Editor's introduction

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The papers included in this Volume of *Linguistics and the Human Sciences* present different aspects of the Scaffolding Literacy in Academic and Tertiary Environments (SLATE) project (2008-2010). The SLATE project evolved out of a desire to address the English language and literacy needs of students at City University of Hong Kong (CityU). CityU, like most other public sector universities in Hong Kong, is an English medium institution. However, a large number of students entering this university may not have studied in English medium schools and/or may have limited English language proficiency. In fact, based on the university records, a large proportion of the students who enter the university have only a grade D or E in their A-level English exams. Such levels of English language proficiency create a formidable challenge for the students (and the universities) and impacts their performance and outcomes. Prior to the SLATE project, students at CityU were supported mostly through traditional English language courses offered by the English Language Centre at the university. These courses – typically offered only in the first year of students' university life – used a variety of traditional (skill based courses) as well as some EAP approaches to provide support to students in developing their academic English language proficiency. Students took their mainstream academic courses alongside these ESL classes. This traditional ESL programme, however, did not necessarily produce the expected results. Evidence of this failure of traditional programmes comes from a range of sources, including students, IELTS scores at the end of their university studies. For example, a group of self-selected students graduating from CityU in 2009 only scored an average of 6.4 on their IELTS, with their lowest score (5.8) in writing. This situation raised questions about how these students

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engage with their studies in English and are able to graduate from an English medium university without having the appropriate language skills. This situation led the staff and administration at CityU to ask: what can be done to support these students? It was this problem that Jim Martin and I were asked to respond to in late 2007. Taking an applicable linguistics (Mahboob and Knight, 2010) approach, we quickly built a team of educational linguists to explore the nature of the problem and then to use our theoretical and pedagogical knowledge to respond to this situation. In doing so, we both drew from a wealth of theoretical knowledge about language and literacy in education and have been contributing to it by presenting the findings of our work. The papers included here demonstrate how our work expands the work on genre pedagogy by adapting it in contexts where it had previously not been applied.

The SLATE project evolved out of a first phase of literacy intervention at CityU called the LCC project (Language Companion Course). The LCC initiative was developed by the CityU staff and administration to improve the academic language skills of their students and to help students succeed in their studies. In the LCC project, students enrolled in specific courses at CityU were assigned an online language coach who provided them with language and literacy support. Students who participated in the LCC sent electronic copies of their draft assignments to online language coaches who provided feedback to the students using an online comment bank as well as more open-ended comments. The students used this feedback to improve their drafts, which were then submitted to their course lecturers for grading. Over time, the LCC project evolved in many ways and, with the involvement of the University of Sydney (USYD) starting 2008, some of the LCC courses adopted a genre-based pedagogy (Martin and Rose, 2008). The LCC courses supported by the USYD team were later renamed the SLATE project. For more details about the early phases of the LCC project and how it differs from the SLATE project, see Mahboob *et al.* (2010).

Drawing on work conducted by Sydney School genre theorists (Rose and Martin, 2012), the SLATE team took on the literacy challenge outlined by CityU and tried to address it by adopting the principles of genre pedagogy to suit the needs of an online literacy project for non-English speaking students in a tertiary education environment. In order to do this, the SLATE team first profiled the literacy needs of students in particular disciplines. They then used these field-specific understandings of language to develop pedagogical material to scaffold students from non-English speaking background into developing discipline-specific understandings of language. This material was embedded into literacy support for the students within four of the core units of study of the discipline. In embedding this support, the SLATE team adapted the Teaching Learning Cycle (Rothery, 1994) to an online context (see Mahboob *et al.*, 2010 for a more detailed description of the project).

The papers included in this volume demonstrate the viability of adopting genre-based approaches to language and literacy teaching in online environments in order to support the needs of non-English speaking background students. These papers, taken together, provide a blueprint of how other programmes and tertiary institutions can consider developing (online) language and literacy projects for their students. In addition to the pedagogical and practical implications of the papers included in this volume, these papers also make a significant theoretical contribution to work on genre pedagogy. Specifically, Martin's paper extends the discussion of genre pedagogy into online and tertiary contexts; Humphrey and Hao provide detailed analyses of some core genres used in undergraduate Biology programmes; Humphrey investigates issues of providing support on disciplinary reading in biology; Dreyfus and Macnaught tackle the complex problems encountered in adopting joint construction in online contexts; and, Mahboob and Devrim consider the role of feedback within the Teaching Learning Cycle. In addition to the discussions of a range of theoretical and practical issues, the volume also includes a critical evaluation of the project. In the final paper in the volume, Mahboob, Chan and Webster identify the strengths of the programme as well as discuss the challenges faced and the possible responses to these challenges. Together, the six papers included in this volume will help researchers and practitioners to understand the principles of genre pedagogy – as applied to tertiary environments – and can go some way into providing a model of how to adopt these principles and practices into a viable and successful project.

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