them, such as collocations, hopefully motivating them to study language more and learn more about language.

GR: Finally, in the Acknowledgements for *Disciplinary Identities*, you cite your familiarity with "academic discourse, disciplinary writing, and [the] interpersonal aspects of language" (p. xi), but then go on to say that the book approaches these from a perspective that is rather new to you. What advice might you have for academics

looking to put a fresh, new spin on their areas of interest?

KH: I have to admit that I stayed away from identity for a long time. I thought it was something really beyond my expertise to study and too ephemeral. So I moved out of my comfort zone to look at it. But when I started to read about it I found a lot of disagreement in the literature and that is something that you can exploit. I don't really have advice, but I think what I would say are just three things—be curious, be confident, and be skeptical.

GR: Thank you, I appreciate you sharing your insights.

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