
[Book Review]

*Teaching Academic ESL Writing:
Practical Techniques in Vocabulary and Grammar*

by Eli Hinkel

(Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004, xi + 360 pp.)

Junko MATSUZAKI CARREIRA *

This book is one of the latest contributions to the ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series by series editor Eli Hinkel. Hinkel states that the aim of *Teaching Academic ESL Writing: Practical Techniques in Vocabulary and Grammar* is “to bridge an important gap that exists in teacher training today: the teaching of the second language and its grammatical and lexical features that are essential for any L2 writing teacher and student to know” (p. ix). Academic discourse and text are rather different from other types of discourse and text. Hinkel emphasizes that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing instruction is necessary to prepare students for real academic courses and that the hedged and depersonalized register should be addressed in English as a Second Language (ESL) /EAP writing instruction. Although this book is intended for teachers of high intermediate and advanced academic ESL students, it is also helpful for second language (L2) academic writers. There are three parts in the book: Part 1, “Academic Text and Teaching Second Language Writing”; Part II, “Sentences and Their Parts: Lexis and Grammar”; and Part III, “Text and Discourse Flow: The Sentence and Beyond.”

Part 1 is divided into three chapters: Chapter 1, “The

* カレイラ松崎順子 カレイラまつざき・じゅんこ：敬愛大学国際学部非常勤講師 第二言語習得、動機

Part-time Lecturer, Faculty of International Studies, Keiai University; second language acquisition, motivation.

Importance of Text in Written Academic Discourse: Ongoing Goals in Teaching ESL Skills”; Chapter 2, “Student Writing Tasks and Written Academic Genres”; and Chapter 3, “Curriculum for Teaching the Language Features of Academic Writing.” In Part I, Hinkel stresses that conversational fluency does not lead to the production of academic text. She criticizes ESL/EAP programs on the grounds that few of them undertake to expose the students to various types of academic writing. She insists on the need for explicit instruction in L2 academic text.

Part II is divided into 6 chapters: Chapter 4, “Sentence, Phrases, and Text Construction”; Chapter 5, “Nouns and the Noun Phrase”; Chapter 6, “More on the Noun Phrase: Pronouns”; Chapter 7, “Teaching Verb Tenses and Voice in Text Cohesion”; Chapter 8, “Lexical Classes of Verbs: Meanings and Text Functions”; and Chapter 9, “Adjectives and Adverbs in Academic Discourse.” Part II provides what non-native speakers need to be taught about English sentence and text construction. In Chapter 7, Hinkel explains verb tense, which is one of the most difficult points for L2 learners. Many L2 academic writers have difficulty in understanding how to use tense accurately, which is slightly different depending on the area and the style, such as the American Psychological Association (APA) or the Modern Language Association (MLA). Hinkel suggests that “L2 writers should be encouraged to use the present simple tense whenever possible in their writing” (p. 146). The APA (2001) requires the present perfect tense or the past tense for sources cited. Following the APA, we should often use the past tense.

Furthermore, there is a problem about the way Hinkel explains modals. Hinkel states that the future “is rarely used in academic writing—more commonly, modal verbs (e.g., *can*, *may*) are used to express future expectation” (p. 169) which made me wonder whether we should not use *will* in academic writing. Her explanation is vague and confusing. According to “frequency of modal verbs across registers” (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002, p. 178) *will* next to *can* and *may* is used in an aca-

demetic register. Hinkel should have given us a clearer explanation of modal verbs.

Part III, covering text and discourse flow, is divided into three chapters: Chapter 10, "Backgrounding Discourse and Information: Subordinate Clauses"; Chapter 11, "Rhetorical Features of Text: Cohesion and Coherence"; and Chapter 12, "Hedging in Academic Text in English." Chapters 10 and 11 drew my attention to the importance of cohesion and coherence. L2 academic writers are often insufficiently aware of cohesive and discourse-organizing links. Hinkel states, "If the subordinate clause is placed at the beginning of the sentence, it can play an important role in establishing a cohesive and discourse-organizing link between the text and/or ideas that immediately precede the clause and the new information that follows" (p. 247), which makes L2 learners notice the necessity of cohesion in writing academic papers.

However, some of what Hinkel says is obscure and confusing. She discusses the sequence of tenses in Chapter 10, noting that tense in the noun clause can remain in the present or be shifted to the past, although their meanings are slightly different. When I read this, I wondered how different they were. She did not say anything about this difference. She should have clarified the difference between present and past in the noun clause.

On the other hand, Swales and Feak(2004) give a lucid explanation of tense and the sequence of tenses. Moves from past to present perfect and then to present indicate that the research reported is increasingly close to the writer's own opinion, the writer's own research, or the current state of knowledge (Swales & Feak, 2004) They go on to explain tense in the subordinate clause. When the writer believes that the finding should be understood within the context of the single study, the past tense should be used(Swales & Feak, 2004) When the writer implies that a wider generalization is possible, the present tense should be used(Swales & Feak, 2004) Their account is exactly what L2 academic writers want to know. Swales and Feak (2004) give a clearer explanation of tense and the sequence of

tenses than Hinkel.

In Chapter 11, Hinkel states that “lexical substitutions work in similar ways across several sentences in which a lexical item is not only repeated, but replaced by a related item, synonym, or near synonym of the original word—or a ‘general word’...class of similar words” (p. 281) L2 learners may overuse pronouns as lexical substitution. However, it is difficult for L2 learners to use synonyms, near synonyms, or general words correctly. She should have shown some useful lists, such as lexical substitution, in more detail.

Chapter 12 covers hedging in academic text. Jordan (1997) states, “A feature of academic writing is the need to be cautious in one’s claims or statements” (p. 240) Hedging is one of the most important features of academic writing. Hinkel states that because a small number of hedges are used repeatedly in L2 writing, L2 texts may seem redundant and repetitious. She shows some useful lists. In particular, the list of common informal and conversational hedges on p. 323 is highly valuable to L2 writers.

Through this book I learned that L2 academic writers should pay more attention to the differences between formal written and informal spoken registers. This book is interesting as well as enlightening and casts a new light on teaching academic ESL writing. Some of the lists that Hinkel shows are of great use for L2 academic writers.

When I read Part I at first, I really expected that this book might give practical suggestions and advice to improve L2 academic writing skills. What Hinkel discusses in this book is important and interesting but might not be exactly what L2 academic writers need. Hinkel’s explanations of modal verbs and verb tense are vague and frustrating to readers eager for answers. Some practical teaching strategies and techniques that she gives may be too simple. This book may not be good as a practical guide book.

This book is an important contribution to the field and will likely enlighten many of those teaching and learning academic writing, but potential buyers should be aware of its limitations.

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