2. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR NEGOTIATING APPROPRIATE EAP PRACTICES IN CHINA

INTRODUCTION

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) emerged in the early 1980s, “as a relatively fringe branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)” (Hyland, 2006, p. 1) to meet the needs of internationalization of higher education, and has now grown into a major force in English-language teaching and research around the world (Hyland, 2006). Its concentration, according to Jordan (1997, p. 1), is on “those communicative skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal educational systems.” Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002, p. 2) noted that EAP “… focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts. It means grounding instruction in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines.” This targets the aim of teaching English not only to improve English-language proficiency, but also to equip students with communicative skills appropriate for engaging in various academic activities, such as being learning-active in lectures and seminars, participating effectively as learners in discussions, and giving oral presentations. Interest in EAP, and systematic involvement with EAP practices, has stretched far beyond Anglophone countries. Unsurprisingly, these practices have also found their way into the educational systems of countries and districts that have come to use English as a medium of instruction (MOI) in higher education, such as Hong Kong (Evans, 2003), Indonesia (Sultan, Borland, & Eckersley, 2012), Malaysia (Hudson, 2009), Pakistan (Ashraf & Hakim, this volume), and China (Yu & Yuan, 2005).

The internationalization of higher education has great impact on its curricula and MOI. One consequence is the rapid increase in the number of courses and degrees taught through the medium of English in universities worldwide (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013). In 2001, the Ministry of Education in China began an extensive promotion of bilingual teaching using English as the MOI. It continues to encourage its universities to cultivate academic courses, especially professional subjects such as information technology, biotechnology, new-material technology, finance, and foreign trade, that use English or other foreign languages as the MOI, believing this is the best means to enhance international competitiveness and to prepare students for international cooperation and exchange (Gill & Kirkpatrick, 2013; Sun & Xu, 2012). This new orientation has posed mounting pressure to both
the academic departments and the College English programs in most universities. Allied to this have been significant issues confronting both students and their instructors. To prepare students for the academic courses that use English as the MOI in junior or senior years, specific EAP courses now have been introduced into a small number of universities in China. Meanwhile the majority of universities has not yet resolved how best to cope with the new pressures of extending current arrangements to include such new measures.

As a sub-branch of English-language teaching, EAP is different from teaching English for General Purposes (EGP – known as College English at the tertiary level). In the Chinese higher educational context, EAP is a transition from College English to programs of study delivered in English as the MOI. The two share the same target group of learners, but with different teaching purposes, foci, and approaches. On the one hand, EAP practices address a rounded set of academic language skills for academic studies, and great importance is attached to needs analysis as a systematic way to identify the specific sets of skills, texts, linguistic forms and communicative practices that a particular group of learners must acquire (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002) for the specific nature and circumstances of their work. On the other hand, and in contrast, College English courses provide instruction sharply focussed on grammar, vocabulary, and other general language skills, and are more general in orientation, placing no special emphasis on identifying and meeting specific needs of specific groups of learners.

In the past few years, researchers and administrators have been advocating a new wave of reform in English teaching and learning in China, aiming to promote English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or EAP at tertiary level as a substitute for the current College English programs (Cai & Liao, 2010a; Qin, 2003; Yang, 2010). Yet, this initiative has not been fully understood and enacted by the majority of College English instructors and the administrations that support them. Additionally, whether college students need ESP or EAP courses to prepare them for future programs of study in which the MOI is English is an unresolved question for some. In this chapter we report a case study carried out at Peking University to explore the opportunities and challenges inherent in contemplations of appropriate EAP in China.

The Local Context of English Education at Tertiary Level in China

The past three decades have witnessed two major waves of reform in English education at the tertiary level in Mainland China (Wen & Hu, 2007). The first, from the 1980s to 1990s, was marked by the division of its College English teaching syllabus into one College English Teaching (CET) Syllabus for Arts students and another for Science and Technology students. During this period, two sets of College English textbooks were compiled and students from Arts and Science academic backgrounds used the corresponding English textbooks while attending their courses. The emphasis of this period was on macro-skills of reading and writing.