Editorial

Year 2012 marked the beginning of a new era in the Hong Kong education system with the full implementation of the 4-year curriculum in undergraduate education in the territory. The new academic structure has brought along profound changes in not only core disciplinary programmes but also English language enhancement provision. In light of the challenges of the development and implementation of the curriculum reform, in June 2012, the Centre for Applied English Studies (CAES) at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) hosted the Research into Practice in the Four-year Curriculum Symposium, where stakeholders in English language teaching in Hong Kong met and discussed various significant issues that they faced. This Special Issue of HKJAL puts together a collection of papers from the Symposium to provide stimulus for further research on English language provision in higher education.

The issue begins with Ken Hyland’s article on how HKU has responded to the educational reform. Drawing on his extensive research in academic literacy, Hyland examines how the notion of academic specificity has been governing the development of English language courses in the new curriculum at the university, with examples from a range of innovative discipline-specific courses, namely English-in-the-discipline courses, offered by CAES. While upholding the tenets of academic literacy, these English-in-the-discipline courses also feature close collaboration with academic disciplines in different departments, which helps clarify the nature of the language courses to the subject teachers, align the learning outcomes of the courses with the communication needs of the students in their disciplinary studies, and promote academic literacy in teaching and learning in the university.

In the first of the two papers on course design, Sarah Carmichael and her colleagues report on the development of a genre-based technical communication course for second-year engineering students at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. With the aim of enhancing students’ abilities to meet the specific language demands of the engineering discipline, Carmichael and her colleagues adopted a task-based instructional framework to draw their students’ attention to a range of genres and lexicogrammatical features in engineering texts. Their paper discusses an evaluation study of the course, with data collected from a student questionnaire, focus group discussion and textual analysis of students’ writing. The findings indicated that students were able to produce stylistically appropriate writing with ‘contextually meaningful’ technical vocabulary but were less able to write an introduction to a technical report, which in the view of the authors could be attributed to students’ ‘constricting repertoire for introduction writing’ in their secondary education.

In the other paper on course design, Laura Wakeland addresses issues arising from developing an English-for-Specific-Academic-Purposes (ESAP) course for HKU music students. Following the needs analysis approach, Wakeland consulted music specialists at the Department of Music, conducted research into writing about music, participated in a collaborative teaching project and analysed music students’ texts. Through the consultations, research and textual analysis, Wakeland has identified the target genres, students’ writing problems and instructional needs that are germane to the design of the ESAP course. An issue that remains to be resolved is the inclusion of figurative language as a learning outcome in the ESAP course. Concluding her paper, she suggests a need to review and reinforce some core literacy skills as part of the ESAP
course but emphasises the inclusion of disciplinary genres and language features at the same time.

Alan Urmston and his team members’ paper, which is about another form of collaboration, reports on the joint effort of three universities in Hong Kong to develop the Diagnostic English Language Tracking Assessment (DELTA). As the name of the test denotes, it is a diagnostic and tracking test system which uses Rasch measurement techniques to determine students’ English proficiency and record their English learning progress throughout their university education. In the paper, the authors detail the structure and various features of the DELTA system, and discuss the testing results obtained in its initial administration in 2011–12.

Drawing attention to the need to be familiar with the students’ previous learning experience, Kevin Yung looks into HKU students’ experience in shadow education (i.e., private tutoring) in addition to their mainstream schooling before university. The students in his small-scale study projected themselves as rather teacher-dependent and passive English learners. Yung therefore argues for the need to cultivate students’ motivation especially in their first year of university study and suggests a number of strategies that course developers and teachers could adopt to motivate these new students and prepare them for discipline-specific language enhancement courses in their later years of study at the university.

Acknowledging the need to motivate students in their English language learning, Jason Ho and Kate Rogers make use of English literary works written by Chinese writers in their course on critical reading skills. The target students, a group of Associate Degree students in a Community College, were asked to study selected literary works as models for reflective essays and to write about their own personal engagement with English learning. Ho and Rogers exemplify this literary-based approach with Xu Xi’s creative non-fiction memoir, Et Tu Mon Pere, and analyse some sample writings selected from three students. Their analysis shows how the students have developed creativity and a sense of agency in language learning.

This Special Issue would not have been possible without the constructive comments made by all our external reviewers, and we very much appreciate the time and effort they expended. We would also like to express our gratitude to Professor Amy Tsui for writing a foreword to this Special Issue, which emphasises the significant role of English language education in the curriculum reform. We are also grateful to Professor Ken Hyland, the Director of CAES, and Dr Lillian Wong, the Chair of the Symposium, for their generous support. Last, we would like to thank the CAES clerical staff for their invaluable assistance.

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